A Spanish-Finnish telecollaboration: extending intercultural competence via videoconferencing

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Abstract. In language learning today, students from different geographical locations are able to interact online in a more authentic environment, share their views with their partners, create profiles as well as build online communities enjoying common interests. With this in mind, this paper examines and reports on a study about how students from two different countries, Finland and Spain, developed intercultural competence through the use of a videoconferencing platform, Adobe Connect, as a telecollaborative learning context. Eleven Spanish and seventeen Finnish participants were provided with the opportunity to interact with each other outside the classroom with a view to exploring the target culture and, consequently, experiencing intercultural learning. The findings suggest that the students' learning experience was positive and to some extent they had enhanced their knowledge of each other's cultural traits, such as their lifestyle, hobbies and traditions.

Keywords: telecollaboration, videoconferencing, intercultural competence, cross-cultural interaction.

1.   Introduction

In language learning today, students from different geographical locations can interact online with a view to developing language skills and intercultural competence. This online intercultural exchange, which is also known as telecollaboration, enables students to interact outside the classroom situation, exchange their opinions with their peers, give a description of themselves and create online groups who do similar activities. Consequently, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is being increasingly used by language teachers since students can communicate both synchronously and asynchronously

through a computer with their counterparts in other countries as well as native speakers. With regard to synchronous CMC, chat sessions have been found to be effective communicative tools at intercultural levels (Chun, 2011; Tudini, 2007). Furthermore, research studies, conducted by means of videoconferencing involving sophisticated audiovisual web communication platforms, such as Adobe Connect, Elluminate or Visu (Canto, Jauregi, & Van Den Bergh, 2013; Guichon, 2010; Jauregi & Bañados, 2010), describe experiences contributing to communicative or intercultural development. However, there exists no strong empirical evidence to support the latter and the target of the present study is to make a contribution in this area. Hence, the study aims, firstly, to analyse the development of intercultural competence between students of two different countries, namely Spain and Finland, during their interaction via videoconference on the Adobe Connect platform; and, secondly, to discuss the participants' most important learning outcome of the project. The two research questions that guided the study are as follows:

- To what extent is intercultural competence developed in students' interaction via videoconferencing?

- What do the participants consider to be the most important learning outcome in this intercultural project?

2.   Method

2.1.   The project

The project designed for the present study was task-based and lasted for six weeks. The 11 Spanish participants were preparing for their Cambridge English C1 and C2 levels (based on the Common European Framework of Reference) at a private language school in Spain, whilst the 17 Finnish participants were studying Spanish at a university in Finland. The participants were expected to interact synchronously via videoconferencing on the Adobe Connect platform and the links to the online interactions were then posted on Facebook (an additional tool used) so that they could watch each other's video sessions. Six specific tasks were assigned on a weekly basis. The tasks comprised introducing themselves, talking about leisure activities/sports that are popular at their respective institutions, discussing a newspaper article relating to an important issue in their country, debating a film that they had watched and, finally, exploring stereotyped ideas pertaining to each

country. Each student recorded their introductory task on video via Movenote, which they posted on Facebook for their peers to watch.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The study adopted a qualitative and quantitative approach and data were collected from various sources, namely videos via Movenote and Adobe Connect. Following Vurdien's (2014) approach, two questionnaires were administered at the beginning and end of the project, and interviews were conducted individually on its conclusion. Finally, a survey in the form of a questionnaire consisting of eight statements was completed by the participants to gather additional data. A five-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) was used to gauge the students' reactions to the project.

3. Results and discussion

The majority of the students had a favourable overview of their experience (Table 1). The survey shows that the students responded positively when asked if they were curious to learn about their peers' culture (statement 2, mean 4.25) and if they felt motivated to interact with their peers online (statement 3, mean 3.68). In general, there were no major differences between the Spanish and Finnish students, although the Finnish students were a little bit more critical in their feedback and assessment. This could be attributed to the fact that most Finnish students had already had experience of the Spanish customs and habits on their frequent visits to Spain and through contact with their Spanish friends. As they also explained in their interview, they felt uneasy while communicating with their Spanish peers due to their speaking level being only B1, and consequently, had some difficulties in expressing their views. Nonetheless, the students found the task and the issues discussed in general interesting (statement 4, mean 3.64).

Table 1. Students' appraisal of their learning experience

Statement	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1. I enjoyed exchanging views with my peers via video conferencing.	4.04	4	0.64
2. I was curious to learn about my peers' culture.	4.25	4	0.70
3. I felt motivated to interact with my peers online.	3.68	3.5	0.86
4. I found the issues we discussed interesting.	3.64	4	0.78
5. I enjoyed working in groups.	3.93	4	0.83

6. I felt happy to share knowledge with my peers.	4.04	4	0.64
7. I have a better understanding of my peers' customs and habits.	3.68	4	0.90
8. I found my peers' comments to be very helpful and informative.	3.68	4	0.90

In their interviews, the students perceived certain similarities and differences between their cultural traits through their willingness to learn about each other's customs and habits, and share knowledge with each other. They mentioned differences in customs, such as Spain being a more family-centred country, whilst in Finland people tend to adopt a more independent attitude. Another difference mentioned is that many Spanish university students live with their parents, whereas the Finnish students generally live by themselves. Nevertheless, many students reported that there were surprisingly many similarities in customs, values and hobbies as well as in lifestyles and thoughts. As for the outcome of their learning experience, the Finnish students claimed that, due to the short duration of the project, the issues were not explored deeply enough to understand each other's cultural traits fully. Some Spaniards, on the other hand, were satisfied with their online interaction and believed that they had enhanced their knowledge about some Finnish cultural traits due to immediate explanation and clarification being given during their online engagement. In some participants' view, videoconferencing can assist in developing friendship since they can see each other, and body language facilitates interaction. A genuine interest in each other's culture plays a crucial role in building friendship, as mentioned by others. However, a few reported that online relationships seem too distant compared with face-to-face interactions which tend to foster friendship better.

The students' appraisal of the issues they discussed exhibited the lowest mean (3.64). This could be explained by the fact that, although they were generally interested in exchanging views on the different subjects they debated, they found the task regarding watching the film and talking about it quite insignificant. The students did not all watch the same films and, as a result, could not follow the thread of discussion. Therefore it would be vital for teachers to select the film they consider appropriate for such a task.

Judging from the students' responses in their questionnaires, videoconferencing can be deemed a useful tool for meaningful learning to take place. Students can feel stimulated to develop curiosity to learn about each other's lifestyle and, as a result, can develop intercultural learning. Because of the synchronous nature of videoconferencing, students are able to spontaneously exchange information and clarify any misunderstanding without any delayed response, thereby facilitating

their understanding of each other's cultural traits. Yet the findings from the interviews suggest that the time factor plays a role in exploring issues leading to intercultural development. Therefore, the length of the study should be taken into consideration, as intercultural learning is a long term process and students need time to reflect on their own views prior to reflecting on those of their peers. With regard to developing relationships online, it might surmise that tasks should be carefully chosen and geared towards that aim to benefit students. For example, activities related to students' interests in terms of their age group and their area of studies might be useful for this purpose.

4.   Conclusion

This study has given some insight into how videoconferencing can foster intercultural learning by means of tasks that aided students to discover information about each other's cultural traits. The main aim was to examine how intercultural competence is developed in students' interaction via videoconferencing and what the students considered to be the most important learning outcome. Surprisingly, similarities concerning customs, habits, hobbies and even lifestyle were noted. In terms of their learning outcome, some students thought that they did not have sufficient time to explore the issues deeply enough since the project was of a short duration. However, others believed that they had enhanced their knowledge of their counterparts' culture. Videoconferencing seems to be an appropriate tool to assist students in discussing and sharing their thoughts with a view to understanding each other's culture as well as developing friendship. Yet sufficient time should be provided for students to attain this goal since it is an on-going learning process. However, due to the small scale of this study, the data cannot be generalised and, hopefully, further research in this area will benefit the learning process.

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CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016
Edited by Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny