

7 A role-reversal model of telecollaborative practice: the student-driven and student-managed *FloCo*

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Abstract

This paper, based both on a talk given at the BMELTT symposium in June 2017 and one given at the UNICollaboration conference held in Krakow in April 2018, reports on *FloCo* (Florida Universitària/Coventry University), a telecollaborative project where the roles of teacher and student were reversed. A student from Coventry University (CU), studying on a Bachelor of Arts Honours in English and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), obtained a third year placement to teach English in Spain at Florida Universitària (FU) in València. The student had taken part in the online intercultural exchange *MexCo*, between Coventry and Mexico, in her first year at university, and decided to set up a similar exchange between the class of students she was teaching in Spain and Year 1 students on Spanish degrees at CU. The shared ‘expert student’/staff reflections on the project are reported here and compared with the outcomes of related online intercultural exchanges (e.g. *MexCo* and *CoCo*).

Keywords: *FloCo*, *MexCo*, role-reversal, telecollaboration, Coventry University, Florida Universitària.

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1. Introduction

CU staff in English and Languages have engaged in telecollaboration aimed at developing global citizenship skills for undergraduate students through Online International Learning (OIL) or Virtual Exchange (VE) since academic year 2011-2012. The OIL projects started with universities in Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Universidad de Monterrey) and, since academic year 2016-2017, also involved telecollaboration with universities in Europe, such as the Université de Haute Alsace in France (*CoCo*, see [Lloyd, 2017](#)) and FU in Spain. Each of these exchanges has been following a similar format, modelled on successful telecollaborative work by Furstenberg and Levet at MIT (the *Cultura* project, see [Furstenberg & Levet, 2010](#)) and by Robert O'Dowd, based at the University of León in Spain (e.g. [O'Dowd, 2007](#)). Each project is supported by a tailor-made Moodle environment maintained by Coventry University and includes a series of tasks that participating students carry out in blended learning mode: face-to-face in their respective home institutions and online, via synchronous and asynchronous exchanges, with the international partners they are working with ([Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018](#)).

All students communicate mainly via Moodle, but also utilise Skype, email, Facebook, and other e-platforms of their choice outside Moodle. The reason why Moodle is kept as the official e-platform for these exchanges has to do with the data protection laws in Europe and the ethical clearance issues relating to the telecollaborative projects if staff want to carry out research on them. As Moodle is a proprietary platform that can be adapted to comply with EU legislation, staff engaging with *FloCo* decided to carry on using it, even if this virtual learning environment does not offer as many Web 2.0 affordances as other e-tools.

The tasks, that are co-designed with the OIL partners and the students involved in the exchange, aim to adhere to the principles for intercultural language learning and teaching outlined by [Liddicoat and Scarino \(2013, pp. 57-59, cited in Orsini-Jones, 2015, p. 52\)](#). They are grounded and experiential and comprise the following elements: active construction; making connections;

social interaction; and reflection and responsibility. The key features of OIL at Coventry University⁴ are that:

- it involves a cross-border collaboration or interaction with people from different backgrounds and cultures;
- students must engage in some sort of online interaction, whether it is asynchronous or synchronous;
- it must be driven by a set of internationalised learning outcomes aimed at developing global perspectives and/or fostering students' intercultural competences; and
- there must be a reflective component that helps students think critically about such interaction.

Despite the fact that the two higher education institutions involved in *FloCo* are quite different (CU has around 28,000 students and is a state university, while FU is a small private university with around 4,000 students), both share the drive to engage in OIL to support their students in developing global citizenship skills. This also includes teaching and assessing intercultural competence, as discussed by [Deardorff \(2011\)](#).

The main aims of *FloCo* are:

- to develop an international intercultural exchange between students of Spanish at CU and FU pre-service TEFL teachers;
- to enhance the intercultural awareness and communicative competence of all participants; and

4. Centre for Global Engagement, CU, 2018, internal document.

- to provide students and teachers with an opportunity for virtual international mobility and to enhance digital fluency.

In its first occurrence, in academic year 2017-2018, *FloCo* ran for five weeks in the first semester (Nov-Dec).

At CU, *FloCo* is embedded in the module *Introduction to Studying English and Languages at University* (its credit value being 5 out of the 60 ECTS credits for the year), a module taken by all students studying on Single and Joint Honours Degrees in English and Languages. The module aims to prepare students for university study and the following are covered in it: academic writing; group project work; digital and presentation skills; and intercultural awareness competences development and practice. The tasks linked to *FloCo* make up 50% of the module mark (2.5 ECTS). Students carry out three tasks in collaboration with the partners (video introductions, *Cultura* tasks, and a group interview on a chosen topic to do with current affairs) and then they present the outcomes of the project as a group. This is followed by an individual reflective report on the exchange. The group presentation is worth 30% of the total module mark and the individual written reflection 20%. Both tasks must include information gathered through the OIL collaborative activities.

At FU, *FloCo* is embedded into *English Language II* (6 ECTS), a module in the final year of a four-year degree in primary education; it is a module aimed at improving the English proficiency of the FU students who must have a B2 CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for languages) level or equivalent in a foreign language to qualify as primary school teachers. The assessment of the *FloCo* activities – which count for 15% of the module mark – is as follows: 60% for the introductions video, 15% for the *Cultura* tasks, 15% for the interviews, and 10% self and peer assessment (reflective).

All students have access to online materials on intercultural-awareness raising, such as lectures/vidcasts on intercultural awareness topics and global citizenship, developing intercultural communicative competence and ‘cyberpragmatic competence’ (Yus Ramos, 2011). All students complete the word associations,

sentence completions, ‘reactions to situations’ surveys, and quizzes adapted from the MIT *Cultura* suite (Furstenberg & Levet, 2010), and all students engage in asynchronous discussion forums where they comment on each other’s introduction videos and responses on the *Cultura* tasks. Fourteen students took part in this exchange from FU and seventeen from CU. The students were ‘matched’ in groups of 4-5 in each country.

2. A role-reversal telecollaborative model

Although ‘expert students’ had been involved in the delivery and managing of *MexCo* (Orsini-Jones et al., 2015) and *CoCo* (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018) that both preceded *FloCo*, in *FloCo* there was an interesting student-centred ‘turn’. A CU student who had taken part in *MexCo* in her first year at CU obtained a work placement at FU to shadow English teachers there as a language assistant. Working in collaboration with her English and TEFL tutor based at CU, and her mentor at FU, she set up and managed *FloCo* from Spain. This made Courtney Green, the student who managed *FloCo* and one of the authors of this paper, the main intercultural mediator for the project (Deardorff, 2006). Courtney helped staff see the VE through her eyes, in a role-reversal model previously explored at CU, where an ‘expert student’ helps staff to explore troublesome areas of knowledge and understanding through her view of said areas while helping her peers and/or ‘mentees’ (see Orsini-Jones, 2014; Orsini-Jones, 2015, pp. 47-48 on this point).

Intercultural communicative competence has already been identified as a ‘threshold concept’ (Orsini-Jones, 2015; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018), that is to say a concept that challenges students’ worldview:

“A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a

transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 3).

The mediation of the OIL project by an expert student appeared to facilitate its adoption by CU students who had previously resisted ‘buying into’ the ethos of similar projects. The CU tutor involved also found that he had to deal with fewer problems arising from the project than in previous years, and observed that students were more at ease with the tasks than they had been in *MexCo* and *CoCo*.

The reflective reports demonstrated that students were grasping difficult concepts relating to intercultural awareness and were developing the Intercultural Communicative Competence skills highlighted by Helm and Guth (2010), which include “Critical Cultural Awareness”, together with “New Online Literacies”, such as “Computer literacy”, “Information Literacy”, and “New Media Literacy” (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 74).

3. Conclusion

By completing *FloCo*, students have opportunities to familiarise themselves with, acquire knowledge of, and research into concepts relating to – and also leading to – the development of intercultural competence, which is essential for success in foreign language learning.

Student feedback confirms that *FloCo* was beneficial for the students who participated in that it allowed them to develop the aforementioned competences and required them to reflect on the ‘direct evidences’, as suggested by Deardorff (2011). A student who had the knowledge and skills to manage the project enabled tutors and students from both institutions to reflect on attitudes towards the target cultures and made the completion of the activities easier to manage. Moreover, the efficiency of the student-turned-tutor (Courtney) ensured that students who took part met their deadlines in almost all the activities at both ends.

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