

Connecting cultures and participation through WhatsApp: assessing students' perception in the ClerKing telecollaborative project

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Abstract. Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) has become very trendy in the field of language learning; however, while there are many studies that include WhatsApp, used here to connect cultures and/or widen participation, very few articulate how students view it or its impact in acquiring and developing linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competencies. This paper reports on ClerKing, a Franco-Jamaican telecollaborative project, which occurred in two phases between Applied Foreign Languages (AFL) students from University Clermont Auvergne (UCA), France, and Modern Languages students of French from Shortwood Teachers' College (STC), Jamaica. WhatsApp was used in both phases. Using the exploratory approach, this study seeks to provide insight into students' perception of the use of WhatsApp in the project, as well as possible moments of knowledge acquisition. Preliminary findings show that WhatsApp is considered to be practical, popular, and preferable. Students acquired knowledge about religion and homosexuality, improved on expressions, and strengthened their grammar.

Keywords: WhatsApp, culture, ClerKing, telecollaboration, perception.

1. Introduction

Telecollaborative projects help foreign language learners to connect and participate with other cultures. Helm (2015) defines telecollaboration as the act of bringing together learners of different geographical locations to engage in online, collaborative interactions, by using diverse Internet-based communication tools/platforms to develop their linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competences.

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Nowadays, thanks to smartphones, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is becoming more integrated in the education sphere, and the use of MIM, primarily WhatsApp, has become a powerful tool in second language development (Adújar-Vaca & Cruz-Martínez, 2017). WhatsApp is a cross-platform instant messaging subscription service for smartphones which uses the Internet for communication. It allows users to send messages, images, video, and audio media, as well as their location (Alsanie, 2015). Its features, such as accessibility, interactivity, immediacy, and permanency, help learners to improve their language skills (Mistar, 2016).

Chinnery (2006) posits that MALL facilitates social interaction, data exchanging, and collaboration with other learners. Learners, thus, can telecollaborate with native speakers to improve linguistic and cultural skills, despite being separated geographically. Adújar-Vaca and Cruz-Martínez (2017) contend that MALL offers “an environment where learners can ubiquitously negotiate meaning, and reflect [on] and evaluate their own performance through authentic interaction and feedback” (p. 43). Madden and Foucher (2019) conclude that WhatsApp is a suitable platform for telecollaborative projects, notably because students are familiar with it, and it does not require much cognitive manipulation.

Concerning students’ perception of WhatsApp in foreign language education, very little is known, and the current literature only provides generalised information. Malecela (2016) reports that WhatsApp helps students by facilitating communication with other students and with the instructor, by enhancing collaborative learning, and by sharing educational information. According to So (2016), some other advantages of WhatsApp are that it provides immediate messaging support, brings new learning opportunities, facilitates communication between students and teachers, provides flexible learning, and supports multimedia learning. However, for some participants, the use of WhatsApp in their learning might interfere with their private lives (So, 2016).

Using the exploratory approach, we specifically explore students’ perceptions regarding the use of WhatsApp in the ClerKing project, as well as possible potential learning sequences in the areas of language, culture, and interculturality.

2. Method

As explained in Madden and Foucher (2019), the telecollaborative project, ClerKing, occurred in two ten week phases between AFL students of English from UCA and Modern Languages students of French from STC. The 50 participants

were of mixed genders, between the ages of 18 and 33. There were slight differences in the pedagogical scenarios (see [Table 1](#)). Students were paired/grouped according to their profiles submitted prior to the start of the project. The primary objectives of this project were for students to practise the target language(s) studied and to develop and/or improve their linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competences in said language(s) – spoken and written, based on their respective levels (Jamaican students were between A2-B2 in French on the Common European Framework for Languages, while French students were B2-C1 in English). Students discussed different intercultural topics weekly (for example, festivals and celebrations, places of interest and nightlife, education systems, religion, and homosexual unions), and specific instructions were given regarding communication tools, language choice, and the desired outcome of each session.

Table 1. Differences in pedagogical choices between the two phases

Elements of pedagogical design	Phase 1	Phase 2
Languages of interaction	English and French (Imposed by coordinator) Some tasks in French and others in English	English or French (Free choice)
Formats of communication	Pairs (One Clermontois and one Shortwoodite)	Groups of four (Two Clermontois and two Shortwoodites)
Communication platforms	Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Skype, WhatsApp	WhatsApp
Tasks and topics given	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All topics imposed • Complete guided and systematic tasks • One imposed final task 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice of two out of ten topics • Complete tasks in a personal manner • Choice of one of two final tasks

The data collection for this study comprised all the interactions that happened within ClerKing, including the individual tasks done, such as Learning Journals, as well as the two questionnaires – one completed at the start of the project, and the other at the end. The former gathered data on the participants’ biographies, linguistic competences, usage of communication tools, and elements related to intercultural communication, while the latter examined the same elements, but within the context of the project at the end. Excerpt 1 ([supplementary materials](#)) shows the students’ usage of WhatsApp in Phase 1.

3. Discussion of preliminary results

In assessing students' perceptions on the use of WhatsApp in the ClerKing project, findings show that WhatsApp is practical, popular, and preferable (see Excerpt 2, [supplementary materials](#)), and is an appropriate communication tool for telecollaborative projects. However, some students thought a common WhatsApp group may not be as effective as smaller groups, because interactions can become chaotic. This can lead to an awkward and reserved atmosphere due to a lack of understanding on certain points and reluctance to see things from different perspectives.

3.1. Potential learning sequences

A potential learning sequence refers to the process through which the learner captures linguistic data in his/her interaction with a native speaker and makes them the object of internal cognitive activities (De Pietro, Matthey, & Py, 1989). This can be in the form of negotiation of meaning, reformulation, etc. However, this concept could also be applied to include the learner's intercultural positioning.

3.2. Cultural and intercultural competence

One area in which several students demonstrated potential new knowledge was religion. There were marked differences between the cultures concerning views on certain controversial topics, such as homosexual unions and religious beliefs. This sparked a heated group discussion, especially in Phase 1, on the takeaways from both cultures (Excerpt 3, [supplementary materials](#)). Talking about controversial topics can prove to be a good source of potential learning sequences; however, it can also cause intercultural friction (Excerpt 3, [supplementary materials](#)).

3.3. Linguistic competence

There were also potential learning sequences in regard to new expressions and grammar. In Phase 1, students noted different new knowledge obtained in their Learning Journal, as seen in [Figure 1](#). They seemingly demonstrated understanding of the context in which the new expression was used, and are likely to reuse it at a later time.

It was also observed that learning opportunities arose for Jamaican students to strengthen French syntax in Phase 2. As seen in [Figure 2](#) (translation in [supplementary materials](#)), throughout conversations, French students were able to

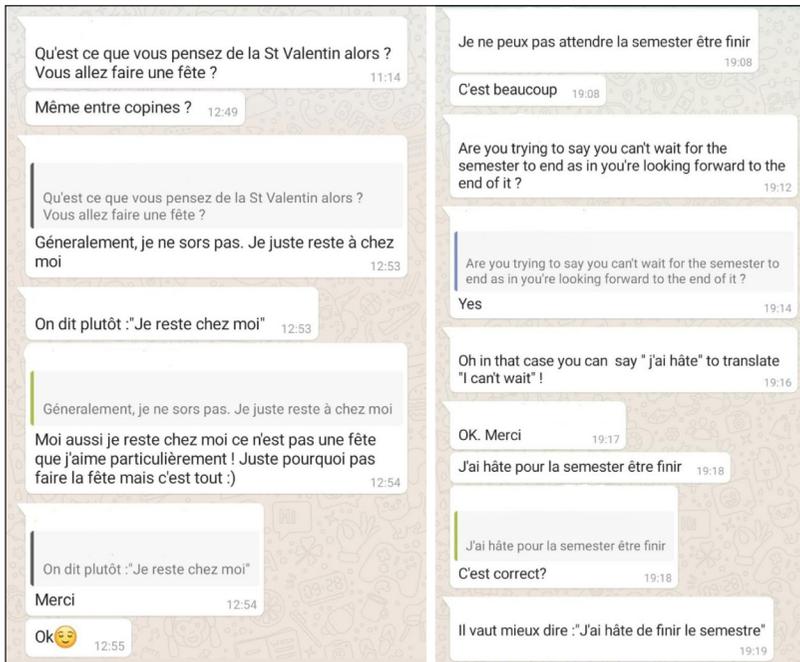
guide their Jamaican counterparts in better formulating some of their sentences, wherever inaccuracies were identified. A Jamaican student demonstrated active learning, while being helped by her French colleague. Here, we can see negotiation of meaning taking place.

One useful feature of WhatsApp is that it helps users to select and respond to specific messages instead of searching through a pile of messages.

Figure 1. Examples of expressions learned in Phase 1

Student 1
New expression: To manage the heat in the kitchen
Situation context: We were exchanging in the group talk, and things got a bit tensed.
Language co-text: “Where did everyone go? – They can’t <i>manage the heat in the kitchen</i> ”
Meaning: It means cancel the meeting.
Student 2
New expression: Call off
Situation context: My partner and I were arranging a meeting time.
Language co-text: We should probably <i>call off</i> the meeting and put off to tomorrow.
Meaning: To deal with pressure

Figure 2. Screenshot of excerpt of grammar acquisition in Phase 2



4. Conclusions

Our study suggests that WhatsApp is a suitable platform for telecollaborative projects, as it is the communication tool prioritised when multiple platforms are proposed. When used as a sole platform, we observed potential learning sequences on different levels: linguistic, cultural, and intercultural. In addition, students perceive WhatsApp as a practical, popular, and preferable MIM application, which can help in L2 development; this is supported by Adújar-Vaca and Cruz-Martínez (2017). WhatsApp's practicality is also due to the fact that it does not require much cognitive manipulation (Madden & Foucher, 2019).

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6. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/3phh0r1cz7eskmz7alzvvv5w85c0fbu5>

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