

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF TELECOLLABORATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract

Although the idea of performing collaborative tasks by language students from geographically distant countries dates back to the end of the 20th century (Warschauer, 1996), its benefits were reconsidered once again after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns had halted students' mobility and abated their enthusiasm for worldwide discoveries. The latter constraints reduced the number of natural opportunities for students to develop their intercultural communicative competence. To bridge the developmental gap, the attention was shifted toward the application of technologies engaging them in semi-authentic communication (O'Dowd, 2013), consequently, one of the modes of telecollaboration was chosen. The study focuses on the analysis of the outcomes of the telecollaboration project run by the teachers of the four universities: Vilnius University (Lithuania), the University of Latvia (Latvia), Los Lagos University (Chile), and the University of Austral (Chile). All the three stages (*before*, *during*, and *after* interaction) of the project are reviewed with a particular focus given on 64 students' attitudinal reflections obtained via a designed questionnaire. The study also presents the analysis of the students' feedback on the project in general, the challenges they were exposed to, and their personal achievements, including the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: *Telecollaboration project, challenges, discoveries, intercultural communicative competence.*

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many challenges to foreign language teaching and intercultural education, making rethink all the pedagogical means that were offered before the outbreak of the disease. The established online culture learning, based on the principles of intercultural approaches and exploitation of the interactive features of ICT provided rich opportunities for telecollaboration (O'Dowd et al., 2006), which appeared a very favourable substitute for developing students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The universities' support in retraining teachers' competences made them active users of contemporary teaching tools and approaches.

The idea to run a telecollaboration project among Vilnius University (Lithuania), the University of Latvia (Latvia), Los Lagos University (Chile) and the University of Austral (Chile) originated from the online course for university educators within the Utrecht Network run by R. O'Dowd. A two-week course familiarized its participants with virtual exchange as a pedagogical activity for engaging students in authentic intercultural collaborative projects with international partners. The project resulted in a partnership agreement between the educators from the Universities of Vilnius and Latvia. In reply to the Partner search announcement, professors from Los Lagos University and the University of Austral joined the team ready for telecollaboration.

This paper overviews scholars' insights into the potential of telecollaboration to develop students' ICC. It also explores the project participants' reflections on the project in general, its challenges and benefits for their personal growth and enhancement of ICC.

2. Telecollaboration as a way to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence

The concept of 'telecollaboration' in this paper is used interchangeably with a 'virtual exchange' and is interpreted in line with O'Dowd's insights referring "...to the sustained engagements of groups of learners in online intercultural interaction and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integral part of their educational programmes." (2020). The definition sheds light on the importance of two key aspects: telecollaboration and development of students' ICC online.

According to the typology of a Virtual Exchange (VE) presented by the Stevens Initiative (NAFSA, 2020), the models employed in educational contexts can be asynchronous and synchronous, course-based, project-based, and curricular or cocurricular. Further to the model chosen, the importance of intentional facilitation and integration of authentic tasks to conduct either classroom-based or peer-to-peer conversations is stressed. The presence of the four key components – preparation, facilitation, collaboration, and reflection signifies the designers' careful thought of helping students prepare, work together, and debrief after the project. The complexity of activities (Helm & Guth, 2016) leads to another important factor – the teachers' and facilitators' appropriate qualification, making their students aware of how to interact online, engage with multiple modes for communication (Gutiérrez et al., 2021). Belz (2003) marks the importance of the teacher's role more than ever before since it is them to be the first to tackle the challenges of the electronic medium. O'Dowd (2007) identifies the four major roles of the teacher in telecollaborative projects: organizer, intercultural partner, model and coach, source and resource. Later, the scholar et al. (2020) expand the list with the fifth role of a pedagogical mentor in VE. The teacher is seen not only as a facilitator, but also as an active participant of the project, establishing successful learning opportunities for their students (Schenker, 2013). Although quite many teachers are described as passive consumers of digital media in their daily lives, the application of technologies in teaching contexts evokes mixed feelings in them, ranging from hatred to love (Tella, 1996). They still require professional training in understanding how these technologies can be used in formal educational contexts, how to gain expertise and overcome initial barriers (Reinders et al., 2013). In contrast, the same cannot be said about their students, the most active and technologically progressive group, who are just in need of the right mindset and skills to navigate the world's challenges (Stevens Initiative, 2020).

Although many models of ICC were designed under the premise of mobility which naturally exposes learners to cultural otherness, the shift toward collaborative learning on the social Web in education (Thomas et al., 2013) made the development of the target competence also possible. If we refer to the model by Deardorff (2009), the component of attitudes facilitates ICC via "effective and appropriate behaviour and communication" (Deardorff, 2009) through respect, openness, and curiosity. From the scholar's standpoint, motivation is enhanced by the influence of knowledge and skills. The mentioned components facilitate empathy, ethnorelativity, and adaptability. The starting point leading toward success of a VE is the teachers' team willing to share good will, ready to adapt and compromise, and open to difference. Müller-Hartmann, O'Dowd et al (n.d.) assume that regular communication between the partner teachers is the key to successful coordination of a VE. Since the latter targets at enhancement of students' ICC teachers are expected to encourage their students fully to employ their linguistic repertoires, facilitate understanding and successful communication by 'creating bridges' and helping their partners to 'construct or convey meaning' within a language or from one language to another (CoE, 2018, as cited in Gutiérrez et al., 2021). The intercultural aspects are to be addressed with the focus on the learners' attitudes such as openness and curiosity allowing them to observe, identify, and interpret cultural similarities and differences, or their colleagues' perspectives and worldviews. Gutiérrez et al. (2021) draw attention to the importance of the adaptability factor, both linguistic and telecollaborative. The first one refers to the context and its participants' skills to improve their communication through the volume of their voices, pace of speaking, choice of register and terminology. The second indicates the communicators' ability to adjust to the dynamics of the group in many aspects of intercultural communication, including scheduling a meeting, group work division and its completion, etc. Researchers acknowledge the possibility to develop ICC virtually with nearly the same array of competence components, as mentioned by Deardorff, though through carefully pre-planned activities. Nevertheless, telecollaboration has received some critical remarks regarding either exaggerated or oversimplified intercultural learning outcomes (O'Dowd, 2013), obliviousness to the medium of the internet as a possible source of frustrations (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002), naïve expectations about students' competences to develop in a natural way (Lawrence & Spector-Cohen, 2018) or organisational ignorance to consider a VE as an integrated part of study programmes and syllabi at university level (O'Dowd, 2014). Despite some possible negative aspects, a thoughtful design, careful preparation, active facilitation, teacher and student regular communication, and constant reflection on the process dynamics can lead to a desirable goal in a Virtual Exchange.

3. Methodological framework of the telecollaboration project

The telecollaboration project involved 64 students from Vilnius University (VU), the University of Latvia (UL), Los Lagos University (ULAGOS) and the University of Austral (UACH) and lasted for ten weeks.

3.1. The Participants

Vilnius University: 18 students, attendees of the elective course on Intercultural Communication: 7 students of Linguistics (VU) and 11 international students of Humanities from Italy, Japan, France, Ukraine, Germany and South Korea.

University of Latvia: 15 students of foreign languages, attendees of the elective course on Intercultural Communication, offered by the Department of English Studies.

Los Lagos University: 15 students studying English at the Centre for Integrated Training.

University of Austral: 16 students of medicine, psychology, biosciences, visual arts, music, forestry, engineering, architecture, law, united for the VE by the request of the university administration.

3.2. Before the project

'Getting to know your Partner Teacher' phase encompassed 3 months of regular meetings on a weekly basis. Cultural and institutional contexts were explored, teaching and research experiences described, subject syllabi analysed and student enrolment strategies discussed. Consequently, sketches of a telecollaboration project syllabus emerged accompanied by fruitful discussions and team members' flexibility towards an assorted list of topics and tasks.

The syllabus comprised the topics typical of Intercultural Communication. It aimed at developing not only students' positive awareness of cultural otherness but encouraged them to address 'discomforting' themes as well. Apart from the subject topics, students were expected to introduce their country's educational system, universities, academic calendars, prevailing types of assessment, and to present the topics on their likes. The completion of a portfolio invited them to reflect upon their personal development in both language and intercultural learning. Each topic was intertwined with a weekly team task: to create a comparative infographic, record a podcast, make a presentation or a video, write an essay, design a poster, etc. For each session, some prompt questions to guide students' conversations were provided.

3.3. During the project

The project launch was joined by the administration, teachers and students of the universities. The participants were introduced to the project idea, its aim and syllabus. The students were divided into teams of four; sixteen teams in total. English was chosen as a medium of communication.

In order to provide students with weekly tasks and learning materials, VU MS Teams platform was employed. It enabled the teachers to manage the course, communicate with the students, check the outcomes. It offered space for the students to meet and do the tasks requiring audio or video recording.

The subject class comprised at least two parts: before a new topic, team outcomes were reviewed, challenges identified, possible solutions offered, guidance to a new task given. To develop students' ICC supporting material on the target vocabulary or intercultural theme was shared.

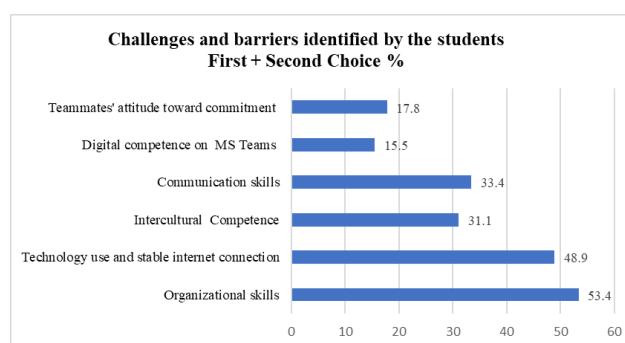
3.4. After the project

By the end of the project, an online questionnaire was designed. It contained closed and open-ended questions inviting students to evaluate their experience in the VE, identify the biggest challenges and barriers confronted, name personal achievements and provide suggestions to the future projects. Despite the fact that just 45 respondents out of 64 expressed their standpoints (which is the limitation of this case survey), their portfolios and questionnaire answers allow us to investigate the VE through various angles. In this paper, we concentrate on the students' general satisfaction, challenges they had to deal with and achievements they gained in telecollaboration.

4. Results and discussion

With reference to the general evaluation, the project was given 4.29 points on the 5-point scale. All the 45 respondents confirmed that telecollaboration should remain part of the institutional practice. The feedback contains just a few remarks advising the teachers to make teams smaller and choose partners from similar time zones. Even though the project involved representatives from at least nine countries of the world, a VE, as a mode of learning, was new for all of them. The joint activities made the students engaged and feel the nature of the VE. The participants' sense of curiosity, their wish to pose challenges were the key drivers for the success of the project.

Figure 1. Telecollaboration challenges and barriers identified by the students.



Telecollaboration challenges identified by the students (see Fig. 1) fall into the following sequence: more than half (53.4%) of the respondents admitted that their poor organizational skills proved to be an obstacle to a smooth flow of the project. The second barrier hindering their successful interactions was technology and stable internet connection: 48.9% of the respondents maintained that they quite often were exposed to the internet interferences. VU MS Teams platform was described as 'not helpful' by 22% of the respondents. The project participants were mainly language students, yet their replies indicate a need for the development of their communication skills (33.4%) and intercultural competence (31.1%). The latter cases were grounded by fear and shyness to speak in public, defend their opinion or debate. Teammates' attitude towards commitment was also mentioned as a barrier by 17.8% of the respondents. Looking from the cross-cultural perspective, the project participants were given an opportunity to meet people whose orientation toward time and work differed. According to Lewis (2002), communication between highly organized planners, linear-active people (in our case, Latvians, partially Lithuanians) and loquacious, multi-active people such as Chileans, could be prone to misunderstandings. Consequently, the attribution of cultural qualities to the respondents' personal characteristics demonstrates the need of their ICC enhancement. The students' digital competence was indicated as the least important barrier (by 15.5% of respondents), which confirms them to be excellent navigators of the digital world.

Students' personal achievements fall into five major groups: personal friendships were mentioned as the greatest benefit of the VE by the students from ULAGOS, UACH and UL. The opportunity to enhance English language skills, revise the vocabulary, improve pronunciation, reduce the fear to communicate became the second achievement of importance. The third priority was given to intercultural discoveries, which helped them to expand their worldviews, identify cultural similarities and differences, grasp the complexity of the subject, which marks their advance in ICC development. Participation in the VE contributed to the development of students' psychological abilities: they have become more organized, confident, patient, and helpful: *"the project helped me overcome my shyness and gain confidence in my communication skills. I was leading the team calls! I've discovered myself anew!"* (FR-2). The application of digital competence to the project tasks was substantially appreciated by the VU students: *"Now I know how to create a shared Google document, infographic, poster and how to use CANVA."* (LT-5). It is worth mentioning that VU team members paid much attention to their personal gains, sometimes leaving their teammates' contribution aside. This could be related to Hofstede's Culture taxonomy, implying that a higher level of individualism might hinder collaborative work. It does not deny the students' appreciation for the project though, in intercultural learning, it reminds its organizers that culturally ingrained thinking patterns do exist. The list of the project participants' personal achievements provided much evidence on their advance in linguistic and intercultural competences with nearly all the components as described by Deardorff (2009). A shift from shyness and uncertainty towards positive emotions demonstrated students' psychological well-being. Their enhanced digital competence boosted their satisfaction and kept them engaged throughout the project stages.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study can be understood as a contribution to the field of intercultural and academic exchanges at personal and university levels. We attempted to review theoretical insights into the opportunities offered by a VE and provide a procedural account of the key steps that involved the design, implementation, and final assessment of the telecollaboration project among 4 universities. These findings provide a potential mechanism for a concrete implementation and later enhancement of the procedures involved in academic exchange practices in other universities. The present results confirm that telecollaboration is a highly valued practice among participants, as it expands academic and personal

horizons by tackling psychological challenges and transferable skills for the professional life, such as: intercultural awareness and interpersonal communication, teamwork, adaptability, proactiveness. Thus, results provide a basis for the implementation of further telecollaboration practices as a constant activity within higher education in and after COVID-19 pandemic.

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