6 Building global graduates and developing transnational professional skills through a telecollaboration project in foreign language education

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Abstract

The development of e-literacies and e-skills is of primary importance in gaining transferable aptitudes for the job market. Students in higher education need to take part in shared intercultural experiences which allow them to understand and cope with their peers in preparation for their futures. Furthermore, virtual exchange of information, development of language skills and interpersonal relationships can allow these future employees to respond better to demands of the job market. This paper describes a case study involving a virtual project developed between the University of Warwick (UK) and the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) aimed at increasing exposure to the foreign language (English/Spanish), and to raise cultural awareness among British and Spanish university students, hence making them more employable in the future.

Keywords: didactic innovation, foreign language learning, intercultural competence, professional skills, oral skills.

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1.   Introduction

There is a substantial literature exploring the use of technologies in higher education (O'Dowd, 2005, 2007; Romaña Correa, 2015). In the context of foreign language education, the term telecollaboration has recently emerged as an:

> "Internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence […] through structured tasks" (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 14).

Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Skype provide opportunities for students around the world to take part in conversations with other native speaking students. These conversational exchanges allow learners to practise the target language in real contexts by increasing the time of exposure significantly, and thus allowing for a greater understanding of other related aspects of the target language and culture that might be useful and transferable to their personal and professional skills set.

In the field of second and foreign language teaching, many projects have described how online intercultural exchanges support language practice – speaking and listening skills – and cultural awareness (O'Dowd, 2007). According to O'Dowd and Lewis (2016), online intercultural exchanges lead to the development of foreign language and intercultural communication skills, which "students need to be able to gain for employment in a globalised labour market" (p. 7). O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) also refer to e-literacies and e-skills developed through asynchronous tools (such as e-mail) and synchronous ones (such as Skype and videoconferencing), which enhance the ability to communicate clearly and effectively in a foreign language at a distance. Similarly, Romaña Correa (2015, p. 144) describes a study at the Language Institute of the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, in which 12 adult learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) used Skype to communicate with native speakers

elsewhere. Results indicated that learners used the target language as a means of constructing their own social networks, a finding in line with Maynard and Peräkylä's (2003) claim that "it is partly through language that humans 'do' the social world" (p. 233).

In another study, Cunningham and Vyatkina (2012) underline the positive effects of the strategic use of modal verbs for expressing polite requests, as well as a moderate effect on learners' use of the subjunctive mood to establish social distance in exchanges of this kind. The authors note that

> "[t]hese results add further support for the use of intercultural online exchanges mediated by data-driven instruction in the foreign language classroom" (Cunningham & Vyatkina, 2012, p. 422).

These considerations were the starting points for the development of the present project.

2.   The project 'language and culture'

2.1.   Participants and context

One hundred participants were involved in the project, fifty from the Faculty of Education at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM) and fifty from the Language Centre at Warwick University. The participants at UCLM were in their second year of Early Childhood Education and were taking an EFL course as part of their degree programme in the Faculty of Education. The students from Warwick were in the second or third year of their degree programmes, but were not necessarily studying to become teachers.

The level of proficiency in English or Spanish was not completely homogeneous. Most students at UCLM had an intermediate level of English equivalent to B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (Council of Europe, 2001). However, four students were below this level, and just two had

reached B2. In Warwick, most participants had a B2 level of Spanish. Not all the students in Warwick were native speakers of English, but most had been living in the country for more than ten years and had C1 or C2 levels in English.

Students at UCLM are required to complete the course English II or French II to become Early Childhood or Primary Education teachers. Receptive and productive skills are dealt with on these programmes, as well as aspects related to language teaching. Warwick students study Spanish as an elective language programme at the University's Language Centre. According to records taken from previous tests, students struggle with oral skills at both institutions, which O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) consider vital for employability and which are generally more effective when completing written tasks. Also, whereas most students at Warwick had been involved in virtual projects before, this was not the case with the UCLM cohort.

2.2.   Analysis of needs

The intervention began in September 2015 and was planned as a six-week pilot project, plus a week of reflection. Before designing students' tasks, an analysis of their needs was conducted in both institutions by tutors. Among the needs identified in tests and through observation were:

- lack of fluency in simple oral interventions;

- anxiety, nervousness and lack of confidence in oral tests;

- educational, social and cultural weaknesses;

- lack of vocabulary related to simple intercultural and cross-cultural issues.

After careful analysis, the telecollaborative project 'language and culture' sought to address these weaknesses in order to develop learners' professional communication skills.

In what follows, the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the project are described.

2.3.   Action plan

2.3.1. Phase I: preparation

During the 2-week preparation process, professors/tutors at both institutions agreed on the exchange time, the type of tasks and communication with students, and the evaluation phases.

At this stage, six topics were shared with students in Warwick through a plan on Blackboard and with UCLM's students using Moodle. Participants at both institutions received a weekly e-mail with the questions for reflection related to the topic. Every task was designed to be developed in a week. The average time of communication was thirty minutes in both English and Spanish. The main aim of giving students defined questions was to provide structured prompts to help overcome shyness and give them a specific starting point for communicating with each other. Tutors also monitored students' involvement through oral or written assignments carried out subsequently in class.

2.3.2. Phase II: implementation

Regarding online task design, Kurek (2015) notes the need to include specific instructions to decrease geographical and cultural distance and build bridges for intercultural contact. Chapelle (2001) describes some notable characteristics in the process of setting tasks, including the need for tasks to be practical, adaptable and meaningful and to be presented in context. In the current project, particular attention was paid to the tasks. These aimed to reflect students' shared experiences by addressing issues of common interest in their age group, as well as other aspects related to intercultural understanding which might have enhanced their broader skills set and hence improved their future employability. Table 1 shows the different tasks for the first six weeks of the project.

Table 1.   Tasks and questions for interaction

Title	Procedure	Questions for reflection
Week 1. First Encounters	Students prepare a presentation about themselves and share it with their virtual exchange partner.	Where do you live? How many languages do you speak? Have you ever been in England or in Spain?
Week 2. My University Life	Students talk about university and their studies. They can focus on their daily activities at university, courses they like, social groups they are involved in or any other aspect related to their studies.	Where is your university? Do you like a subject (discipline in your studies) in particular? Have you ever failed a course at university? Do you take part in any social group at university?
Week 3. Food and Eating	Students share a typical dish or a recipe from their country. They also discuss international food and their favourite food/s and how to prepare them.	Is there a typical dish in your country? What do usually have for dinner or lunch? What time do you have lunch? What dish are you best at cooking?
Week 4. Avoiding Stereotypes	Students discuss how true or false some extended stereotypes are from the cultural reality or society they live in. Students can also discuss if it is important to overcome stereotypes when you study a foreign language.	Is it true that all Spaniards take a siesta every afternoon? Are the Spaniards loud and outgoing? Are the British always punctual and good-mannered?
Week 5. Youth and World Job Market	Students share with their virtual exchange partner aspects related to young people and the job market in their countries.	Do you work? Is it easy to find a job in England/Spain when you finish your studies at University? What job would you like to have in the future? Would it be possible to work in your country?
Week 6. On the news	Students look for a recent news story online either in English or Spanish. Once they have read it, they have to share it with their exchange partner.	Do you think that news includes a lot of violence nowadays? Do you normally listen to the news?
Extra Task. Reflection on my learning	Complete a questionnaire and group work	Would you like to keep talking with your exchange partner?

2.3.3.   Phase III: evaluation

Researchers at UCLM and Warwick developed the tools for evaluation. These were an initial pre-project online questionnaire, a mid-project face-to-face semi-structured interview and a post-project final questionnaire.
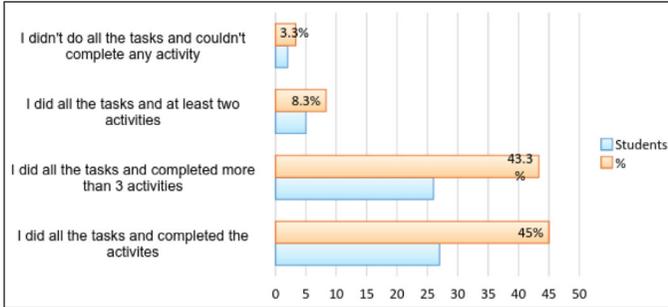
This section focuses on the final questionnaire, which aimed to analyse the extent of students' regular (weekly) participation in the project and whether they had completed the activities proposed for each of the scheduled exchanges. The questionnaire also enabled students to rate their experience in the project and to respond to the following items on a scale of one to four (none, a little, quite a bit, completely):

- tasks have allowed me to work on fluency and pronunciation in English/ Spanish;

- thanks to this project, I became aware of some intercultural aspects related to either Spanish or British culture;

- conversations through Skype, Whatsapp etc. allowed me to break initial cultural stereotypes;

- I consider that I improved negotiating skills and task completion through peer-work.

The questionnaire also provided an opportunity for open comments.

Figure 1 illustrates the high percentage of students (88.3%) who completed all virtual conversational exchanges, and who did all activities, or more than three (essays or oral expositions following the conversation phase). The number of participants who did not complete the online exchanges was quite low (three students out of 50 participants). These data are for UCLM participants, but similar findings can be extrapolated for participants at Warwick, since they shared tasks with their partners in UCLM.

Figure 1.   Results of participation and task completion (UCLM)

In valuing their experience of the project and responding to the 4 items listed above, 88% of students answered 3 (quite a bit). As for the open comments, some of them indicated the benefits that they observed in relation to their future employability, their intercultural understanding and the increase in their motivation. Thus, a participant from UCLM noted:

> "I found [it] really interesting talking about the job market in Britain. They have more possibilities to find a job soon when they finish their studies" (Participant 10; UCLM).

Furthermore, a participant from Warwick pointed out:

> "For me it was a great opportunity to get to know more things about the Spanish culture. I enjoy talking every week with someone from a different country" (Participant 24; Warwick).

Similarly, a student from Warwick stated:

> "I like to speak Spanish with a native speaker because my weakest points are the listening and the speaking" (Participant 38; Warwick).

The only negative observations were related to the length and timing of connections. Warwick students seemed to have more flexibility in the time

available to talk, perhaps due to their familiarity in taking part in virtual exchanges, although one Warwick student commented:

> "The hardest thing was perhaps finding a time to chat! It was difficult finding a time when both of us were available" (Participant 23; Warwick).

3.   Conclusion

In general, both sets of participants enjoyed the tasks and took active part in the project. Moreover, they positively valued the opportunity to meet people from different countries as a way of understanding the kind of cross-cultural realities which emerged during the tasks (food, access to the job market, university life, etc.). Tasks were shown to be appropriate for the learning context and learners' profiles (intermediate foreign language level). It was the first time that most of the participants from UCLM had been involved in a virtual project, but this did not impede their involvement perhaps because they were offered weekly advice by tutors on how to proceed and were also given guidance throughout the tasks. All the previous aspects contributed to the achievement of a successful rate of participation. This will help to shape the format of future virtual exchanges and contribute to both language development and professional skills which are considered important in accessing the world job market.

The main limitation of this study has to do with the relatively small number of participants involved. Nonetheless, as a case study, it has shown the possible language and professional skills benefits related to the former of the virtual exchange experience in this particular setting and with these participants.

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