

11 Telecollaboration, challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

This article discusses some practical ideas associated with a pilot intercultural telecollaboration project. The aim of the project was to connect students from five countries: Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Poland and Spain, and to make them interact using social media, such as Facebook, Skype, Google Hangouts, etc. There were success stories connected with the project outcomes, as well as some challenges and problems, such as students' motivation and the available technology. This paper presents the project's objectives, methods and results.

Keywords: intercultural communication, telecollaboration, social media tools, motivation, active learning.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, more and more universities broaden their syllabi with intercultural education reinterpreting communicative skills into intercultural communicative skills which have become a must. Although academic syllabi of these courses may differ, they always have the learning goal of making students sensitive

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to intercultural issues and cooperation. In the global working environment, employers expect fresh graduates to be able to work together with colleagues from other cultures and become global citizens. As not every student has the opportunity to study abroad, it remains an important task of universities to provide them with courses that might replace a longer period spent abroad (Jones, 2011).

2. Project objectives

The purpose of the collaboration was to establish an interaction between the students of five universities to encourage them to use the English language and to share information about their different cultures. By creating international learning communities and calling their attention to the basics of cultural differences, we aimed to have the students realize and question their own values and habits (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2006) by making them aware of differences to increase their European multicultural, social consciousness and mutual understanding (Dominguez, 2007). Our primary long-term goal was for the students to be able to study and work abroad, and to cooperate in multinational communities.

3. Research questions

As this was a pilot project, there were several issues whose results could not be anticipated at all. The first question was whether it is possible for five participating institutions to work together efficiently. Right from the beginning it seemed quite a challenge to coordinate the different syllabi and especially the different teaching periods. The second question was what task to design for the students to be interested in, to bring the planned results and to fit into the curricula. There were several other issues which at the beginning were seen as minor problems, such as the most preferable way of communication for the students, how detailed the instructions should be, how many tasks to give them, and how much to control the teams.

4. Project design

The participants were students of five universities: BGF-PSZK (Hungary), TAMK University, Tampere (Finland), Silesian University of Technology, Gliwice (Poland), Polytechnic University, Valencia (Spain), and Pärnu College, University of Tartu (Estonia). They studied different subject areas and attended different university courses, including media and art, economics, finance and engineering, though there was one thing in common; they were learning English as a second language.

4.1. Tasks

Task 1. The introductory task was completed by two or three students from the participating institutions. Students were asked to make a five-minute video that would describe their native cultures. Students had to select specific aspects of their lives that were significantly influenced by culture, like food, leisure time, national holidays, and traditions. The videos were uploaded to a designated YouTube channel for the students to watch and discuss.

Task 2. The task focused on teamwork and telecollaboration. All universities delegated two students to each team, compiled by the teachers. The teams were assigned different topics based on the popular concept of cultural dimensions (e.g. Hall, 1976; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). The dimensions included ‘power distance’, ‘uncertainty avoidance’, ‘high context and low context’, or themes mining the cultural differences found in non-verbal communication and business etiquette. The teams researched their own topics and together they prepared a questionnaire, to which they collected the answers in their home groups and from the team members. The results were presented to their course mates within a few weeks.

4.2. Organization

The participating teachers started with the creation of their own Google Drive interface for sharing various documents, including related articles,

questionnaires, task descriptions, objectives, recommended schedules, suggested tests, and lesson plans.

After the first introductory task, 13 international teams were compiled with two students each from the same course. The reason behind this was on the one hand to not have too many teams, and on the other hand it appeared a good idea to have two students from one country in each international team, so that they would be able to support each other. Finland participated with a total of 56 people. Estonia generated two groups of 16 persons each. Spain had 29 participants, Poland 19, and Hungary 30. Altogether, the teams had a relatively high average headcount, i.e. 12-13 students each. The students received the team members' names, e-mail addresses and task descriptions, but the way of communication was not prescribed.

5. Challenges and results

We were faced with two kinds of challenges; technical and motivational. The first concerned common starting and ending dates that would suit all participating universities, and some technical issues regarding the use of social media tools. The second motivational challenge became evident during group activities where leadership and time management were in need. This created frustration among some students and affected their participation.

We created an evaluation questionnaire for the participants from four countries (Spain left the project): Finland (47) Hungary (27), Estonia (19) and Poland (14). A 5-point Likert Scale was used, where five was the best, and one was the weakest evaluation. In addition, the students had to answer some open-ended questions such as: 'Explain your choice', 'What did not work well?' or 'Please, propose suggestions for improving cooperation'. The questionnaires were collected by each country's tutors, and summarized into a table.

At the end of the project we invited six Hungarian and eight Finnish students to give us more information about their experiences in order to be able to refine

the project. The interview answers, suggestions, and opinions were incorporated into the project results.

Figure 1. The results of the survey

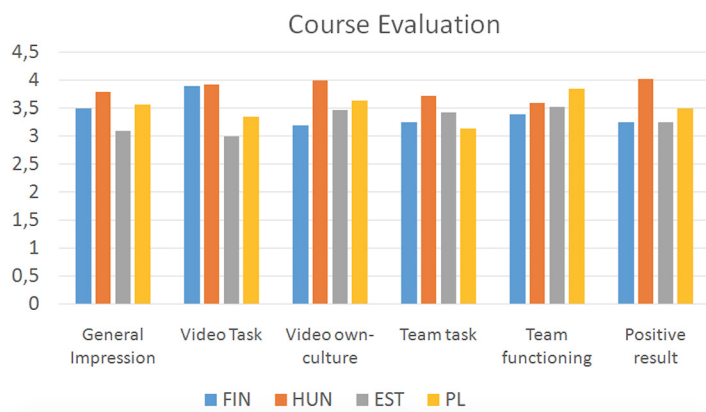


Figure 1 summarizes the opinions given by the four groups of international students. The results of the survey depict that students were satisfied with the project. On the whole Hungarian students gave the most positive feedback, Finnish, Estonian and Polish students gave lower ratings which seemed to be more realistic, as there were several critical remarks about timing, teamwork, not clear enough instructions, etc. The positive ratings of the Hungarian students could be attributed to the fact that they were either less critical or more motivated.

When asked whether the telecollaboration task ended on a positive note, the highest ratings were given by the Hungarians: 4.03. The Finnish, Estonian and Polish students' results were lower: 3.25, 3.26, and 3.5, respectively.

6. Conclusions and perspectives

In conclusion, we can say that the project was a great initiative. Despite their early objections to the additional workload, students enjoyed the program, describing

it as special and unique because of the international teamwork, unconventional tasks and methods.

As suspected, it was not easy to synchronize the five countries' different courses and their original syllabi. As the Spanish participant's objectives were different, they quit after the first task without saying so, which meant a lot of frustration for the other four countries' students. It was also a huge challenge to organize groups of several students in a way in which they would be able to work together.

In answer to the original research questions, it can be concluded that, however exciting and colourful it seems to have five countries in a project, it creates a huge burden for the organizers. Even if every participating teacher is highly motivated, it is almost impossible to coordinate five different semesters, syllabi and so many students.

Harris (1999) summarizes the viewpoints on a successful telecollaboration project by mentioning requirements of the participation, deadlines, interim deadlines, and concrete instructions. In our case, the importance of those criteria was proven. It will be necessary at the launch of a next telecollaborative project to concentrate on precise planning of the aims and objectives, as well as on requirements and timing.

As regards the second research question it is worth planning the tasks in a way that they are simple, attractive and can offer a chance for discussions. The intercultural questions in the questionnaires that students had to ask and answer in Task 2 exaggeratedly fixed the direction of the relations on that special content only, which took away the spontaneity and curiosity of a free conversation. In our future telecollaborative projects, we should find a task where students need to use their own special knowledge and which needs a lot of discussion and cooperation.

Building on our current experience we would like to continue telecollaboration in the future since it is not simply a useful and enjoyable activity for students, it

is also a great opportunity for the instructors to restructure their courses, and it amplifies our European identity (Dominguez, 2007).

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