Telecollaboration and languages for specific purposes

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Abstract. There is no doubt that telecollaboration currently plays an important role in foreign language learning and, not less so, in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Guth (2020) highlighted how telecollaboration has rapidly evolved in the past years as an innovative approach, and how it has brought together a whole community of academics and researchers interested in the field. In this paper, a brief overview of the various presentations that took place in the EuroCALL Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) Special Interest Group (SIG) Symposium is offered. The paper introduces four projects based on telecollaboration contextualised within an ESP classroom in higher education. The first one focuses on a collaborative debate project using English as a *lingua franca;* the second elaborates on improving learners' pragmatic skills through telecollaborative role-plays; the third describes an immersive Virtual Exchange (VE) aiming to foster the students' civic and entrepreneurial competence, while enhancing their intercultural communicative competence. The fourth project aimed at improving students' business communication and management skills in English in a multicultural environment.

Keywords: telecollaboration, virtual exchange, languages for specific purposes, English for specific purposes, pragmatics, virtual reality, intercultural competence.

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1. Introduction

CMC can be described as any human communication which takes place with the aid of two or more electronic devices. The term CMC has traditionally referred to diverse kinds of communication, such as e-mails, e-forums, instant messaging, etc. This term has also been applied to other forms of text-based interaction, such as text messaging (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Significant research on CMC is mainly focused on the social effects of diverse computer-supported communication technologies. Telecollaboration or VE is indeed one of the most enriching and interesting forms of authentic communication in foreign language learning in general and in ESP settings, in particular. This is what triggered the EuroCALL CMC SIG to bring together six experts to explain current practices in telecollaboration which can enhance language learners' motivation.

2. Proposals of the symposium

2.1. The what, why, and how of telecollaboration projects in ESP in higher education

In her presentation, Gimeno-Sanz explored two projects combining telecollaboration and ESP in higher education. Both projects were based on collaboration and product creation tasks as described by Harris (2002) and Helm and Guth (2010), which are the most demanding and, therefore, the least often used. The first project between students from two Spanish universities using English as a lingua franca was based on a collaborative debate project. The post-project questionnaire revealed that learners perceived they had primarily improved their speaking and listening skills, as well as acquiring new vocabulary relating to their field of study. In addition, students pointed out they had improved a number of 'life skills' such as public speaking, critical thinking, articulating thoughts, learning to think on their feet, controlling emotions when speaking in public, and improving their presentation skills. These results were aligned with their expectations, as evidenced by a pre-project questionnaire.

The second project, with Spanish ESP students and US students of Spanish as a foreign language, had the clear goal of developing the students' intercultural awareness. It was conducted bilingually through synchronous and asynchronous tools to give both sets of learners equal opportunities to practise their foreign language. The pre-project survey showed that, overall, the students were open-

minded about discussing intercultural issues and very positive toward collaborating with fellow students from different cultural backgrounds (Gimeno, 2018). They were happy to use information and communications technologies for language learning purposes and did not think that communicating in writing through a private social network or orally through a video-conferencing system hindered authentic intercultural communication and interaction. The surveys also showed that the learners' expectations correlated with their stated post-project gains. Regarding specific benefits, there was clear evidence that the Spanish students saw the project as being instrumental for their English as a foreign language improvement, which was one of the project aims. The artefact students had to produce collaboratively in groups of four (two US-based and two-Spain-based) was a bilingual radio podcast simulating an interview where each cohort summarised their findings in relation to the topics under discussion.

2.2. Does participating in a telecollaborative project foster the acquisition of apologies? Insights from the ESP context

Since Yus (2011) coined the term *cyberpragmatics*, which is "the application of pragmatics to online interactions" (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018, p. 26), the interest in analysing the pragmatic implications of online encounters has evolved, although the field of interlanguage pragmatics in computer-assisted language learning is still under-investigated (Sykes & González-Lloret, 2020). Despite this, Orsini-Jones and Lee (2018) argue that cyberpragmatics is of paramount importance in telecollaboration. Based on these presumptions, Di Sarno-García presented a comparison between the results obtained from a control group (n=17) and an experimental group (n=7) that participated in a telecollaboration project. Di Sarno-García aimed to demonstrate that telecollaborative encounters are a suitable environment for the development of L2 pragmatic competence and for the acquisition of the speech act of apologies, which is usually a problematic speech act that they are likely to perform in their future professional life. Participants from both groups were aerospace engineering students from the Universitat Politècnica de València (Spain), and they performed six open role-plays to elicit their use of apologies. The difference lay in the fact that participants in the control group carried out the task in pairs with their Spanish classmates in a face-to-face setting, while participants in the experimental group conducted the task with L1 or highly proficient speakers of English from the University of Bath (UK) through synchronous Zoom sessions. Their apologies were coded following a taxonomy based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), Leech (2014), and Martínez-Flor (2016). The results of the qualitative analysis revealed that the apologies produced by the experimental group were more complex and sophisticated as they were

performed using a wider variety of strategies compared to those of the control group. On the other hand, findings from the quantitative analysis carried out through an Eta coefficient revealed a significant correlation ($r=.71$) between the number of strategies used and the modality where they were performed. The descriptive analysis of the responses obtained in the pre- and post-test of each group demonstrates that there is a higher tendency of improvement in the case of the experimental group, while in the case of the control group the means reveal a regression in the responses obtained to different questions. Therefore, we can claim that telecollaboration projects are an adequate environment for the practice and acquisition of the speech act of apologies within an ESP context.

2.3.   Sustainable development goals meet immersive VE: the youth entrepreneurship for society in a 3D initiative

Immersive telecollaboration, immersive VE, or 3D VE involves the interaction, communication, and collaboration of geographically dispersed groups of learners via immersive virtual reality by means of engaging participants in 3D-embodied interaction. To our knowledge, there is very limited research exploring 3DVE for language learning in ESP contexts. To address this gap, the 3DVE research project YES3D was launched with the participation of 16 business English students from the Cyprus University of Technology and 26 students from the Universitat de València. Through the completion of different social entrepreneurship project tasks, participants produced various collaborative digital artefacts in their plurinational teams. Interaction, communication, and collaboration were mediated by various tools, including high immersion virtual reality technologies. The co-authored digital artefacts were analysed in terms of their alignment with the sustainable development goals proposed by UNESCO (2017a, 2017b), thus shedding light on how YES3D contributed towards fostering the students' civic and entrepreneurial competence while enhancing their intercultural communicative competence within a discipline-specific, ESP curriculum. This was achieved through the creation of highly immersive experiences in the participants' synchronous interactions which afforded opportunities for increased engagement and effective collaborative work on a meaningful common goal.

2.4.   VE in the business communication classroom: catalyst for employability skills and intercultural competence development

This presentation (Koris and Vuylsteke) described the benefits of VE on students' knowledge acquisition and skills development. The VE project described was

implemented in the field of English business communication by a Hungarian and a Belgian university for three consecutive academic years between 2019 and 2021. Students participating in the VE represented a large variety of nationalities with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. During the collaboration, participants worked online in virtual teams simulating real business communication practices in English (Swartz & Luck, 2018). Capitalising on the multicultural diversity of the teams, students engaged in discussions about the cross-cultural differences in their local business environments, job markets, recruitment processes, job applications, and interviews. At the end of the project, students participated in a real online job interview with professional recruiters. As a final assignment, students presented a digital portfolio on their learning experience, professional development, acquired employability skills, and intercultural competence. The qualitative analyses of student team reports, digital portfolios, and results of pre/post-project surveys of the three iterations revealed that students developed employability skills by facing new challenges in the culturally diverse business world. Not only did it allow students to improve their business communication and management skills in English in a multicultural environment, but it also challenged their intercultural communication competence and global collaboration skills. Hence, VE is an efficient means of and a catalyst for developing students' intercultural competence without physically leaving their classrooms.

3.   Conclusion

The EuroCALL CMC SIG symposium participants provided ample evidence demonstrating that telecollaboration or VE practices in a languages for specific purposes context has more advantages than drawbacks. Through these projects, students can improve their linguistic skills and gain intercultural competence, two essential assets in today's global world that would otherwise not be possible in a traditional classroom setting where students only interact with fellow students or with their teacher. It was also demonstrated that pragmatic skills, which are crucial in communication, can also be developed through telecollaborative activities. The authors highlighted several requirements for these projects to be successful, that is, strict coordination between the project tutors from both participating universities, clear instructions provided to the learners at the start of the project, implementation of questionnaires to gather both expectations at the outset and satisfaction upon conclusion, a clear artefact to be produced collaboratively by the mixed cohorts of students, full integration into the course programme, clear evaluation guidelines, and accounting for student grading.

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