

9 The lights and shadows of intercultural exchange projects for 21st-century skills development: analysis and comparison of two online case studies

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Abstract

This study analyses the results of two parallel two-month online exchange projects launched during the spring semester of 2018. The first project was a bilingual one-to-one English/Spanish exchange project for undergraduate business students. The second one was a monolingual one-to-many intercultural practice in English between native and non-native undergraduate business/economics students. Whereas both projects followed a similar structure, they differed in many aspects. Our mixed-methods approach focusses on student profile, project and task design, implementation, and coordination, in relation to students' participation, performance, and their evaluation of the project. The objective is to identify what led to positive (lights) and negative (shadows) outcomes and to provide a collection of project design recommendations to telecollaboration practitioners.

Keywords: telecollaboration, project design, student perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Since pedagogy tacked from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches, learning has been seen as a process facilitated by the teacher and carried out by the learner (Lynch, 2010). The possibilities brought by the development of web 2.0 information and communication tools are nowadays playing a key role in supporting innovative teaching and learning practices (Lillejord, Børte, Nesje, & Ruud, 2018). An example is telecollaboration in education, that is, the use of computer and/or digital communication tools to promote learning through social interaction and collaboration among students (Dooly, 2017). However, as Jager, Kurek, and O'Rourke (2016) state, summarising David Little's contribution to their edited volume, "telecollaboration cannot by itself be an agent of fundamental change: it can only ever be as effective as the pedagogical environment it is embedded in" (p. 5). In the following sections, we analyse the project design features and student experiences in two telecollaboration projects. The objective is to better understand positive and negative effects of project design and implementation elements to inform future telecollaboration projects.

2. Method

The sample of this study comprised a total of 285 students:

- one-to-one bilingual (English/Spanish) exchange project: 89 students from Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), University of Minnesota (UMN), University of Maryland (UMBC), University of Limerick (UL), and Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP); and
- one-to-many monolingual exchange project: 25 students from BUAP and 171 students from Queens College City University of New York (QCUNY).

The projects were part of the course assignments and were based on oral communication. The two projects ran synchronously and followed the same

data gathering procedure differing only in the case of the QCUNY students, who did not participate in Foreign Language (FL) practice. For this reason, their questionnaires were adapted to cover only intercultural issues.

This paper is based on questionnaire data. The pre-project questionnaire sought to identify student profiles in terms of demographics and intercultural sensitivity levels. For the bilingual project, all the questionnaires were provided either in English or Spanish. Therefore, the intercultural sensitivity scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000) was translated into Spanish by the main researchers and a group of experts (see supplementary materials). Students' perceptions about tasks and interactions were gathered during every virtual exchange. Finally, their perception of the overall project and performance were measured using the Project Evaluation Questionnaire (PEQ).

3. Results and discussion

The dropout rate in both projects was low. The higher numbers of dropouts are among QCUNY students. Working in groups could have had a negative effect on the students (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' participation rates

Type of project	Institution	Sample	Participation		
			Active	Inactive	Dropout
Bilingual One-on-one	University	Enrolled	Active	Inactive	Dropout
	BUAP	2	2	0	0
	UL	19	17	2	1
	UMN	22	20	2	0
	UMBC	6	3	3	1
	UOC	40	30	10	0
Monolingual One-to-many	QCUNY	171	147	24	21
	BUAP	25	23	2	2

Student perceptions about the project, gathered with the PEQ, show that students enjoyed participating in the project and perceive their participation to have positive effects in communicative and intercultural skills development (Table 2).

QCUNY had lower percentages expressing positive effects than its counterparts, but still high.

Table 2. Intercultural skills development and enjoyment during the project perceived by the students (percentages of students who answered quite/very much)

Item	Eng	UOC	BUAP	QCUNY
Developing skills for communicating with other people	71%	63%	71%	66%
Developing skills for interacting with people from other cultures	77%	73%	71%	70%
Developing skills for understanding other cultures	71%	73%	81%	75%
Enjoy getting to know someone from a different culture	86%	93%	95%	76%
Enjoy interacting with your partner	88%	83%	83%	72%
Liking to learn with someone from a different culture	80%	87%	100%	73%

As QCUNY students showed lower levels of enjoyment, we analysed their responses to the open question *In your opinion, what are the most important elements to have a successful online intercultural exchange experience?* from the PEQ. The answers reflected issues in three areas (Table 3):

- project design: lack of alignment between the project and the subject;
- task design: need for clarity in task descriptions and aims; and
- language: communication problems due to a low FL proficiency level in Mexican students.

As reflected in students’ perceptions about the project, the shadows are grouped in project design, task design, and language barriers. Although QCUNY students valued positively the opportunity to use statistics in real-life contexts, they perceived a lack of structure in some tasks and had difficulties carrying them out.

They felt that the language barrier with their Mexican partners had a negative impact. QCUNY students worked in groups and formed the largest contingent of students in the projects (n=171). This may have hindered the possibility of personalised support, which could have affected engagement and dropout rates. However, students in QCUNY showed high levels of enjoyment and valued their participation in the project positively. Thus, the interactive and affective dimensions seem to promote motivation and engagement, making up for project design flaws identified by the students.

Table 3. Responses of QCUNY students to the open question

Project design	<p>“This was not an organized and coherent project”</p> <p>“I really did not have a good time, thought it was pointless”</p> <p>“I feel that the topic was not very relevant to us and the project probably could have been better coordinated”</p>
Task design	<p>“More organized. More individualized – questions were not always applicable to our topic”</p> <p>“I feel like the topic of our discussion didn’t allow much room for any huge conversation to happen”</p>
Language	<p>“I did not feel it was very beneficial because of the language barrier between me and my partne”</p> <p>“Respectfully, language was a barrier”</p> <p>“Our partner from Mexico had difficulties expressing himself in English”</p>

4. Conclusions

The main problem teachers face in telecollaboration projects is the lack of institutional support in very time-consuming projects (Guth, Helm, & O’Dowd, 2014). In addition to this, our study revealed the importance of both project and task design, and especially attentive coordination and personalised student support. Complementary language assistance must be included in the learning materials when the interaction is monolingual and one-to-many to avoid

communication breakdowns. In these projects, success is normally measured by dropout and completion rates as well as skill development and knowledge acquisition. Such measurements of success are fundamental but following the latest stream of research in pedagogy that links learning with emotion, we claim that enjoyment should also be included as part of the equation to measure the success of telecollaboration projects. The fun component added to the tasks and social interaction (level of enjoyment) in the projects has shown to keep the students motivated as they value the experience positively despite the flaws in the design.

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Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/q0s5ylm7lj3rb9nx5s02y1jjvjkk4hjk>

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