Collaborative Online Learning: Plurilingual and Pluricultural Development

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Abstract. Background. The growing importance of international cooperation among universities have increased the number of joint training projects. Common Bologna principles followed by Russian and Spanish tertiary institutions helped perform a pilot study focused on telecollaboration and plurilingual and pluricultural competence implementation. The project aimed at forming plurilingual and pluricultural competence and communicative competence among students studying either English or Spanish or both through the integration of digital technologies into the learning process.

Methods. This 7-month study took place in Moscow (Russian Federation) and Valencia (Spain) from November 2019 to June 2020. Participants were university students aged 20–23 from Teaching Training Faculties from Lomonosov Moscow State University and CEU Cardenal Herrera University. The undergraduates who volunteered to participate in the focus group took part in five telecollaboration sessions (March-May 2020). The participants were divided into two mixed (50% Russian and 50% Spanish learners) subgroups and discussed suggested topics during online student-led bilingual sessions. After each online interaction, researchers collected their opinions through questionnaires and discussion with a lecturer.

Outcomes. All participants announced that the study gave them a chance to improve their language abilities, update their vocabulary and enhance their intercultural experience. None of the partakers reported having experienced any difficulty doing the project and only regretted that interaction time was too short. Additionally, lecturers were able to test new curricula implementation and assessment procedures.

Conclusions. The pilot study was feasible to deliver and there was a clear, satisfactory result with the focus groups participants and teaching staff.

Keywords: Bologna system, competence-based higher education, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC), telecollaboration, online bilingual sessions

Коллаборативное онлайн-образование:
плюрилингвальный и плюрикультурный подход

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Аннотация. История вопроса: Растущее значение международного сотрудничества между университетами увеличило количество совместных образовательных проектов. Общие принципы Болонской системы, которым следуют российские и испанские высшие учебные заведения, помогли провести пилотное исследование, посвященное дистанционному взаимодействию и развитию плюрилингвальной и плюрикультурной компетенций. Проект был направлен на формирование плюрилингвальной, плюрикультурной и коммуникативной компетенции у студентов, изучающих английский, испанский или оба языка, посредством интеграции цифровых технологий в учебный процесс.

Метод: Данное семимесячное исследование проходило в Москве (Российская Федерация) и Валенсии (Королевство Испания) с ноября 2019 года по июнь 2020 года. Участниками проекта стали студенты факультетов подготовки преподавателей из Московского государственного университета имени М.В. Ломоносова и Университета CEU Cardenal Herrera (возраст: 20-23 лет). Студенты старших курсов, вызвавшиеся участвовать в фокус-группе, приняли участие в пяти учебных блоках дистанционного взаимодействия (март-май 2020 года). Участники были разделены на две смешанные (50% русских и 50% испанских учащихся) подгруппы и обсуждали предложенные темы во время двуязычных онлайн лекций и дискуссий. После каждого онлайн-взаимодействия исследователи собирали их мнения посредством анкетирования и обсуждения с преподавателем.

Результаты: Все участники заявили, что проект дал позволил им улучшить языковые навыки, обновить словарный запас и расширить межкультурный опыт. Никто из участников не сообщил о том, что испытывал какие-либо трудности при выполнении проекта. Кроме того, было выражено сожаление о том, что время взаимодействия было слишком коротким. Преподаватели смогли опробовать новые учебные программы и процедуры оценки в рамках проекта.

Выводы: Данное пилотное исследование было осуществлено в соответствии с планом; участники фокус-групп и преподавательский состав получили четкий и удовлетворительный ответ на обозначенные вопросы исследования.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, Болонская система, компетентсностный подход в образовании, плюрилингвальная и плюрикультурная компетенция, дистанционное взаимодействие, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

Introduction

From university cooperation to telecollaboration

There has been a fast progression in global partnerships amongst higher education institutions all through the most recent twenty years because of the Bologna agreement. Additionally, among current participants from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), we find 48 nations and the European Commission actively promoting quality education, cooperation and research. It is a knowledge integration space, fundamentally offering high quality comparable and compatible university training, three-cycle qualifications and joint groundwork for the work market necessities. The above mentioned beneficial partnership collaborations attest to growing new and productive methods of embracing intercultural learning connections.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in 2013 EU Erasmus programmes provided grants to "3.3 million students and 470 000 staff members" [1]. The mobility programmes offered one-of-a-kind support for shared acknowledgement of credits, language training and, in general, better preparation for the globalised economy. Presently, the inquiry is: what kind of new collaborative solutions can surge based on the sustainable higher education premises in the digital era? There is no uncertainty about online interaction's complexity, yet new kinds of advanced communications dynamically flood educational settings.

Telecollaboration models have become a valuable asset in most tertiary education establishments in the past years. Due to a large variety of meaningful links of this field to foreign language (FL) education, below, we determine the essential findings and indicators relevant for the current research:

– telecollaboration, as defined by O'Dowd [2], is "the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work". Recently, by equating telecollaboration with virtual exchanges, the same author [3] adds an important point: the interaction mentioned above happens as "an integrated part of [their] educational programmes";

– telecollaboration achieves new social and institutional dimensions while associated with foreign language, claimed Belz [4; 5], or becomes a source of intercultural understanding and otherness perception in view of Van der Kroon et al. [6]. Additionally, Guth & Helm [7] report to be reinforcing online literacies through three main categories of tasks: (a) information exchange, comparison and analysis, (b) collaboration and (c) product creation;

– telecollaboration and intercultural communication become partners in promoting intercultural competences, detailed Belz [5]. In this respect, the analysis presented by Çiftçi & Savaş [8] pointed out five major factors influencing this trend: (1) the students' general perspectives on their telecollaborative encounters, (2) language learning through telecollaboration, (3) intercultural learning through telecollaboration, (4) the difficulties experienced inside the telecollaborative undertakings, and (5) the requirements for additional successful telecollaboration;

– telecollaboration models in university framework extensively studied by Helm [9] showed the tendency to use emails, virtual learning environments, online discussion forums or video-audio conferencing, preferably. Meanwhile, O'Dowd [3] focused primarily on virtual exchange approaches such as UNICollaboration (a combination of applied linguistics and FL education), X-Culture (international business experience) or COIL (global partnerships, online learning collaboration in higher education).

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and learning outcomes

For this study, the researchers utilised a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) system, designed and promoted by J. Rubin [10], to advance worldwide virtual exchange programmes for universities worldwide. It is a financially savvy and inventive way to establish an advanced learning climate for virtual ventures and communication. Loop activities (www.coilconsult.com) help associate study halls of at least two higher education institutions, developing socially different and still very sensible correspondence types.

The COIL model does not just pay attention to students' considerations and works as they examine and obtain information yet also offers secure and not costly virtual situations to develop coordinated efforts. On similar lines, De Wit [11] advocated for COIL as an opportunity for authentic virtual mobility while making teachers and students cooperate, interact, go global

and embed all aforementioned factors into the training.

Therefore, we place our research under the umbrella of COIL sustainability and globally networked learning in humanities. In the following white paper, the telecollaboration system advises on the telecollaboration premises [12; 13]:

• class size and duration: from 4 to 40 students interacting during 5–12 weeks;

• language: predominantly English language;

• technology: mainly synchronous face-to-face classroom sessions. For synchronous communications, the participants used Skype, Facebook and Google chat, whereas the asynchronous tools were email, Facebook and institutions' learning management system (LMS);

• student feedback: genuinely interested in the online collaboration courses, learners requested a longer duration of class sessions and interactions as well as needed more time for collaborative work and the whole exchange programme;

• teacher feedback: educators' enthusiastic attitude towards the co-teaching process, moderation, and intercultural online training proved to be a driving force behind every COIL application. Besides, they raised concerns over the learning objectives' achievement;

• institutional support: the most critical elements for the success of virtual sessions are the financial, administrative, pedagogical and technical support of both educational institutions.

Once we reviewed the essential aspects of COIL telecollaboration, we can now focus on the detailed example of the exchange phases aimed at sustainable international partnership and transferable career skills development [14; 15] in the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences Faculty of Business:

1) socialising (icebreaker, group formation, creating trust);

2) project organisation, planning and comparative discussions;

3) collaborative project work, research and analysis, problem-solving;

4) research results' presentation and conclusion, evaluation and reflection.

COIL practitioners should note that this method pays special attention to learning outcomes (LO) viewed with a magnifying glass of revised Bloom taxonomy [16]. In other words, the competence levels during each COIL stage are attached to the corresponding taxonomy levels. As Haug [14] holds, educators must ensure the progress on

• Level 1 Remembering (Can the learner recall or remember the information?);

• Level 2 Understanding (Can the learner explain ideas or concepts?);

• Level 3 Applying (Can the learner use information in a new way?);

• Level 4 Analysing (Can the learner distinguish between different parts?);

• Level 5 Evaluating (Can the learner justify a stand or decision?);

• Level 6 Creating (Can the learner create a new product or point of view?).

In addition to the LO stated above, we collected some thoughts and ideas on learning outcomes in higher education. Although a limited number of studies addressed this point [17–21], their main focus did not include telecollaboration as a specific area of training and curriculum design. In this regard, we would like to mention a research report supported by Educational Testing Service [19] where seven critical domains surge: creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, effective communication, digital and information literacy, citizenship and life skills.

Considering current study objectives, a fruitful combination of both approaches to LO [14; 19] could increase awareness of learning objectives in telecollaboration.

Plurilingual & pluricultural competence (PPC)

In the present proposal, we explore the process of telecollaboration and its application to *plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC)* development.

International educational setting makes it critical to glance at the official point of view on language training upheld by UNESCO [22], declaring the "linguistic pluralism" to consolidate the primary language, a subsequent language and a modern global language. Such a methodology requires a list of directions and instructional highlights that unite policy-makers, strategists, undergraduates, lecturers and families. The two releases of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [23; 24] gave us significant help with setting fully operational educational systems focused on language training and assessment.

Initially, in 2001, the first Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) featured various social advantages of plurilingualism. Being characterised as a context to enhance singular language foundation and work up an open "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contribute and in which dialects interrelate and collaborate" [23]. The association of language and culture engages life advancement, representing a fundamental plurilingual and pluricultural fitness piece.

Further on, in 2018, the renewed CEFR Companion Volume brought the meaning of plurilingualism as an "uneven and changing competence, the dynamic and linguistic repertoire of an individual user/ learner" [24].

Because of the stable association of plurilingual and pluricultural parts of the competence, below, we recover the idea of a joint plurilingual and pluricultural competence from a few scholarly findings such as

– Coste et al. [25], describing the PPC in terms of "the ability to use languages for communication and to take part in intercultural interaction", highlight the role of a language user as a social actor;

– Piccardo and North [26] who unveil mixed facets of a learner/social agent where general competences and PPC help accomplish activities in a mutually significant way: from a socially-situated extent to an individual one;

– Galante's [27] study of 379 plurilingual speakers who proved to perceive PPC as a unique construct where language and culture

are interrelated. Additionally, plurilingual and pluricultural competence's analysis highlights its significance in terms of language education, curriculum, and policy.

As of now, the semantic and social pieces of the PPC are immovably interconnected. In this way, different benefits arise out of prior socio-linguistic and practical capacities bettering the interlinguistic design of other co-official languages, updating interrelation of etymological structures, building new cut-off points and encouraging friendly, phonetic and social learning [24].

Moreover, the principles of plurilingual pedagogies cross the borders of English as a modern international language and get a deserved integration in the sphere of higher education [28] employing the following three-fold matrix:

(1) faculty and student initiation;

(2) planned and spontaneous engagements with plurilingualism;

(3) plurilingualism as either a scaffold or a resource for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

By moving forward with the investigation of the telecollaboration and PPC phenomenon, we initially focus on the research question (RQ) of how the COIL framework helps build a profound learning experience (RQ1). Besides, we enquire about PPC connection to a new perspective on the training interactions (RQ2). Finally, we identify plurilingual pedagogies necessary to support integration of virtual exchange in university curricula (RQ3).

Methodology

The Erasmus agreement between CEU Cardenal Herrera and Lomonosov Moscow State Universities was signed in 2014 to facilitate students' and teachers' interchange, mobility, facilities, and research collaboration. Upon agreeing on all the required input, the stakeholders decided that both institutions will launch the project aimed to develop plurilingual and pluricultural competence and communicative competence among students studying either English or Spanish or both through the integration of

digital technologies into the learning process with the implementation of the Collaborative Online International Project (COIL) method. Several reasons led to resorting to the COIL method. They include:

− to help students learn more about other cultures;

− to internationalise both universities involved;

− to make the two universities closer to each other;

− to improve students' team working and digital competence;

− to develop students' plurilingual and pluricultural competence;

− to develop students' linguistic competence.

Research goal

Generally, the project aimed at forming PPC and communicative competence in students studying either English or Spanish or both through the integration of digital technologies into the learning process. Within the competence framework, the project aimed to develop skills and abilities such as interculturality, cooperation and plurilingualism. Specifically, language learning aspects included phonological, grammatical proficiencies, dialogic and monologue speech skills, writing and lexical skills in the online environment.

The pilot study involved four parts performed by project participants, which are summed up in *Figure 1.* In order to carry out the study, five one-hour long Skype sessions were set up.

Participants

As the study objective was to teach and better understand current students' needs and enhance future university curriculum development, we followed specific guidelines on focus group (group size of 6−8 participants, moderated discussion practice, evaluation and feedback) [29−31]. The educators created a focus group of 8 students since it was a piloting project where four students were from CEU Cardenal Herrera University (native Spanish speakers, B2 level of English, Teachers' Training Degree) and the oth-
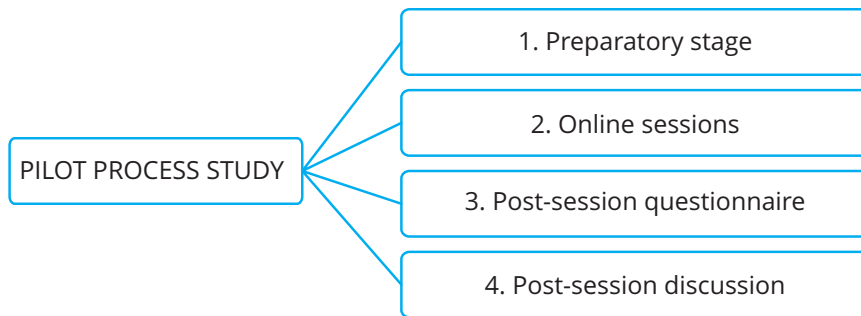
Fig. 1. Pilot study process

er four from Lomonosov Moscow State University (native Russian speakers, C1 level of Spanish, B2 level of English).

Implementation

Stage 1: Preparatory Stage. The project participants, together with the authors of the project, were required to work on the upcoming items according to the thematic plan: intercultural topics, the lexical minimum necessary to conduct a discussion within the proposed subject, different ways of constructing argumentation, list of questions for discussion with participants of the online session and a list of introductory and linking structures necessary for conducting a debate or discussion.

The participants were suggested to discuss the following topics during the five sessions: (1) Stereotypes; (2) Equality; (3) Education; (4) Fashion and (5) Social Life.

Stage 2: Online sessions. Students were divided into two groups: A and B. Each group consisted of two students from CEU Cardenal Herrera and two students from Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Together with the authors of the project, the project participants met on the online platform Skype/Zoom and held a discussion or debate on the topic indicated in the planning. The online session participants were allowed to independently determine the language rules for conducting a debate according to the following possible options. Option 1 included participants changing the language of communication after every 20 to 45 minutes. Option 2 included having participants from CEU Cardenal Herrera speak English while those from MSU Lomonosov State University speak Spanish. Finally, the participants divided online sessions into two parts: 30 minutes of Spanish and 30 minutes of English language interactions.

The project participants (100% female group) were to conduct the conversation without the project authors'/lecturers' direct input. The authors of the project observed the discussion in observer mode.

Stage 3: Post-session questionnaire. Once every session was over, we invited students to fill out a small questionnaire on Google Forms to summarise the conversation results.

Stage 4: Post-session discussion. After each session, lecturers reviewed the process held to determine and identify the following: 1) lexical features and techniques used in the discussion by the participants of a foreign university; 2) ways of constructing argumentation by representatives of a foreign university; 3) cultural features of the discussion by representatives of a foreign country.

The project's implementation included a free-time schedule, synchronous sessions.

Evaluation

Questionnaires suggested below were used as the primary qualitative research tool, whereas short videos and a 1-minute paper included in the continuous assessment process of each session training results were confidential. In receiving the feedback for the project, the research

team used the opinions of students and lecturers-researchers' views were also regarded.

Questionnaire

This section provides responses to the following three open questions answered by all study participants and summarises critical analytical data collected:

1. Have you ever participated in a bilingual project?

2. How has this experience improved your plurilingual and pluricultural competences?

3. What difficulties did you experience moving from Spanish to English and from English to Spanish during the session?

1. Among the participants, 66.7% (5 respondents) had previously participated in the project; hence, they were experienced in bilingual training practices. However, the remaining 33.3% (3 respondents) have no previous experience in bilingual projects.

2. All participants rated the collaboration experience as highly relevant to their studies and future profession in didactics and methodology of foreign language teaching. In raising awareness of the plurilingual and pluricultural competences, some students commented:

− they had had an excellent opportunity to talk in English and Spanish with girls about their chosen topics;

− the project presented them with an opportunity for developing and perfecting their oral skills;

− they have expanded their vocabulary in the two languages; they also changed their speaking English and Spanish vision since they were ashamed of speaking in English before;

− they have developed a positive attitude towards speaking English secondary to the project as it has made it easier for them to understand English and Spanish;

− their English language competency has markedly improved and they have acquired a specific vocabulary of various topics.

3. In addition to examining the PPC, we also looked at the responses concerning the challenging format of 30 minutes (English) + 30 minutes (Spanish) interaction per session. In the focus group, both educators and learners viewed these practices in the following manners:

- Russian participants found no difficulties moving from English to Spanish or from Spanish to English since they have been living and working with many Spanish friends, so changing the language was normal to them;

- Spanish learners liked the project as they could speak in the two languages since the project presented them with an opportunity to improve English. They also praised the friendliness of the Russian counterparts which made them break the fear of speaking in English. They even would have liked the project to take a longer time.

Outcomes

Most of the students (66.7 %) participated in projects entailing plurilingual and pluricultural experience before, while 33.3 % had not had prior experience in participating in such projects. All study participants reported that the project presented them with an opportunity to improve their language skills and update their vocabulary and enrich their personal experience of intercultural communication. They perfected their oral skills, enhanced their speaking in English and gained new English and Spanish vocabulary. None of the participants reported having experienced any difficulty in doing the project. The cooperation of Russian students made it easier to break the fear of speaking in English. Some of the participants with bilingual and bicultural experiences made it easier to carry out the project minus constraints. All in all, the implementation of the telecollaboration experience helped apply international rules and conventions mentioned by Crowley-Vigneau et al. [32] within the Russian higher education context.

Conclusions

The pertinence of both universities to the EHEA and adaptation of international HE norms enabled a valuable partnership experience focused on plurilingual and pluricultural

competence development. The research approached the general goal of developing PPC and communicative competence through the integration of digital technologies into the learning process. A pilot study was carefully designed to monitor and improve the process of plurilingual virtual collaboration performed in a focus group. Authors follow the step-by-step investigation process (see *Figure 1*) for exploring the feasibility of mutual cultural and linguistic enrichment employing a new way of applying technology and advancing HE curricula. The following observations were made as a result of the conducted project:

RQ1. The integration of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) scheme in the learning process is an effective approach to acquiring intercultural skills, as well as Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence because of its across-the-board availability, cost-effectiveness, the efficacy of bilingual training practices.

RQ2. On observation of the questionnaire evaluation, it was apparent that within the framework of competence, the project is operative in training such abilities as communication competence, plurilingual competence, pluricultural competence, linguistic competence, digital competence, team working competence.

RQ3. The integration of the virtual exchange in degree curricula of two different universities resulted in participation assessment as 20% of the final course grade, recognising the value of participative learning.

Since the project participants were to conduct the conversation without the direct input of the lecturers, the educators observed the virtual classroom discussion in the observer mode, encouraging the participants to become active partakers in the collaborative learning process. Moreover, student-led discussion facilitated active learning, shared knowledge acquirement and promoted social interaction as well as helped participants to share ideas, express opinions, manage time and overcome anxiety linked to the effective filter limitations. Hence, we strongly recommend using a common virtual space to gain a new intercultural background.

Considering the above-mentioned cooperation background, students' needs and curricular advancement, the study helped address the following aspects of online telecollaboration and PPC:

1. implementation of a methodological and pedagogical experiment using digital technologies;

2. formation of students' understanding of the difference between formal and informal communication styles;

3. formation and development in students of the skill of using the introductory, plug-in, and ligamentous structures;

4. formation of students' ideas about the difference in the ways of thinking, the formation of thoughts, and the construction of argumentation among representatives of different cultures;

5. formation of the ability to conduct debates, discussions with representatives of the countries of the target language;

6. competence development via student-led discussions.

The results of the conducted study suggest that further projects may target telecollaboration initiatives where international HE participants are engaged in a guided project interaction. A further important aspect of supporting learning outcomes is to ensure an appropriate and visual training result by introducing a focused task aimed at task-based language teaching. These kinds of assignments are of great importance for the educators and researchers as they need to know "whether learners are able to perform some specific feature they are investigating in a communicative context". Due to the importance of the plurilingual and pluricultural competence to the HE training, further experimental studies should be performed on using focused consciousness-raising tasks in telecollaboration.

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