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Integrating Telecollaboration into EFL Classroom: Theoretical and Practical Implications

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Abstract

To date, methods fostering intercultural collaboration among university students have become a central draw for EFL teachers, as it is required for a graduate to be ready for communication in the international context. Telecollaboration is one of the most effective one. The present paper gives common information about the method mentioned, carries out a brief literature overview. In addition, characteristics of a collaborative classroom are defined, TPU experience in telecollaboration is described.

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1. Introduction

Telecollaboration in foreign language education is online intercultural exchange between classes of students in geographically distant locations. It has also been called Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) and Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education (ICFLE). Telecollaboration offers opportunities for universities to support their internationalization strategies and engage learners in dialogue with peers in different parts of the world.

Telecollaboration has evolved as a pedagogic approach with diverse learning objectives, involving a variety of participants' typologies and configurations as well as a range of languages. Telecollaboration is an interaction generally occurs between participants who are involved in tasks designed to foster language skills and intercultural

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communicative competence. Moreover, it is also crucial that foreign language education is concerned not only with instrumental aims but also humanistic ones, and promote not only the acquisition of language and intercultural skills and competences but also intercultural dialogue and understanding (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003).

It is worth admitting that intercultural dialogue has recently become a key area of European policy. In 2008, the Council of Europe published the “White Paper on Intercultural dialogue”. In this document it is defined as “a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect, an ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others” (O’Dowd, 2003, p. 363).

Promoting telecollaboration in EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom is an imperative for educators and one of the area where intercultural dialogue may find a collocation.

Concerning language learning contexts, telecollaboration is regarded as an internet-based intercultural interaction between students of different national backgrounds set up in an institutional context with the aim to develop both language skills and intercultural communicative competence through structured by teachers tasks.

There are several different models of telecollaboration: a) monolingual (involving just one of the partners’ languages); b) bilingual (involving both languages of partners); c) multilingual (involving the sharing of more than two languages).

In most telecollaboration projects reported in the literature, teachers organize the communication and tasks, motivate students, monitor activities, provide feedback and support learners. Sometimes learners engage in communication with no direct intervention from teachers, in case when they have a good enough level of language.

As for the communication itself, it takes place synchronously (this type of communication supposes preliminary arrangements between partners about time and topics for discussion) or asynchronously (the communication via social nets or e-mail). The type of communication depends on objectives of the exchange, institutional and logistic constraints, such as jet lag, class times, teacher/student preferences.

Objectives of telecollaboration depend on the project and the participant groups. They can include the development of language skills and intercultural communicative competence; development of new online literacy; language tutoring skills; work-related competences. A recent survey of telecollaboration practitioners in EFL classroom revealed the fact that the most widely shared objective is intercultural communicative competence.

Telecollaboration projects are supposed to be ideal to get it, since it offers learners an authentic context for taking part in a real communication, catching up what has been seen as the limitations of the classroom activities, overcoming language barriers (Good, O’Connor, Greene, & Luce, 2005).

2. Literature review

The telecollaboration literature is quite vast and has focused on many different aspects. The most well-established models of telecollaboration are the bicultural and bilingual eTandem and Cultura, which have formed the basis of many exchanges and have been adapted to different languages and contexts.

eTandem is a form of institutionalized online tandem learning, where individual students from different classes, with different native languages are paired and communicate together with the aim of learning each other’s language (Kötter, 2003). The focus tends to be on the development of linguistic competence. Encouraged learners provide feedback on their partners’ foreign language corrections and offer new formulations (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011). The Cultura model, developed by Furstenberg and her colleagues at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001), is the basis of what O’Dowd has described as a “blended intercultural model” (O’Dowd & Ware, 2009). It has a strong intercultural component, with learners being engaged in tasks designed by educators to elicit cultural differences and similarities. Researches on projects adopting this model are generally based on sociocultural frameworks and focused on the role of intercultural competence as well as development of language skills (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003).

Much of the literature on telecollaboration is dedicated to international projects involved into a classroom. The most commonly taught languages are English French, German, Spanish and Italian. In 2003, Belz identified that there were little researches on partnerships involving the so-called less commonly taught languages (LCTL). But in

recent years, however, there seems to have been a rise in the number of publications describing telecollaboration projects involving Chinese (Wang, Zou, Wang, & Xing, 2013) and Russian.

As for Russian practice in telecollaboration projects, it should be noticed that modern system of Russian education demands modernization, supposing a shift of emphasis in educational objectives and conditions that means “open” and individual trajectories of studying. In this area, telecollaboration projects create absolutely new opportunities for teachers and students. Thus, to date it attracts much attention, since a lot of surveys are devoted to the problem mentioned. The researches of telecollaboration at schools belong to Bukharkina (2001); Krivoshechekov highlights the role of IT in performing intercultural projects (1994); extracultural work, organised with the help of pedagogical projects are reflected in the surveys of Polat (2001); methodology of telecollaboration at a non-linguistic university is described by Pahmutova (2003); practical experience of taking part in telecollaboration projects and sharing issues are observed in papers of Klimanova and Dembovskaya (2013).

There are also some researches on telecollaboration exchanges whereby participants use a foreign language common to all of them, a “lingua franca”, rather than communicating with native speakers, most commonly this language is English. It has been suggested that this move may be partly due to the increase in telecollaboration projects involving multiple partners. Researches in this area are just beginning, but an interesting finding is that learners report being less anxious when interacting with non-native speakers, and that the use of a contact language can cement participants’ feelings of proximity and mutual support (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001).

3. Characteristics of a Collaborative Classroom

3.1. Collaborative knowledge among teachers and students

In traditional classrooms, the dominant is a teacher as information giver; knowledge flows only one way from the teacher to the student. In contrast with traditional classrooms, collaboration promotes shared knowledge. The teacher has vital knowledge about the content, skills, and instructions, and still provides that information to students.

3.2. Shared responsibility among teachers and students

In collaborative classrooms, teachers share authority with students in very specific ways. In most traditional classrooms, the teacher is responsible for setting goals, making learning tasks, and assessing them. Collaborative teachers differ in that they invite students to reach specific goals within the framework of what is being taught, provide options for activities and assignments, and assess what they learn. Collaborative teachers encourage students to share their knowledge and their learning strategies, treat each other respectfully, and focus on high levels of understanding. There are two main points in it: 1) students have opportunities to ask and investigate questions of personal interest; 2) they have a voice in the decision-making process. These opportunities are essential for both self-regulated learning and motivation.

3.3. Teachers as middlemen

As knowledge and authority are shared among teachers and students, the role of the teacher increasingly emphasizes mediated learning. Successful mediation helps students connect new information to their experiences and give the opportunity for students to figure out what to do when they are stumped. Above all, the teacher as mediators adjust the level of information and support the ability of students to take responsibility for learning. This characteristic of collaborative classrooms is very important.

3.4. Hybrid grouping of students

The perspectives, experiences, and background of all students are important for enriching learning in the classroom. As learning beyond the classroom increasingly requires understanding diverse perspectives, it is essential to provide opportunities to do this in multiple contexts. In collaborative classrooms everyone learns from everyone

else, and no student is deprived of this opportunity for making contributions and appreciating the contributions of others.

Thus, a critical characteristic of collaborative classrooms is that students are not segregated according to supposed abilities, achievements, interests, or any other characteristics. Segregation seriously weakens collaboration and impoverishes the classroom by depriving all students of opportunities to learn from and with each other. Thus, shared knowledge and authority, mediated learning, and heterogeneous groups of students are essential characteristics of collaborative classrooms. These characteristics necessitate new roles for teachers and students that lead to interactions different from those in more traditional classrooms (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011).

4. TPU experience in Telecollaboration

4.1. Context

One of the main objectives of TPU as one of the leading Russian technical universities is to improve the quality and to increase the volume of student international collaboration. It will lead to intercultural understanding, break stereotyped beliefs and negative attitudes, and create the community of international students. In other words, promote personal, linguistic and intercultural development. Therefore, the need for initiatives, which integrate Russian students with native speakers of English has been recognized and the invitation to participate in a telecollaborative project was accepted.

The Lingua Exchange 2015 project (hereinafter referred to as Project) is one of a series of projects that has been set up by Lingua Exchange Group. This is a group located in Chicago (USA), which arranged telecollaborative projects among the universities of the USA, Canada, Switzerland, Finland, Russia and Ukraine were the participants of the projects earlier. In 2015, telecollaboration was arranged among TPU, University of Arizona (Arizona, USA) and Loyola University (Chicago, USA). The project used the social network VKontakte (hereinafter referred to as VK) to put the students of the three universities in touch with each other, so that they could exchange information and collaborate. In view of the time difference, asynchronous way of interaction was considered to be the most appropriate one, although Skype was used by the students voluntarily.

The Project was devised to promote greater contact between the students so that they could develop their foreign language skills and intercultural communicative competence. Along with that, the students had the opportunity to become aware of the life in different international contexts. The Project took place from March to May 2015 and involved 29 Russian and 29 American students.

The group of Russian students was quite homogeneous: most of the students were aged 18-19 with the language level around A2-B1 (according to CEFR). All of them studied at the Institute of Power Engineering. The group of American students was more diverse in terms of academic year (first-, third-year students, postgraduates), age (19-25 with several students older) and specialities. They were studying in different faculties such as Law, Linguistics, Politics, and others.

All the students were computer literate and had unlimited access to computers and the Internet. The project was integrated into the compulsory foreign language course (English on behalf of Russian students, Russian on behalf of American students). The students were divided into pairs depending on the results of the questionnaire aimed at defining personal characteristics, interests and goals. Students worked in a self-directed way out of class with teacher facilitation when required.

4.2. Objectives

The main aim for the students was to foster student international collaboration. In addition, the learners were given the opportunity to communicate with peers and gain an insight into partners' experience. In terms of language learning, the project offered the students the chance to develop their productive skills both in writing and speaking. A secondary objective was to stimulate interest in a foreign language and culture learning.

4.3. Phases and Tasks of the project

4.3.1. Duration

The project took 8 weeks:

March 9-13: Pre-project orientation, registration of VK accounts.

March 16-21: Week 0. Registration and introductions. Lingua Exchange group activities.

March 23-27: Week 1. Project 1 – Russian phase.

April 30-5: Week 2. Project 2 – Russian phase.

April 6-12: Week 3. Project 3 – Russian/English film making (group project).

April 13-19: Week 4. Project 4 – English phase.

April 20-26: Week 5. Project 5 – English phase.

May 27- 4: Week 6. Project 6 – Wrap-up. Final reflections are due.

4.3.2. Topics

The main task for the students was to collaborate via VK within the defined topics so that the students could complete the tasks elaborated by the teacher at the end of each week (e.g. write a composition, make a report, etc.). Topics defined for American students: 1) personal information, interests; 2) university life. Topics defined for Russian students: 1) students' life and education (prospects after graduation, the academic course, tips for successful studying, entertainment); 2) a changing world (using technologies, global issues, environment problems).

4.3.3. Rules

At the project orientation stage, the following basic rules were outlined:

1. Topics, prohibited for discussion: religious beliefs; LGBT issues; political views on the situation around Ukraine; anti-American or anti-Russian attitudes.
2. Interaction should be formal/semiformal (no mocking or making fun of one's language skills, no cyber bullying, unsolicited romantic attention and inappropriate remarks; no cursing, blasphemous or obscene language, or stereotyping).
3. All participants must visit the site vk.com every day at least once throughout the whole project.
4. All participants should be tolerant and respect another culture (the least we want is to instill negative stereotypes in our students or encourage scornful labelling and verbal attacks).
5. All rule breakers are supposed to be banned.

As mentioned above, weeks 3-5 involved film making. The following theme/topics were elaborated by the participants/learners for videos:

- 1) City life/Downtown/ Things students do these days;
- 2) One day in the life of a student;
- 3) How to party in Russia/America;
- 4) What it means to be Russian/American;
- 5) What kinds of university clubs and extra-curricular activities are available for students at university;
- 6) Show us your city (and your bars, tourist attractions); i.e., out-of-class activities;
- 7) Dorm life (a typical room in a dorm);
- 8) Driving in your city, public transportation;
- 9) Campus buildings;
- 10) How is shopping done in your town (groceries, clothes);
- 11) Breaking cultural stereotypes.

The students were organized into groups made up of 3-4 people. Each group was assigned a topic. The created videos were uploaded in the VK group. As students shared private information while participating in the Project, it was decided to remove the group from the Web after the end of the Project.

4.4. Project evaluation

The main assessment criteria were the extent of participation and the content of the final learning “product”. In

addition, TPU students had to deliver a presentation, in which they described their experience. In this case, language performance was the object of assessment according to institutional requirements.

4.5. Challenges

It should be noted that learners encountered some problems during the project. Sometimes learners found it inconvenient to interact with the partner or did not visit the website within the required timeframes. It was not always easy to arrange collaboration between the students experiencing frustration in waiting for responses. In these cases, the moderators reacted in the appropriate way.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of the survey results and input from discussions, we could conclude that Project participation led to the following results:

- increasing learners' motivation in language acquisition
- breaking the language barrier
- increasing students' cultural awareness
- enriching vocabulary
- developing language skills

It was interesting to find out how students negotiated the peculiarities of student life, how they switched language codes. The new experience aroused students' interest not only in language, but also in their partners' culture. In other words, the participation in the Project allowed the learners to foster language and intercultural development.

6. Future developments

We intend to continue involving telecollaboration as a part of EFL process at our university. More than that, in the future we aim to set up the projects, where students would be able to collaborate around their professional topics as a part of ESP. This would enable to foster students' professional communicative competence. We also aim to expand the content of tasks and use more technologies. For example, wikis could allow the learners to create new content and perform its continuous improvement (editing, enriching with own research results, completing collaborative tasks, etc.) and will certainly bring to increasing the level of students' learning competence.

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