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Les Langues, les Cultures et les Communautés Virtuelles

Learning by doing: Promoting language teacher competencies for networked teaching and learning

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Abstract

One of the opportunities to engage (future) language teachers in the use of ICT for interactive and collaborative language learning is by having them actively participate in ICT-enabled networked learning environments. This participation can take place at the level of task development, the level of task completion and the level of task evaluation. In the European NIFLAR project (Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research) student teachers acquire competencies for online language teaching by participating in networked tasks for intercultural communicative competence, at these three levels: (1) they develop tasks for intercultural communicative competence by video-web communication and virtual worlds; (2) they participate in the tasks as native speaker interlocutors communicating with foreign language learners; and (3) they carry out action research on the task effects on communication, intercultural competence, language proficiency and added value of the ICT tools.

1. Introduction

The NIFLAR project seeks to study the opportunities and effects of innovative e-learning environments for creating authentic and interactive contexts for foreign language learners and for (future) teachers in a blended learning system[1]. In this project, language learners, (future) teachers and researchers

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[1] This two-year project (2009-2010) received a grant within the Lifelong Learning Programme. For more information see Jauregi and Canto (this volume) and the sites www.niflar.eu and niflar.ning.com

participate from five European countries. Target languages are Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Russian, and tasks are developed for secondary and higher education at A2-B2 level, for video-web communication using Adobe Connect, and for virtual worlds using Second Life and Open Sim. By experimenting with and showing how these digital media can be successfully implemented in language teaching, the NIFLAR team attempts to hint at solutions to overcome limitations reported in actual foreign language teaching practices, where most learners have very limited opportunities (1) to engage in authentic communication with native peers, (2) to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Lace Report, 2007; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2004), and (3) as digital natives, to use the social tools they are so familiar with in order to enhance and enrich learning and make it more rewarding (ICT Impact Report, 2006). At the same time, (future) teachers have to learn how to cope with the challenges of a rapidly changing and dynamic knowledge society, and implement adequate pedagogies to enhance effective learning processes. Teachers have to acquire sufficient digital, intercultural and pedagogical competencies and skills in order to handle these new challenges adequately.

The NIFLAR project tries to achieve these goals in teacher training programmes by introducing modules related to the pedagogic implementation of synchronous tools in language teaching. This is done in the context of a Master's course, where student teachers acquire relevant pedagogic, digital and intercultural competencies, not only by reading relevant literature about significant topics (task design for interaction, ICC, CMC, motivation, teacher skills) but particularly by relating theory to practice. That is, they learn by doing, by taking action in a dynamic process of creation, experimentation, analysis, reflection, evaluation and adaptation, restarting the whole process again and applying the newly created knowledge and skills to new contexts.

2. Implementing teacher competencies for networked interaction in the curriculum

Teacher competencies and skills for initiating, coaching and evaluating networked interaction in language teaching were integrated in the Master's course *Language Education* at Utrecht University (The Netherlands) which took 10 weeks between February and April 2010. 35 students of different target languages (Dutch, English, Spanish, French, German) from diverse Master's programmes[2] followed the course. The subjects had a mean age of 22 years and most of them were women (83%).

The course followed different phases:

1. Initial phase. Course objectives and content were shared. Students were told that they would be engaging in three telecollaborative interactions through video-web communication with students learning Dutch (A2 and B1 proficiency level) at Palacky University in the Czech Republic. The students in their role as pre-service teachers would be designing interaction tasks for the sessions, they would engage in dyadic telecollaborative interactions, they would analyse sessions, evaluating the adequacy of tasks, their role as teachers and the affordances of the environment. After each session they would have to assess their peer students' language performance, utilizing the assessment grid based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). At the end they would report on specific results of the action research on networked interaction they carried out in groups, focusing on task effects, tool evaluation and teacher-learner intercultural communication.

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[2] 63% of the students followed the Master's in Education, 31% the Master's in Language, Mind and Society, and 6% the Master's in Linguistics.

2. Groundwork phase. This took the first three weeks of the course. Here the pre-service teachers undertook different activities in order for them to prepare for pedagogical action:

   a. they read relevant literature on *tasks* (the CEFR; Ellis, 2003; Moonen, 2008; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd & Waire 2009; Willis, 1996), on *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (Byram, 1997; Lazar et al, 2007; Müller-Jacquier, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006), on *CMC* (Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Jauregi & de Graaff, 2009; Shekary & Tahririan, 2006; Thorne, 2008; Tudini, 2007; Wang, 2006), and on *teacher skills* (Dörnyei,2001; Gatbonton, 2008; Guichon, 2009; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008);
   b. they analysed tasks developed for networked interaction by peers the year before and some recorded sessions conducted through video-web communication; they further learned to assess the foreign language learners' performance by applying the assessment grid based on the CEFR;
   c. they followed a tutorial on the multimodal affordances of the video-web communication environment Adobe Connect, which would be used for the telecollaborative encounters;
   d. they formed teams for collaborative task design;
   e. a plenary virtual session through the virtual video-web environment was organized where participants at both universities got to know each other.

3. Action phase. In this phase the pre-service teachers:

   a. developed three interaction tasks in groups with a focus on intercultural communication for A2 or B1 proficiency levels of Dutch according to task elaboration criteria for effective task design;
   b. carried out three dyadic interaction sessions through video-web communication with their Czech student once a week for 25 minutes;

4. Reflection phase. The main objective was to reflect upon and evaluate the actions taken in the previous phase, by relating action to the groundwork or preparatory stage. The pre-service teachers analysed each interaction session using mid questionnaires as guidance. They evaluated:

   a. the tasks (Is the task developed an effective task? Does the task expose the learner to rich target language? Does the task elicit meaningful target language use? Does the task have a communicative objective? Are there instances for focusing on form? Does the task enhance a focus on intercultural competence? Does the task make effective use of the affordances and opportunities of video-web communication? etc.); they were asked to provide significant examples from the sessions as evidence;
   b. their teacher skills for managing interaction (Did you find it difficult (a) to keep yourself in the background to leave the floor to the learners, (b) to express clear instructions and make sure they were understood, (c) to decide what feedback to provide to learners during interaction? Did you try to create a relaxed and positive atmosphere during the session? etc.); they were also asked to report on what teacher activities they were particularly satisfied with and what they could have done better, this in order to relate reflection to professional development in action;
   c. the environment (related to digital and technical skills: How did the environment work? Did you get anxious when technical problems arose? Did you feel comfortable in the video-web communication environment? etc.).

This reflection took place individually after the interaction session and was followed by a group encounter where different issues were addressed aiming at enhancing adaptation (of tasks, of teacher behavior to the specific context, to the students' individual needs and interests) and progression (trying to

improve pedagogical actions for the next session).

5. Research phase. The previous stage formed the basis to conduct team action-research on networked interaction. Groups of students studied different aspects of the effectiveness of their group tasks, the meaningfulness of the interactions they carried out, the roles the students and pre-service teachers had in favouring (or not) interaction, or the affordances the virtual environment offered to enhance collaborative learning.

3. Results

The pre-service teachers addressed one of the following research questions:

1. Task effects: to what extent have the language learners developed their L2 proficiency?
2. Tool evaluation: what are the strengths and weaknesses of video-web communication for effective NS-NNS interaction?
3. Teacher reflection: how has the role of the teacher-interlocutor developed throughout the three sessions?

The pre-service teachers reporting on research question 1 found that, according to the CEFR assessment grid, language students had gained on fluency and in interaction engagement between sessions 1 and 3, particularly at A2 proficiency level. Those reporting on research question 2 found that the video-web communication environment offered more opportunities for authentic and functional interaction, although technical problems did arise, such as delay in the communication. The students reporting on research question 3 experienced a clear progression between session 1 and 3 in terms of their own competencies for designing effective tasks, interaction and feedback skills. However, some of them reported they were rather sceptical about the possibilities to implement these communication environments in mainstream secondary education: the need to find enough partners abroad with access to good computers and fast internet connections and the schedule of synchronous sessions might turn out to be troublesome.

When evaluating the experience, the pre-service teachers made the following critical comments: they had problems with organizational aspects of the project; three sessions were too short in order to measure communicative and intercultural growth (particularly at B1 proficiency level); that they would have liked to have more theoretical background instead of having to reflect so much (they had to fill in 5 questionnaires). As for the positive experiences they reported:

- "The positive aspect of the project has been to learn and work out how to create *effective tasks*. Actually interacting with a student- ie- trying out our ideas in a *real* situation."
- "I've learned to teach a language in a different way."
- "I've learned how to improve and make the teaching of foreign languages (or rather education in general) more rewarding and fun through innovative methods that utilize different communicative means and pedagogic strategies related to tasks and teacher and student roles during virtual sessions. These methods make it possible to learn more in a shorter period of time, for being more natural and interactive compared to traditional language learning classrooms."

4. Conclusions

This study has shown that Master's students in their role as pre-service teachers were able to design

telecollaborative tasks for language learners, to engage in these tasks as native speaker interlocutors, to provide feedback on interaction, to assess linguistic and intercultural growth, and to reflect on their own role as task designer / teacher / interlocutor. We are convinced that a telecollaborative setting in particular provided opportunities for successfully reaching these learning goals. In a regular language education course it would have been impossible to both theoretically and hands-on pay attention to task design, task completion with language learners, task evaluation and action research. Furthermore, the video-web communication sessions with learners of Dutch as a foreign language made students aware of communicative and intercultural challenges of learning and teaching a foreign language.

The use of video-web communication was not only a means to promote intercultural communicative competence and teacher awareness, but also a goal in itself. In order for (future) teachers to critically appreciate the challenges and opportunities of ICT-enabled networked language learning environments, it is essential that they gain hands-on experience in the use of such environments for communication with language learners. By having (future) teachers involved in action research on the added value of such tools for language learning, we expect they will be able to make well-considered decisions on the affordances and applicability of these tools in their future teaching practice.

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