

Chapter 33

Developing Intercultural Competence and Language Skills Through International Online Collaborative Learning

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ABSTRACT

Raising the intercultural competence of learners has been one of the most important issues in language education in this global world, but how can we integrate intercultural education into our teaching? This chapter introduces two online exchange projects, one for the beginner level and one for the intermediate level, which were designed for Swedish learners of Japanese as a means to develop their intercultural competence through collaborative language learning. The projects were designed through collaboration between five universities in Europe and Asia. In this chapter, the authors explore how the intercultural competence of learners developed based on learners' reflections after each session and their answers in the questionnaire after the project. The study finds that the different language levels require teachers to take different approaches in designing the intercultural contents of the projects. The chapter ends with further discussions on how to design intercultural education in an online environment.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Online Higher Education in Sweden

In Sweden, distance education has a long history, partly because Sweden is a vast country with many scarcely populated areas. Hermods correspondence school was the first institution offering letter-based distance education in Sweden; it opened in the southern city of Malmö in 1898 (Hansson et.al. 2005).

This strong tradition of distance education seems to have continued, although today “distance” education mostly means “online” education. If we focus on higher education, since the beginning of the 2000s, we have seen a great increase in the number of university students studying online. According to the 2012 report from the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, in the 2011 Autumn term, 86,400 of a total of 363,000 university students studied by distance, which is roughly 24%. The report points out that the number has almost quadrupled in the past 10 years. In the autumn of 2011, 18,900 of these 86,400 students combined online and campus studies, whereas the other 67,500 students studied exclusively online.

The advancement of technology has somewhat blurred the division between “distance” and “campus”, at least in terms of time, if not also space. Today, online education can entail asynchronous contact using a learning management system or synchronous contact via videoconferencing and a chat function, or a combination of these two to various degrees. In the academic year 2008/2009, 34 higher education institutions of a total of around 50 were offering online education in various forms (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2010).

Dalarna University

The online education offered by Dalarna University is a combination of asynchronous and synchronous forms, although the university has placed its emphasis on synchronous education, and the courses offer real-time lectures and seminars using a video conference system. In 2015, 11,642 of its 16,344 students, or 71% of the total number of students, took web-based courses.

In 2002, Dalarna University decided to invest in online education, and this investment made the university one of the fastest growing institutes of higher education in Sweden. In its 2011 policy, Dalarna University stated that it would strive to become the leading university in Sweden in the field of Next Generation Learning (NGL) by 2015. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) defines NGL as follows: “the intelligent use of technology to develop innovative learning models and personalized educational pathways”. The vision of NGL at Dalarna University is to develop and renew educational settings with the support of technology. The NGL Centre has worked to initiate an active pedagogical discussion within the university and to support professional higher education training and other educational programmes to ensure that Dalarna University is a university:

- “Where students know that their studies are meaningful
- Where students find their studies rewarding
- Where students know that their studies are preparing them for working life or giving them the extra competence that they require for positions they already hold
- Where teachers feel that they have the support they require to do their jobs well so that the above goals are achieved

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