

Chapter 33

Creating a Micro-Immersion Environment Through Telecollaboration

Tasha N. Lewis

Loyola University Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter offers an innovative approach for implementing telecollaborative activities in order to enable students to connect with peers in real-time, with the goal of creating a micro-immersion experience called a “Virtual Language Exchange”. This chapter describes and compares two intermediate Spanish classes participating in Virtual Language Exchanges via Skype: one paired with peers from the target language and culture, and one paired with peers from within the class itself. Students from both groups participate in meaningful interactions in the target language in order to complete the assigned task-based activities. The chapter argues that finding new ways to bring the target language to life by using technology, like the Virtual Language Exchange experience described here, can benefit students’ foreign language development in multiple ways.

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology for educational purposes is nothing new nowadays. Technology has become exceedingly commonplace in many educational fields over the years because it has the ability to empower its users in multiple ways. Currently, in the field of foreign language education in particular, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) technology is frequently expected. CALL affords teachers and students alike an opportunity to directly connect with the target language and culture in new and exciting ways. CALL technology is remarkable because it is quite versatile in its application; it can be used inside as well as outside of the classroom for the benefit of both teachers and students.

This chapter reports the use of an Internet-based videoconferencing software in two separate foreign language classrooms for the purpose of creating an environment in which language learners must use

Creating a Micro-Immersion Environment Through Telecollaboration

the target language in order to complete an assignment. Although the two classes participating in this study are partnered with different people, (i.e., one group is paired with native speakers of the target language and the other group with peers from within the class itself) so that a comparison can be made, the study offers both teachers and researchers an innovative approach to bringing the target language to life through the use of technology. The information provided in this chapter is twofold. First, it is meant to link current theories of second language acquisition (i.e., the communicative language approach, task-based language learning/teaching and intercultural communicative competence) with the use of technology for language learning purposes, more specifically, the CALL practice of telecollaboration. Second, it is meant to serve as a model for implementing and using telecollaboration in foreign language classrooms in non-traditional ways in order to create an immersion-like environment.

BACKGROUND

Telecollaboration

Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education (Belz & Thorne, 2006) as well as Online Intercultural Exchange (O'Dowd, 2007b) are terms that have been used interchangeably with telecollaboration. Telecollaboration, the preferred term of this chapter, should be understood as an Internet-based intercultural exchange between people of distinct cultural backgrounds with the goal of developing language skills as well as intercultural communicative competence through structured tasks conducted in an institutional context.

The main objective of telecollaboration is not solely to practice and improve foreign language skills; telecollaboration is meant to connect foreign language learning with learning about culture (i.e., another culture as well as one's own culture) (Belz, 2006). More specifically, it is a mediated situation in which participants are given the opportunity to increase their intercultural communicative competence through discovering another culture while at the same time reflecting upon their own (Byram, 1997). The simple act of interaction and information exchange over the Internet provides language learners in this situation with a chance to expand their ever-growing intercultural communicative competence (Belz & Thorne, 2006). Learning management systems, e-mail, social networking sites, wikis, blogs, video conferencing software, media sharing websites, Second Life, etc. are all specific examples of how telecollaboration has made its way into the realm of education. These prevalent examples demonstrate how telecollaboration is versatile since it can be used inside or outside of the classroom as well as synchronously or asynchronously. Telecollaboration has been particularly useful in the field of second language acquisition because it is a way to bring two cultures closer together in a virtual environment that would otherwise be located very far apart. In recent years, research has especially supported the use of telecollaboration for the development of intercultural communicative competence in language learners (e.g., Chun, 2011; Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Levy, 2007; Müller-Hartmann, 2006; O'Dowd, 2003, 2007a; Schenker, 2012) despite some of its limitations, which will be further addressed throughout this section (e.g., Belz, 2002; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Schenker, 2012; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

The asynchronous use of e-mail in foreign language classrooms has been examined in terms of its ability to provide a unique space for second language learners to demonstrate their intercultural com-

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