

Chapter 61

A Spanish–Finnish Telecollaboration to Develop Intercultural Competence and Learner Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Telecollaboration enables students from different geographical locations to interact in a more authentic environment, share their views with their partners, create profiles as well as build online communities enjoying common interests. With this in mind, a Spanish-Finnish task-based project was designed to examine how students perceived their cultural exchange via Facebook and the extent to which such online interactions assisted them in becoming autonomous learners. Nineteen Spanish and seventeen Finnish participants were provided with the opportunity to interact with each other outside the classroom with a view to exploring the target culture and, consequently, experiencing intercultural learning. The findings suggest that the learning experience was positive and that the participants felt motivated to examine each other's cultural traits and manage their own learning tasks. Sharing information and reciprocally exchanging views on comments are paramount in developing skills to become independent learners.

INTRODUCTION

In language learning contexts telecollaboration, which is also known as ‘online intercultural exchange’ (OIE) (O’Dowd, 2007), applies to the use of Internet communication tools to engage students from distant geographical locations (Dooly 2008) in online intercultural exchanges with a view to developing their language skills and intercultural competence. Research has also shown that telecollaboration is a potential activity for online collaborative projects in foreign language learning (Ware & O’Dowd, 2008).

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Furthermore, telecollaboration research has developed from a compilation of classroom practice and anecdotes to a deeper exploration of online exchange studies (Dooly & O'Dowd 2012). In the last approximately twenty years several models of telecollaboration have emerged, with the most well-established ones being the Cultura (Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillet, 2001) and the e-Tandem (Kötter, 2003; O'Rourke, 2005), which involve students in bilateral and bilingual online interactions (Thorne, 2006). In addition, telecollaboration can appear in the form of text, audio or video, one example being Skype or desktop video-conferencing (Develotte, Guichon & Vincent, 2010; Tian & Wang, 2010; Wang & Tian, 2013). The application of Web 2.0 tools (Twitter, blogs, wikis and podcasts) can also facilitate cross-cultural communication (Lee, 2014; Guth & Thomas, 2010). What is more, e-Twinning, the European Commission's project, encourages collaboration between schools in primary and secondary education through the use of Internet communication tools.

Telecollaboration plays a significant role in fostering intercultural competence (Chun, 2011; O'Dowd, 2003) and especially in higher education, when students can benefit from such exchanges prior to travelling abroad on their study programmes. Web 1.0 tools, for instance, email, online discussion boards or chat, have been widely used in telecollaborative intercultural projects; however, scant research has been conducted into the use of Web 2.0 Internet tools, such as blogs, podcasts or social networks. Facebook, for example, the most popular social network tool, can offer numerous possibilities for language learners to collaborate online to develop intercultural learning (Chen, 2013; Jin, 2015). Nevertheless, once again little is published with regard to its potential (Jin, 2015). Orsini-Jones (2015), meanwhile, whilst conducting an exchange through Facebook, posits that she is quite resistant to the exclusive use of social media for academic purposes as productive debates were not as well developed here as via MOOC, which was more motivating and thought-provoking. The present study will report on how a group of Spanish and Finnish students interacted on Facebook as a platform with the aim of learning about each other's cultural traits, whilst developing at the same time learner autonomy through the tasks designed for this purpose.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Development of Intercultural Competence Through Telecollaboration

In foreign language learning Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been extensively used (Byram, 2009). Intercultural competence refers to "the ability to interact effectively with people with different cultures other than one's own" (Byram, 2000, p. 297). Successful intercultural speakers should possess the following five key components of IC ((a) knowledge, (b) intercultural attitudes, (c) skills of interpreting and relating, (d) skills of discovery and interaction and (e) critical cultural awareness) (Byram, 1997), in addition to linguistic competence (Byram, 2009).

In the recent literature many projects have reported that learners can develop intercultural competence through telecollaboration (Chun, 2011; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Schuetze, 2008; Orsini-Jones et al., 2015). The scope of telecollaboration has extended and telecollaborative exchanges have now been shown to contribute to intercultural approaches to foreign language instruction. Through telecollaboration students are provided with a more authentic type of knowledge, different from the majority of the existing language courses, curricula and textbooks, which give consideration to solely the culture-specific elements of learning and mainly within the context of a static and factual view of the target culture (O'Dowd, 2006). Contrary to the objective factual information in the textbooks, students tend to exchange more subjective

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