

Chapter 18

Cross–Cultural Comparison of Student Perceptions and Performance in a Multicultural, Interdisciplinary and Bilingual Online Educational Project

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ABSTRACT

Exchange agreements between universities and new technologies are influencing the education-learning process during the past few years. E-learning has become an educational tool with several applications and the main aim of facilitating student learning process and adapting it to the social and professional reality. In this study, the authors present an online project based on a multicultural, interdisciplinary, and bilingual collaboration developed between two European universities: the University of Valencia (Spain) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom) through the free access academic platform, Moodle. Additionally, the chapter examines the significant differences in student perceptions and performance and problems arising from cultural differences.

INTRODUCTION

Cooperation agreements between Higher Education institutions and the use of e-learning enable students to develop their skills and competences

as well as to broaden their perspectives on other cultures and social realities. All this makes students will be highly appreciated in their future professional careers to happen in an increasingly computerized and globalized environment. In this regard, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs provide different ways of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-074-7.ch018

learning in which a language allows to combine content, cultural and linguistic issues.

Notwithstanding, the results of interuniversity e-learning projects as well as CLIL programs may be influenced by linguistic and cross-cultural differences between students at the participating institutions and diversity in the classroom (Hannon and D'Netto, 2007). In this sense, a survey conducted by the European Commission (2006) regarding the language skills of Europeans evidenced the existence of significant differences across countries regarding the foreign language command, being Italy, Spain and English-speaking countries (i.e. United Kingdom and Ireland) those with the highest rates of monolingual citizens and less developed foreign language skills. E-learning has been posited to favor English-speaking students because of design issues, thus potentially causing difficulties to non-English speakers in their interactions through online learning systems (Chase et al., 2002; Macfadyen, 2005).

Taking into consideration the above mentioned evidence, the present paper has a double objective. First, it aims to present an interdisciplinary and bilingual e-learning project between the London School of Economics and Political Science in United Kingdom (LSE) and the University of Valencia in Spain (UV). We have planned different objectives and designed specific tasks for the students of the two participant universities, i.e. LSE (mostly native English speakers or highly fluent in English) and UV (mostly Spanish native speakers with a good English command). In particular, students have worked linguistic aspects, economic and managerial contents as well as other social competences. Exchanges between both groups of students were operated through the online learning environment Moodle.

Second, we assess the outcomes of this project. In particular, we examine the existence of significant differences in student perceptions and performance. From the evidence obtained, we extract a set of conclusions about course design

and task definition to prevent potential problems derived from cross-cultural differences.

The following chapter is developed as follows. We first describe the theoretical framework that inspired this activity. Next, we introduce the main characteristics of the multicultural, interdisciplinary and bilingual online educational project between LSE and UV. Subsequently, the analysis of the results obtained is performed. A set of conclusions close this chapter.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An increasingly number of European universities is offering courses taught in foreign languages, exposing students to teaching of several contents through the medium of a foreign language (Wilkinson, 2004). This approach has been named Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and is considered as a suitable way to improve students' command of foreign languages without devoting too much time to their teaching. In addition to the benefits related to language skills, the CLIL is believed to help prepare students for internationalization, and to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence (Coyle, 2008; Marsh, 2008).

In order to develop students' communication skills it is crucial to create a classroom environment that enables students' interactions. In this regard, peer-to-peer e-learning activities have proved to be more efficient, effective and satisfactory for students in comparison to alternative activities and/or environments (e.g. Rada, 1998; Chiu, 2007). In particular, it has been considered as an excellent vehicle for culture learning (Griffith, 2007; Müllering and Ritter, 2008) and cultural interchanges (O'Dowd, 2007).

Nevertheless, in order to achieve students' involvement in collaborative learning activities, it is not enough with providing technologically advanced environments (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb, 2000). In this sense, special attention

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