Case studies

Case Study 1 – Intercultural collaborative learning: creating and marketing an EFL online application

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Introduction

This chapter presents a plan for a joint project which was designed in the Blended Learning Working Group of an ECML workshop in Graz in 2009. The proposed endeavour is founded on the idea of involving three different groups of international partner students with different cultural backgrounds and interests in a project in which they will co-operate online and contribute their expertise to design and trade online a didactic, virtual web tool, which will include a sample lesson for students of English as a foreign language (EFL). At the time of writing this chapter, the project is being carried out by the three partner groups and it is, therefore, not possible to provide a full account of the actual outcomes. More details of the project and its results can be found at: www.englishproject.viko.lt.

As far as the structure of this chapter is concerned, first, we describe the profile of the three partner groups. Then, we go on to provide the rationale for the selection of activities. Following that, we present the educational aims and the expected learning outcomes. Next, we describe the teaching methodology and the students' collaboration patterns. Finally, we make some proposals in terms of the students' assessment.

1. The profiles of the three international partners

1.1 The Greek partner group

The Greek students, who are EFL teachers, attend a Masters programme in Applied Linguistics at the Hellenic Open University (HOU) and are using distant learning to enrich and expand their teaching skills outside of the course. The programme is built on a number of modules, which aim at helping students, on the one hand, acquire a solid theoretical background and, on the other, to get acquainted with novel practices, digital applications and modern means of instruction that render foreign language learning effective and stimulating.

The experience of creating online learning activities is expected to be challenging and rewarding for the specific students due to the fact that it can open new job opportunities for them in the Internet market.

1.2 The Lithuanian partner group

The Vilnius College of Higher Education (VIKO) is the largest accredited higher professional education institution in Lithuania. A group of students who have been doing their Professional Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science in the Faculty of Electronics and Informatics has joined the project. In particular, the students study computer programming and information systems and at the same time they attend a course in English for specific purposes (ESP), which aims at increasing their ability to understand and deal with various situations, communicate a set of professional skills and perform particular job-related functions. It is hoped that the project will widen their experience of both designing online digital applications, and consolidating and expanding the English language.

1.3 The Icelandic partner group

The Icelandic students are completing their Masters in International Business at Reykjavik University (RU). Their role in the joint project is to design the marketing campaign for selling the digital product. These students have been working in different posts in business and have decided to attend this programme in order to acquire new skills and knowledge in marketing. Participating in the joint project is expected to motivate them since they will have to collaborate with students from other European institutions. This process is expected to broaden their intercultural experiences and offer them opportunities to sell a product in an international market. At the same time, it is believed that the project will help them expand their skills in the English language, which is the lingua franca of the Internet.

2. Literature review and rationale for the design of the joint project

The endeavour is in line with principles of good practice in the areas of blended learning, the intercultural communicative approach and new literacies. The joint project has been structured in such a way that the participating students' intercultural communicative competence can be enhanced through their online communication. Furthermore, the process of the co-operative production of the didactic, digital web tool is expected to expand their new literacies and broaden their experiences in the subject areas they are specialising in.

Blended learning, which can be defined as a teaching format that is articulated by combining online and traditional learning approaches in various degrees, is a mode of learning that

facilitates online intercultural exchanges, such as the one presented in this chapter. Growing numbers of scholars and researchers view this educational process as an active attempt to enhance teaching and learning within a learner-centred environment (Singh and Reed 2001, Cameron 2003, Frazee 2003, Garrison and Anderson 2003, Ausburn 2004, Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal 2004, Bonk and Graham 2005, Vaughan and Garrison 2005). Research has shown that asynchronous and synchronous online communication by means of e-mail, blogs, wikis or videoconferencing, which is combined with traditional teaching methods, enables students to develop their productive, that is, speaking and writing, and social skills (Vlachos 2009). Face-to-face instruction in the three regional institutions will prepare the international partners for the online collaboration as well as for the particular non-linguistic tasks each group will have to complete. The tasks are described in section 5 of this case study.

The intercultural communicative approach aims at the development of intercultural communicative competence, which is a construct that includes a number of sub-competencies, skills, experiences and awareness of one's own and other cultures (Vlachos 2006). Specifically, except for the linguistic, pragmatic, strategic and sociolinguistic sub-competencies, according to Byram (1997), the construct includes a number of interrelated components, that is, willingness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own; knowledge of social groups and their products; skills of interpreting and relating documents or events from another culture to documents or events from one's own culture and, last but not least, critical cultural awareness of one's own and other cultures. The online intercultural exchange planned in this chapter targets the development of intercultural communicative competence, which nowadays is interrelated with the acquisition of new literacies (Kalogerakou 2009).

Online technologies have changed the definitions of literacy to include electronic environments. According to Leu et al. (2004) and Lankshear and Knobel (2006), new literacies include the skills, strategies and disposition that empower students to use ICTs effectively to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of the information and to synthesise information to answer those questions. More specifically, as it is analytically discussed in Vlachos (2009), students nowadays need to be trained in new literacies that let them access multimodal online sources of information, decode and evaluate the meanings contained in these sources and use Web 2.0 applications to communicate their knowledge and ideas to other Web 2.0 users. In the vocationally oriented language learning (VOLL) context, acquiring sophisticated new literacies is essential due to the fact that students are being prepared to enter the working world as active members and, therefore, they need to exhibit readiness to make effective use of the ICTs and to demonstrate their social abilities that allow them to co-operate with representatives of different cultures, social environments and mother tongues.

Summarising the rationale for the design of the joint project, we may assert that the main aim is to enable the international partners build intercultural communicative competence and new literacies in a VOLL context with the aid of blended learning. The section that follows presents the particular aims the project opts for.

4.   The teaching/learning aims of the joint project

The learning aims and the educational benefits are grouped on the basis of four categories: language, intercultural knowledge and experiences, new literacies and VOLL.

A.   Linguistic aims in the English language

- improving communicative skills (negotiating, collaborating, reflecting and expanding other people's arguments, expressing oneself with clarity and precision, etc.) in the target language (English);

- becoming aware of netspeak;[10]

- accumulating ICT, business and applied linguistic related vocabulary.

B.   Intercultural aims

- enhancing intercultural awareness and knowledge of more than one culture and social identities;

- cultivating the capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts;

- developing global awareness by collaborating with representatives of other cultures;

- mediating across different cultural groups;

- creating a pedagogical, digital product which reflects the interests and needs of all participants.

C.   Developing new literacies

- improving online skills (using e-mail, videoconferencing and Skype to communicate effectively);

- creating sophisticated, user-friendly digital materials and media;

- communicating information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media;

- contributing to project teams to produce original works;

- getting used to locating, analysing, evaluating and synthesising information from a variety of sources and media;

- evaluating and selecting digital tools based on the appropriateness of specific tasks.

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10   "Netspeak" is an alternative term to Internet language, which involves all four language skills, that is writing, talking, listening and reading. Crystal (2001) has studied the characteristics of netspeak.

D.   VOLL aims

▪   expanding and consolidating the Greek students' knowledge in lesson planning, activity design and assessing students' linguistic and communicative skills;

▪   broadening the Lithuanian students' technical vocabulary, gaining intercultural skills working with the international team;

▪   improving the Icelandic business students' specific vocabulary regarding the marketing area; they will also improve their intercultural skills/competence.

5.   Teaching methodology and collaboration patterns

Each international partner group has been in charge of a part of the project.

a.   The Greek students have been in charge of designing the application in terms of pedagogy and applied linguistics. First, they will consult their partners in terms of their expectations from the joint project. Next, they will define the types of learning activities they will create for the sample lesson of the didactic web tool, as well as the patterns of collaboration the activities will entail (group work, pair work, individual work). Furthermore, they will write the instructions for the learning activities. Finally, they will explain to the Lithuanian partners what the layout of the learning activities will be like.

b.   The Lithuanian students are in charge of creating the application following the layout guidelines dictated by the Greek students. Specifically, first, they will consult the Greek students about the characteristics of the application, that is how it will work, who will use it, the facilities it will offer (for example, online dictionaries and thesauri), the type of learning activities it will include (for example, cloze tests, multiple choice questions, interactive games, writing tasks, etc.). Having constructed the didactic web tool, the Lithuanian partners will explain in detail how the application works to the Icelandic students and ask for their suggestions to improve the application, so that it may attract online customers, who use it to improve their EFL skills.

c.   The Icelandic students will need to collaborate with both groups overseas in order to get a proper description of the product they are expected to trade online since their task in the joint project is to design a marketing campaign for the digital application. They will get information from the Greek students regarding target customers, their educational level and age, how the application will be used (for example, for individual access at home or at school or for group work at school). In other words, the Icelandic students will require and be provided with all the necessary information in order to create a business plan. At the same time, the Lithuanian students will give them all the information about how the didactic tool will work in order to allow them

to describe it properly to potential customers. The selling campaign will be published in the web tool. Table 1 presents the separate steps required for the completion of the joint project.

Steps to be taken	Partners involved	Length of time	Task
Step 1a	Greece	2 weeks	Develop specifications for the engineers
Step 1b	Lithuania	1 week	Clarify the needs of the Greek students
Step 2a	Lithuania	2 weeks	Create mock-ups of the platform and send it to Iceland
Step 2b	Iceland	1 week	Consult the Lithuanian partners about technical characteristics
Step 3	Iceland	2 weeks	Create the marketing campaign and share it with all the partners of the same group
Step 4	International teams	2 weeks	Creation and submission of the portfolio
Step 5	International teams	Same week	Reflection on, and evaluation of, the teaching/ learning procedures and patterns of collaboration

Table 1: The steps to be taken for the completion of the joint project

6. Assessment and evaluation

6.1 Formative evaluation of the project and self-reflection

The project work in each partner group is organised by a co-ordinator. The co-ordinators in each of the three countries will prepare a questionnaire that will attempt to raise students' awareness regarding collaboration patterns, the effectiveness of co-operation, the quality of the product in terms of pedagogy, the usability of the produced online application and proposals as to how the product can be improved. The questionnaire will be answered twice

by the students. The first time students fill in the questionnaire will be two months after the joint project has started, so that the co-ordinators will gather information that will be used for adjusting and improving the work plan and the learning activities that will follow. The second time students complete the questionnaire will be at the end of the joint project. This time the co-ordinators will collect data regarding both the effectiveness of the endeavour and also the students' progress in terms of the teaching/learning aims presented in section 4 of this chapter.

6.2 Individual assessment forms for each participating country based on the specific criteria each co-ordinator has established

The Greek students' work will be assessed by the HOU co-ordinator on the basis of how effective the EFL activities will have been in terms of the principles of good practice in foreign language teaching. They will also be assessed with reference to the new literacies they will have built and the intercultural awareness that they will have developed.

The Lithuanian student's work will be assessed by the VIKO co-ordinator on the basis of the following criteria:

- if the steps taken to create the application will have been appropriate;

- whether the set problems will have been solved;

- if the students will have improved in terms of language expression.

The Icelandic students will be assessed by the RU co-ordinator according to their final product (portfolio), which should reflect the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns. In addition, they will be assessed in terms of the following criteria:

- language and communication (oral and written through chats and Skype recordings);

- intercultural aspects (use of appropriate register of language and commitment for meeting the deadlines);

- new literacies (proper use of the multimedia resources used in the project to communicate).

Concluding remarks

The case study presented in this chapter was designed in the E-VOLLution Graz workshop as an example of how telecollaborative exchange and blended learning can be used in a VOLL context to enhance language learning, intercultural awareness and the development of new literacies. At the time of writing the chapter, the case study is still being developed. The participating students have already reported that the specific collaborative project provides

them with opportunities for personal development in the professional fields they are interested in. The project is a model that can be altered or expanded. It can also be adjusted to the learning, social and cultural conditions that constitute reality in the educational environments individual groups of international partners come from. In closing this chapter, we would like to assert that joint, online, collaborative VOLL projects need to be accompanied by systematic observation and research so that their dynamics, potentials and weaknesses are recorded and documented in the relevant literature. The results will be published in the near future in our online platform.

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