

Using a Telecollaboration Exchange Web 2.0 in a Second Language Classroom

Maguerite Coutinho

Nottingham University, Nottingham, England

This research project presented a practical evidence-based investigation into whether a telecollaboration exchange or tandem exchange incorporating the use of Web 2.0 tools can be used to enhance the linguistic skills of adults learning English as a second language in the Middle East. It explored the possibilities of integrating the exchange in the form of Web 2.0 tools, as partly online and face-to-face instruction, in a post-compulsory adult learning environment. The project sought to illustrate the usefulness of a blended course for Arabic speakers learning English at a higher education institute six hours per day. The research identified the difficulty in the learners' ability to acquire the second language, which, in this case, is English, in the educational system of a particular curriculum. It offered a way to improve the learners' linguistic skills by improving the methodology and subject matter of the curriculum through a telecollaboration exchange, in order to provide bespoke tuition for the learners. By the end of a stipulated period of instruction, the learners had upgraded their competencies to participate in examination preparation and achieve an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) qualification with a band 5.0 score. This study adopted the active or practical participatory method in the form of an experiment or pilot study that aims to discover whether embedding online learning through the telecollaboration exchange could benefit second language learners. The project explored the possibilities of implementing the tandem exchange into the pedagogical approach and the affordances of such a technique to motivate learners in developing their overall linguistic competencies through a variety of theme-based literacy practices. The research methods used are quantitative with tables and learners' comments.

Keywords: telecollaboration exchange, second language learning, adult learning, experiential learning, synchronous discussions, learner autonomy

Introduction

The learners who participated in this project consisted of six female Arabic speakers from a class of 10 students between the ages of 22 and 30 in a post-compulsory educational setting in a remote city in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The learners at Pre-Intermediate level, which is equivalent to A2/B1 Level on the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) scale (O'Dowd, 2007, p. 340), were preparing for their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examinations in March 2015. The majority of the students had been on a foundation immersion course for approximately eighteen months, while others had been learning English for almost two years. It was mandatory for them to achieve an IELTS qualification with a band 5.0 score in order to proceed to a diploma class. So, in order to do this, it was crucial for the learners to upgrade

their skills, since results (see Appendix 1) showed that they were below the required band score. Subsequently, a telecollaboration exchange seemed a suitable way to improve their linguistic competencies as well as the learners' confidence to ensure that they would achieve the desired grades. So, a telecollaboration exchange project was set up with partners in a small town of Treviso in Brazil. The theme of the exchange was "My Country," and it focused on the two countries' cultural aspects, such as festivals and celebrations of the two countries, which are significant contemporary topics in the IELTS examinations.

Definition

The reason why a telecollaboration exchange was considered a suitable method to improve learners' linguistic skills was the ubiquitous benefits it affords. Telecollaboration or Tandem learning is an internet-based intercultural exchange between groups of learners of different cultural and national backgrounds set up in an institutional blended learning context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). It uses "English as the lingua franca (ELF) (or the communal language of communication) between non-native speakers of English with a focus on different cultural perspectives on local and global issues" (Guth & Helm, 2011, p. 42).

Telecollaboration exchanges support language learning through learning the culture of the country of the language in question, which, in this case, is English, because according to Carlorosi, Helm, Marini-Maio, and McMahan (2008), language and culture are inseparable (p. 174).

Therefore, it was deemed that besides improving the learners' linguistic competencies, an online Web 2.0 telecollaboration exchange, if designed in "concert with students to meet individual needs and interests" (Toohey, 1999, p. 59), might provide valuable experiential learning. This is due to the fact that students learn through gaining experience in how to perform various online tasks, which promotes the learner's autonomy.

Online learning is predominantly experiential education by virtue of being "a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experience" (Itin, 1999, p. 91). Educational theorist, Dewey (1938) viewed the "educational process as involving the teacher and learner engaged in purposive experience" in order to provide purposeful learning (p. 1063). This is true since both students and teachers were engaged in the project: the purpose of the tutor was to guide and instruct, while that of the students was to follow and participate in the exchange.

In light of the above, a telecollaboration exchange provided experiential learning, because it encompassed a hands-on educational experience, as it engaged the learners from different geographical regions, cultures, and languages in a cognitive-constructive and holistic experiential learning environment. Tandem learning has several benefits, since it also embeds Web 2.0 tools in its design. Hence, learners improve not only their linguistic competencies, but also intercultural skills, awareness of online literacies (O'Dowd, 2010), and interpersonal communication skills in a safe and non-threatening environment through discussion forums on the wiki, wherein students learn from their peers by emulating their writing and creating innovative resources to showcase their cultural heritage.

Advantages

Telecollaboration projects have exponential benefits, because they integrate Web 2.0 activities, such as Skype chats, discussion forums, movie maker, and PowerPoint presentations into the exchange. Consequently, learners improve not only their linguistic competencies, but also intercultural skills and awareness of online

literacies (O'Dowd, 2010, p. 355). For example, the learners became aware of the Italian influence on Brazilian culture, as Treviso is a part of the Italian Quarter and its inhabitants speak Italian besides Portuguese, Spanish, and English.

Telecollaboration promotes “learner-autonomy” (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009, p. 173) as learners take control over their own learning by participating in intercultural exchanges through “asynchronous” (Weller, 2007, p. 18) discussion forums with their partners in their own time and space and when searching for information. Learners have enough time to prepare ahead what they want to write in the forum and say on Skype, which improves the quality of their contributions to the discussions. With regard to this, Harmer (2004, p. 8) said that, “The writer has a chance to plan and modify what will finally appear as the finished product” and “rehearse what (they) are going to say” in “synchronous” discussions to their partners on Skype.

In addition, it improves learners' interpersonal communication skills in a safe and non-threatening environment through a forum on wiki, wherein students learn from each other and emulate their peers. Thus, learners can cultivate a rapport when participating in intercultural exchanges with their partners in their own time and space away from the all-pervasive presence of the teacher (Boston, 2009).

Finally, a tandem exchange enables learners to gain confidence and acquire new skills by the incorporation of multimodalities, such as making videos in an advanced pedagogical setting of technologies for the purpose of interactive online communication.

Description

When second language learners communicate with one another, they are obliged to engage in the lingua franca, which, in this case, is English (Guth & Helm, 2012, p. 42), that would provide an opportunity for them to learn about and discover the “value of experiencing another culture” besides their own (Carlorosi et al., 2008, p. 177).

The theme for the telecollaboration exchange was festivals and cultural celebrations, as this contemporary topic is significant in the IELTS examinations. Renaming the theme “A Tapestry of Cultures,” because it involved the cultures of both collaborators participating in the exchange, and a wiki (see Appendix 3) was created especially for this purpose.

The telecollaboration exchange project took place over a period of four months: From March through to June every Monday afternoon. The participants were six students from a class of 10, and a teacher from a small town called Treviso in Brazil along with her three students. During the Skype chat, the students who were paired up (since they outnumbered the Brazilian learners) introduced themselves and talked about their families and hobbies on Skype. The following week, they posted brief descriptions of their families on the forum. In the second Skype meeting, the learners exchanged important facts about their countries and then posted information about the same topics on the discussion forum. During the third Skype meeting, they talked about the different festivals and traditions observed in their countries, and the UAE students described certain important features of their country, particularly Masdar City and Global Village. The students posted videos and power point presentations that they had created about National Day celebrations, Global Village, and their visit to the Falcon Hospital. Finally, they wrote a report on their telecollaboration partners as part of their assessment.

Participating in this exchange empowered the learners and helped relieve their Level 2 learning anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). The learners, who developed a closer relationship with their partners and

communicated with them in their own time, benefitted most, as they acquired the confidence to speak freely, which was manifested in their classroom and examination responses, as well as in their writing competence.

Assessment

The students were assessed throughout the project and marks were given for their level of participation with regard to their contribution in creating videos and power point presentations (O'Dowd, 2010, p. 345). Marks were also awarded for the manner, attitude, and degree of confidence in which the Skype conferences were conducted with their partners (see Appendix 4). To minimize learner anxiety, the students had prepared a set of questions that they asked their partners in pairs, as they were not very confident or comfortable speaking with strangers on their own. They displayed their knowledge of "netiquette" by being mindful of register, politeness, and turn-taking, as they equally divided the questions between them (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 83).

Challenges

The greatest obstacle in the telecollaboration project was finding a suitable partner. Several people were approached, but none of the tutors seemed interested once they discovered that males were excluded. Eventually, after more than three months of searching for a partner, someone willing to participate in the project was found in March.

Another problem that arose, due to the time differences between Brazil and the UAE, was that the participants were unable to have as many Skype interviews as they would like to have had.

Evaluation

In light of the above, it is obvious that it is not easy to conduct a telecollaboration exchange. It needs time, tenacity, and commitment to look for suitable partners. A lot of valuable time was wasted looking for a partner, and perhaps if one had been found earlier, the students might have had enough time to engage in two telecollaboration exchanges on different topics and would have had a far more enriching experience. Furthermore, the teachers involved have to closely cooperate with each other, which, fortunately, happened in this case.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the difficulties, the synchronous computer mediated exchange provided an opportunity to improve the students' communication skills and their "online performance and ability by interacting with learners of their own age in a sensitive way to develop positive relationships through dialogic exchanges" (O'Dowd, 2010, p. 346). To some extent, and partly due to the tandem exchange, the learners performed well in both their college (see Appendix 2) and IELTS exams. Some students even managed to achieve the required band score of 5.0.

Conclusion

The students enjoyed participating in this project and they said they preferred doing creative activities, such as making videos and giving presentations, rather than learning grammar points from grammar text books. They professed that they learned better when the grammar points were incorporated in the writing tasks, for example, when they prepared scripts for the videos they made for this project. They said that they profited from the one-to-one sessions that were conducted whilst checking their scripts, and the feedback that they were given

during these sessions. They gained confidence and improved their communicative ability through the interaction encompassed in collaborative learning through the Skype interviews and the video presentations, which, subsequently, enabled them to do well in their speaking exams. They increased their knowledge about another country and their awareness of another culture, giving them new insights into the world at large. The exchange altered their perspectives by bringing the outside world into the classroom.

Consequently, a telecollaboration exchange is a unique method of “network-based language teaching (NBLT)” (Blake, 2009, p. 70) that enhances the learning experience through a “meaning-centered activity that is based on learners’ communicative needs and related to the real world” (O’Dowd & Waire, 2009, p. 174). Ideally, it should be implemented in every foreign language classroom for the exponential benefits it affords a second language learner.

References

- Blake, R. (2008). Intercultural CMC: Telecollaboration. In *Brave new digital classroom: Technology and foreign language learning* (Chapter 4, pp. 92-100). Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Boston, J. (2009). Social presence, self-presentation, and privacy in telecollaboration: What information are students willing to share? *Journal of the Research Center for Educational Technology (RCET)*, 5(3).
- Carlorosi, S., Helm, F., Marini-Maio, N., & McMahon, K. K. (2008). Confronting new technologies: A cross-cultural telecollaborative project across the ocean. In E. Occhipinti (Ed.), *New approaches to teaching Italian language and culture: Case studies from an international perspective*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education* (p. 1063). New York: Collier Books.
- Guth, S., & Helm, F. (2011). Developing multiliteracies in ELT through telecollaboration. *ELT Journal*, 66(1), 42-51.
- Harmer, J. (2004). *How to teach writing*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
- Helm, F., & Guth, S. (2010). The multifarious goals of telecollaboration 2.0. In S. Guth, & F. Helm (Eds.), *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language, literacies, and intercultural learning in the 21st century*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1996). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 7 (2), 125-132.
- Itin, C. M. (1999). Reasserting the philosophy of experiential education as a vehicle for change in the 21st century. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 22(2), 91.
- O’Dowd, R. (2007). Evaluating the outcomes of online intercultural exchange. *ELT Journal*, 61(2), 144-152. DOI:10.1093/elt/ccm007
- O’Dowd, R., & Waire, P. (2009). Critical issues in telecollaborative task design. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 22(2), 173-188. DOI: 10.1080/09588220902778369
- O’Dowd, R. (2010). Issues in the assessment of online interaction and exchange. In S. Guth, & F. Helm (Eds.), *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language, literacies, and intercultural learning in the 21st century*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.
- Toohey, S. (1999). Beliefs, values, and ideologies in course design. In *Designing courses for higher education* (pp. 44-69). Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University.
- Weller, M. (2007). *Virtual learning environments*. London: Routledge

Appendices

Appendix 1

Block Three Grades for Level 9

Name	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
(1) Ali	46*	42*	38*	45*
(2) Betty	50	35*	40*	48*
(3) Cindy	55	42*	40*	52
(4) Dana	56	35*	45*	53
(5) Ellie	55	46*	52	55
(6) Fifi	43*	35*	40*	45*
(7) Gigi	57	46*	50	52
(8) Hannah	58	45*	55	56
(9) Ingy	42*	25*	30*	32*
(10) Judy	35*	35*	35*	38*

*Note. P (performance) < 50.

Appendix 2

Block Six Grades for Level 12

Name	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
(1) Ali	54	48*	60	42
(2) Betty	60	52	60	45*
(3) Cindy	72	64	70	70
(4) Dana	70	68	72	65
(5) Ellie	76	70	65	72
(6) Fifi	64	60	60	65
(7) Gigi	73	62	72	78
(8) Hannah	76	70	75	72
(9) Ingy	52	45*	60	40*
(10) Judy	58	52	65	55

*Note. P (performance) < 50.

Appendix 3

Learner's name	Skype 15	Posts 15	PPt/Video 20	Recording on festivals 20	Report 30	Total 100
(1) Cindy	5	15	20	11	18	69
(2) Dana	5	15	20	9	23	72
(3) Ellie	15	5	20	13	23	76
(4) Fifi	5	15	20	10	18	68
(5) Gigi	5	-	20	12	21	58
(6) Hanna	15	15	20	10	20	80

Appendix 4**Learners' Comments**

(1) I enjoyed the telecollaboration exchange the most. I enjoyed talking to my partner on Skype with my friends. I enjoyed this course because I can talk to my friends and do the work nicely. Gigi

(2) I talk a lot from Skype. I learn new things. I like the project exchange. I made friends with Rafaela and I love her very much. She is my friend. We are facebook friends. Fifi

(3) I like the project and I like talking on Skype. I do not like writing, but I like writing on computer and discussions on forum. Hanna

(4) I enjoyed the telecollaboration exchange, because I learn many things about Brazil. I did not know that Brazil has Italian culture, but I know it now.

(5) I enjoyed the project so much. I do not like studying for IELTS. It is boring. I like making videos and presentations, because I improve my speaking.

(6) I enjoyed the project. I like everything, talking on Skype, writing on forum, making videos and power point presentation. I want to do more projects like this.