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Virtual exchange – not only for language learning

Technology enables teachers to connect their students online with foreign students in a facilitated educational setting. Such tele-collaborative intercultural projects are called virtual exchange practices (O'Dowd 2018). The students get an opportunity to engage in dialogues and tele-collaboration with peers from other countries. The intercultural encounters may not only enhance the participants' intercultural and foreign language competencies but can also develop their collaborative skills. In addition, the students can learn how to manage in communicative situations, when the communicators' language proficiency levels and study fields are different. This article provides an overview of virtual exchange projects that two enthusiastic teachers planned and launched together, moving beyond the subject boundaries. This article gives an overview of the pedagogical design, the research conducted and the ideas for the continuation.

Julkaistu: 13. joulukuuta 2018 | Kirjoittanut: Judit Háhn

The pedagogical design

One of the secrets of successful virtual exchange is the smooth collaboration between the teachers. I had a wonderful colleague to work with, Irena Podlásková from the Language Centre of the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. We were a "good match" in the sense that our teaching styles and personalities are similar, which helped us co-design and co-manage the joint projects. We arranged the first videoconference in 2014 spring, for Business major students in Czech Republic and in Hungary. Both of us were teaching Business English courses at that time, and it seemed natural to connect our students in the form of online videoconference meetings. I moved to Finland later, but the collaboration with Irena continued, which resulted in three similar projects at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland (in 2015, 2017 and 2018).

The planning for each virtual exchange started at least half a year beforehand. Irena and I exchanged several e-mails and had many Skype chats in the planning phase. We agreed on the topics, the tasks, the deadlines and the group sizes. We chose room-based videoconferencing for the synchronous meetings, which meant 4–5 students sitting around a table, facing a big screen

in each country. "Room-based" refers to the type of technology used for the connection: special videoconference equipment, which is immobile as it creates connection between two rooms. The arrangement is similar to that of a mediated business meeting. As for the asynchronous platform, closed Facebook groups were set up because the students felt comfortable in a familiar online environment. The social media platform was mainly used for socializing, warming-up, and getting to know one another before the videoconferences.

In our very first project, Irena and I arranged three group-to-group videoconference meetings, where the students had to present and compare some aspects of their culture, university life, and studies. Before the live videoconference sessions, all the participants introduced themselves to the partner university's students in a closed Facebook group, by posting a self-introductory text with an image that showed something they liked about their culture. The self-introductions and the complementary images triggered some interaction among the students already before the live meeting.

When I started working for the Department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, my teaching portfolio changed in terms of the courses taught. However, I felt that intercultural, video-mediated communication is such a useful and memorable experience that any student can benefit from it, regardless of their field of study. Therefore, the collaboration with Irena Podlásková continued with some adaptation in the pedagogical design. As my students were EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher trainees and language experts in Finland, observation and reflection tasks were included as analytical follow-up activities for my students. Irena's students were majoring in Business or Public Administration; thus, they paid more attention to the use of business meeting phrases in the preparation and also in the follow-up parts of the projects.

In the most recent virtual exchange project (2018 spring) between the Czech Republic and Finland, the broad topic was the use and presence of the English language in the two countries. The Finnish participants were undergraduate students, future teachers and language experts in English. The Czech students had Business or Public Administration as their main fields of study. In the preparation stage, the students formed small, Finnish-Czech groups, each group focusing on one domain of language use, for example, catering, tourism, advertising, or public transportation. The task was to collect evidence in the form of fieldwork for the presence and role of English and other languages in the selected domain, compare the findings and share them with the whole group in the videoconference. The sociolinguistic focus served the learning outcomes of the Finnish linguist students directly and also supported the learning goals of the Czech students. They did not only become more aware of the use of English in the two countries, but also practiced English in a real communicative situation.

As for the difference in the students' English proficiency levels and their study fields, the projects proved that it is possible to cut across the curriculum and move beyond the framework of university subjects. The participants can benefit from intercultural group collaboration and mediated social interaction, as the experience itself can enhance these skills. What is important is to set and communicate clear learning outcomes for all the students at the start of the project, which may differ for the two groups involved. For example, in the project described above, the Czech students' main goal was to use English and thus develop their oral skills in a business-meeting like situation. For the Finnish participants, the main learning outcome was the increased awareness of video-mediated communication and the lingua franca role of English. Language

learning (Czech students) and content learning (Finnish students) can thus be combined and result in useful educational encounters. The same task may generate different takeaways for the different participants, which is natural process in real life, too.

The differences in English proficiency can be addressed before the project in the form of preparatory class discussions. For example, the Czech students were pre-taught some of the useful English phrases for meetings, while the Finnish students were told that they would need to be flexible in the way they express themselves in English. In real life, there is no guarantee either that one's communication partner is exactly at the same proficiency level in a foreign language. Both the Czech and the Finnish students had a preparatory class discussion on this topic, and, probably as a result of this, the students did not find it difficult to overcome the gap in their English proficiencies.

Research on student feedback and group dynamics

We collected feedback from the participants at the end of each project. Our findings were presented at several conferences (Háhn & Podlásková 2015, Háhn 2016, 2017, 2018) and also published in a research article (Háhn & Podlásková 2016). The results indicate that for most of the students, these projects meant the first experience of mediated international group interaction and collaboration. Regardless of their study field and fluency in English, they agreed that such encounters brought them closer to the "real world" and thus to working life. They pointed out beneficial aspects such as increased intercultural awareness, the experience of peer support, the opportunity to use English for communication outside the classroom, increased autonomy in learning, and the experience of mediated group communication.

Here are some comments made by the students:

"I liked most that we can know some other people, and other culture" (Hungarian business student, 2014)

"I see the strongest point of the VC sessions in having the opportunity to try videoconferencing with people from another culture before possible work life experiences" (English major from Finland, 2015)

"I think that the strongest point were people around me. Because I knew that they help me." (Czech business student, 2015)

"good for language skills" (Czech business student, 2017)

"If you can't afford to go abroad, it is a good opportunity to improve your English." (Hungarian business student, 2014)

Well, many meetings in business are over Skype or any other social media, so I think it is a big advantage to know how to make a videoconference like this." (Czech business student, 2017)

"it is a fact of life that you have to get used to not having everything readily handed to you" (English major from Finland, 2017)

"We had to organize ourselves, our group, and do the video conference without the participation of the teachers" (Hungarian business major, 2014)

"I learned during videoconference how work in a team and respond quickly to questions" (Czech business student, 2015)

"I learnt that I do not have to be afraid of these situations and it was good experience to life." (Czech business student, 2015)

In 2018, the Masaryk University in Czech Republic published an edited collection of studies on the use of videoconferencing in university language education (Štepánek, Sedlácková & Byrne 2018). In the chapter "Roles of the learner in videoconferencing" (Háhn & Podlásková 2018), we discuss the different types of roles a learner can take in virtual exchange. Drawing on the theory of group dynamics (Forsyth 2006, Dörnyei & Murphy 2003), the chapter introduces the different levels of group formation and also the assigned formal and the naturally emerging informal roles in videoconferencing.

Based on the students´ participation rates and the peer support they gave in three consecutive synchronous group-to-group videoconferences in 2014, we identified and described the following informal roles: dominator, active contributor, active listener, and passive listener (Háhn & Podlásková 2018). The dominator tends to assume that they have to raise and answer all the questions and thus often dominate the conversation floor. Being an active contributor is a more ideal form of behavior as this means active participation but with consideration for the others. Active listeners are the ones who are usually silent, but at least initiate a turn or two on their own. Passive listeners only speak when spoken to, otherwise they tend to sit in silence and get marginalized. The book chapter mentioned above also discusses how to create more balanced participation rates in mediated group-to-group communication. One solution suggested is the assignment of formal roles (such as chairperson, secretary or facilitator) that can scaffold the students' communicative behaviour.

Ideas for the future

I am planning to continue integrating international collaboration into my teaching because I believe that the students can acquire invaluable intercultural and digital skills by taking part in such projects. Virtual exchange does not just add some variety to classroom-based teaching, but it can also fill a gap in the students' education. Although there is a demand for "virtual team players" on the labor market (Schulze & Krumm 2017), there seems to be a lack of representation of group-based, virtual intercultural discourse practices in higher education; most students do not get the experience of participating in collaborative virtual teams (Long & Meglich 2013). As pointed out by Long and Meglich (2013), it should be the task of higher education to help the upcoming university graduates to acquire the skills needed for virtual collaboration, which include the development of their digital literacies and intercultural competencies.

Virtual exchange is getting more and more popular in higher education worldwide. In case anyone is interested in launching such projects, there are trainings freely available for teachers, lecturers, and instructional designers. Erasmus+ has already launched its Virtual Exchange programs, which include online learning communities for students and online trainings for educators: https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual (https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual). Similar opportunities are offered by UNICollaboration http://uni-collaboration.eu/ (http://uni-collaboration.eu/), and by EVOLVE https://evolve-erasmus.eu/ (https://evolve-erasmus.eu/), both of which are EU-funded teaching development and networking projects.

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