Power (Im)Balance in Telecollaboration

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Telecollaboration

- Internet-based intercultural exchange between students with different cultural/national backgrounds organized in institutional contexts with two main objectives to develop:
  - language skills
  - intercultural *communicative* competence
  - online literacies
Brief history of my practice (2006-2011)

Italian students with Italian students

Italy (Unipd) and USA (Dickinson)

Bilingual students

Italian students with teacher trainers

Italy (Unipd) and Germany (Bochum)

English as a lingua franca

Uni students with teacher trainers

English

Italy (Unipd) and Jordan

Amsterdam

Hebron

Jordan
Lingua Franca exchanges – why?

- Move beyond the dichotomy of comparing two national cultures
- Ever-increasing global communication in lingua francas, in particular English
- Less intimidating for less proficient students

**BUT**

- Several factors may lead to power imbalances among participants. We will look at:
  - choice of language,
  - choice of discussion topic, and
  - participants’ geographical location.
Two EU countries, one language

- Asynchronous written communication
- Synchronous oral communication via Skype

How long?
- 6 weeks, 3 of which were holidays in Germany

Aims?
- To develop intercultural communicative competence, online communication skills and fluency.
Many countries, one language

- Who?
  - Students in Conflict Resolution, Media Studies, English as a Foreign Language, etc.

- How?
  - Soliya Connect Program platform with audio-video communication

- How long?
  - 9-10 weeks

- Aim?
  - Promote dialogue between young people in the ‘West’ and young people in the predominately Muslim world in places such as North Africa, the Middle East, South-East Asia, etc.
Research findings (Spring 2010)

Quantitative data:
pre- and post-survey results
N=217 sts

Qualitative data:
N=30 sts

Universities
- Group A
- Group E
- Group U

No. of sts
- Group A
- Group E
- Group U

Students in Hebron, Jordan and Padova
- Hebron
- Jordan
- Padova
I think we both learned to be supportive and patient. To give each other time to think and formulate our ideas. To give each other good tips. Try to be prepared for our conversation. For me I learned to be more tactful and be open for new ideas. (DE)

Sometimes I had to paraphrase sentences in order to make sure that my Italian partner understood what I wanted to say. This is a good training for me as future teacher. I did not really feel superior to my partner. (DE)

I got a better feeling talking to someone who has a strong accent. (DE)

Overall positive effects related to language:
- Reduced stress between non-native speakers
- More or less proficient speakers learn to accommodate one another
- Sharing of terms and expressions from students’ native languages

I learned to consider more important the emotional approach we have with foreign people and how prejudices can affect a conversation. So I learned to be less rigid in my views and use more empathy when I speak English. (IT)

Spoken interaction online (in a language different from mine). (IT)
Language: Soliya

- only 5 out of 30 report the importance of language learning: students placed more importance on the dialogue process and meaning-making rather than on simply “speaking in English”.

- Hebron and Jordan:
  - “how to express my opinions bravely” (J03)
  - “it gave me a chance to talk freely about different issues” (J08).
Discussion Topic: Padova-Bochum

- Topics chosen were balanced, in that no one group necessarily had ‘more’ knowledge.
  - Topic 1: Country Comparisons
  - Topic 4: Global Citizenship
  - Topic 6: Cultural Comparisons beyond the two national cultures

Students were provided with significant preparatory activities before the Skype exchanges, e.g.
- Watching videos and reflecting on them
- Readings and discussion on the wiki

However… the more ‘controversial’ topics led to more intense discussion and increased efforts to express their ideas.

I am very sensitive towards this kind of problems and I think that both Deborah and Volker understood my point of view, even though I sometimes had some little problems while trying to express my feelings and thoughts. For example, I didn't manage to explain what I meant for "take the law into your own hands", but then they understood what I wanted to say.
Discussion Topic: Soliya

- Topics chosen to stimulate debate and discussion, e.g. Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but are moderated by two facilitators (one fluent in Arabic and English, the other in English).
- Telecollaboration as a learning process: our analysis of learner diaries demonstrates that the greater the disagreement, the greater the effort to express one’s own opinion and learn.

Well, it was tough…but we can’t always agree with others…and even by disagreeing, we manage to see how much we can learn from others’ points of view.
Geographical Location

- Padova-Bochum
  - Final conclusion: more similarities than differences
- Soliya
  - Major impact on participation with regards to:
    - Internet access
    - Personal experience with reference to topics discussed
Conclusions

- In the literature on power asymmetries **dominant groups** tend to minimize inter-group difference and emphasize common humanity and building friendships
  - *From a cultural point of view I learnt that we are not so far from Germany both economically and socially. We have more or less the same view on major topics, and that shows that Europe is not an utopia, but in my opinion needs to strengthen its political role.* (DE)
  - “*We really all are the same, maybe different beliefs and customs, but we do all want the same things*” (US)
  - *One of the most important things I've learnt is that we should not dismiss differences by assuming that in the end we're all the same. Instead, cultural and social differences do exist and shape our lives: what we should really do is to be willing to get to know them, trying to appreciate other people's perspectives, so as to respect them without fear or prejudice.* (PD)
  - “*I learned to respect people's opinions more, in addition to having a good idea about other cultures and countries.*” (J)
Getting the right balance

• Experience with COIL Institute groups in the Language and Literature strand with US speakers of English and groups from other countries:

  • **Language**
    • exploit the multilingual abilities of the non-native speakers
    • raise awareness about different ‘Englishes’, e.g. using films with strong accents/dialects such as “The Full Monty”
    • point out grammar issues that students of English as a Foreign Language may be more familiar with than their US peers, e.g. differences between the present perfect and the simple past

  • **Topics**
    • choose topics and carry out preparatory activities that allow all participants to feel ‘prepared’

  • **Geographical Location**
    • respect geographical differences by using different modes of communication and different tools, and by emphasizing the enriching nature of contact between different cultures
The many ways of saying 'Thank You'

- Xièxiè
- "Thank You"
- SPASIBO
- GRACIAS
- Grazie
- MAHALO
- Danke
- WA - DO
- Arigato
- Dhanyawada
- Asante

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