Brazil and Colombia virtual exchange project: the Brazilian view

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Abstract. The objective of this paper is to report the preliminary results of a telecollaborative project between a Brazilian university (UTFPR) and a Colombian university (Universidad de Pamplona) that both offer a Licentiate degree in English. The project had two purposes: a pedagogical one to show student-teachers how they can develop their communication skills in English in a collaborative way by sharing information with other student-teachers from a different culture, and a technological one to put future teachers in contact with some technological tools. The paper is divided into three parts: (1) a brief description of the context and the participants; (2) the project itself – the first steps, the objectives, and the tasks; and (3) the Brazilian view of the whole process/project as well as the students' feedback.

Keywords: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, pre-service teachers, CALL teacher education.

1. Introduction

Teacher education for Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is a challenging area. There are many unanswered questions on how future language teachers should be prepared for using technology in their practice. What should be taught? What duration/quantity? One course? Or should it be spread across all subjects? Studies show that language teachers are graduating with little or no formal training on the use of technology in language teaching (Hubbard, 2008). However, there is evidence that language teachers with technological skills are the ones that educational institutions request the most. The market wants qualified teachers in CALL, but teacher-training courses are not meeting the demand.

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Besides that, language teachers need to be equipped with knowledge and skills not only about new technologies. They must also have foreign language competence, for example. One way of helping these future teachers to develop some of these language and technology skills simultaneously is telecollaboration or, using the umbrella term, virtual exchange. Research has shown the important contributions that this kind of activity can make to the language learning process (O'Dowd, 2013, 2018). By taking part in it, students will be exposed to online collaborative approaches to learning and teaching and will have semi-authentic experiences of communicating in the foreign language as well as a focus on the pedagogical and technical applications of new technologies. If we want them to be innovative when they become teachers, first they themselves need to have this kind of experience.

Based on this, a telecollaborative project between UTFPR and Universidad de Pamplona was developed by the end of 2018. The objective of this paper is to report the preliminary results of this project.

2. The context and participants

This project involved two professors from Brazil – Claudia and Maristela – and two professors from Colombia – Antonio and Gabriel. The two universities offer a *Licenciatura* in English (a teacher-training program). So, the participants were pre-service English teachers: 30 from Brazil and 35 from Colombia. In Brazil, Claudia had 25 students in the subject English Language Basic 1 (A2 students – focus on listening/speaking), and Maristela had 25 students in the subject English Reading and Writing 1 (A2 students). Both subjects are in the second semester and complement each other to cover the four skills. Twenty of these students were the same for both teachers and five others attended only one or the other. Antonio had ten students in one of his groups and 25 in the other (A2 students) and he worked the four skills with the groups. Gabriel coordinated the project.

3. The project

3.1. The first steps

This project was the result of an initial contact that professors Gabriel and Claudia had in 2016. By the end of 2018, the idea was to conduct a project involving

the students from both universities in the first semester of 2019. To guide the project, we used documents from the EVALUATE project[3] (Müller-Hartmann & O'Dowd, 2018) as well as other authors from the CALL area, mainly O'Dowd (2013, 2018).

We initially communicated using Skype. The objective was to get to know each other and also to establish a working plan. Brazil is two hours ahead of Colombia and this and the fact that the four professors had several other activities besides their classes made it difficult to have the meetings. The solution later was to create a WhatsApp group and that worked perfectly.

Another difficulty that we faced were the differences in academic schedules. This had some impact because we realized the project should last less than what we had initially planned. Another consequence was that we had to adjust the deadlines of the activities, taking into consideration the exam periods of both groups.

It took us a good amount of time to decide what exactly we would do taking into account the constraints mentioned before. We then agreed that this would be a 'pilot study' for future projects and in this way we had to simplify it. The platform used was Edmodo.

3.2. The objectives

The project had two purposes: a pedagogical one to show student-teachers how they can develop their communication skills in English in a collaborative way by sharing information with other student-teachers from a different culture, and a technological one to put future teachers in contact with some technological tools. We also agreed to conduct a survey with both the professors in charge and the student-teachers from both countries to have the necessary feedback.

3.3. The tasks

We decided to have two activities, each one lasting about a month to be done. The activities had to be complementary so that they could be used by the two disciplines in Brazil. Participation was mandatory for the Brazilian students and the activities were used as part of their final grades for both subjects. In both tasks students had to use English.

3. See http://www.evaluateproject.eu/ for more information.

Activity 1. First students had to record a one-minute video introducing themselves to their international partners. They had to use their own devices, and could not read. Then they had to upload it to a Google Drive folder. After watching the partner's video they had to write a short text describing him/her. Detailed instructions were given on the platform and in class. A list with the pairs of students had to be prepared so that they knew whose video to watch.

Activity 2. For the second activity, they had to also record a video and write a short text, but this time about a topic they chose after talking to their partners. They had to use WhatsApp, Skype, or Facetime – any app to talk and see the partner.

4. Preliminary results: the Brazilian view of the project and students' feedback

Despite all the preparation and even some previous experience, reality was more complex than expected. The interaction between Brazilian and Colombian professors went very well and it was easy to reach an agreement. This kind of collaboration worked and will probably continue. Nonetheless, time management was our biggest issue.

Some misunderstandings concerning the first instructions happened and it was not clear why. Detailed instructions were given about the activities, however, some students had difficulties understanding them and even uploading the videos. For Activity 2, the number of students changed and other arrangements had to be made. Unfortunately, the interaction using an app to decide on the topic did not happen for all the pairs/groups; writing messages was the option they preferred.

The survey created is still receiving responses, but the first answers show that students would like to continue taking part in projects like this. The biggest difficulty was their partners' accent. Several suggestions have been made and most of them mention that they would like to have more contact with the other group: live video sessions with the whole class, for example.

5. Conclusions

There are many barriers and problems that still make telecollaboration be on the periphery in higher education. It takes time and teachers have to be absolutely committed to it. Students do benefit from this kind of exchange but also require

attention and have to be constantly motivated. Autonomy is an issue that still has to be developed so that students become more independent and responsible for their own learning.

Nevertheless, our final goal is to have a long-term project involving other professors from other subjects from our course and partners from other countries. This is the starting point to try to raise awareness in our teaching community as well as in our Latin American colleagues of the advantages of telecollaboration. By sharing these results here we aim to engage others from the foreign language community. As teacher trainers, it is important to get to know the reality of colleagues all over the world who are also preparing future English teachers and to share our realities, challenges, strategies, and expectations.

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