22 Preparing student mobility through telecollaboration

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Abstract

In recent years, going to a foreign country has become all the more significant for Higher Education (HE) students, as concepts such as internationalisation and intercultural competencies have gained a more prominent role in HE. For students to fully benefit from this experience, it is paramount to prepare them for their stay in a foreign country through reflection and analysis (Byram & Dervin, 2008). This paper focuses on a pre-mobility preparation programme: the I-Tell project (Intercultural Telecollaborative Learning). This initiative aims at raising intercultural awareness amongst students and promoting language practice through telecollaborative exchanges between students of Spanish in Ireland and students of English in Spain prior to their sojourn abroad. The data gathered from this initiative yield some interesting findings, especially in relation to linguistic and intercultural development. We will particularly highlight the findings pertaining to student preparation to their period abroad and show what students gained from partaking in this project.

Keywords: period abroad, intercultural awareness, telecollaboration, mobility programme.

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1.   Introduction

Even though studying abroad is not a new phenomenon (Welch, 2008), student mobility has exploded in recent years (Dervin, 2011) and a higher emphasis in research has been placed on the period abroad (Byram & Dervin, 2008; Jackson, 2008).

In 1997, Coleman already highlighted that preparation was "all-important" (p. 15) before the period abroad and that "[p]reparation for the cultural dimension of discourse [could] obviate certain problems" (p. 2) but that in general, the preparatory tasks in this domain were nonexistent or inadequate as they were often limited to practical or linguistic advice. Recent research on mobility preparation has shed light on the importance of intercultural awareness (Borghetti, Beaven, & Pugliese, 2015; Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015).

The I-Tell project joins this trend as it aims at ensuring that students are prepared for their mobility period. It also explores the impact of this pre-departure intervention on students.

2.   The I-Tell project

The goal of this project is to improve students' cultural, linguistic and digital competences before they go abroad. The main focus of this research was to investigate the impact of telecollaboration on students' preparation before their mobility period.

2.1.   Participants

The participants consisted of a group of twelve students learning Spanish at the University of Limerick, Ireland and set to go to Spain on Erasmus or work placement. They were paired up with twelve students from the University of León, Spain. These latter students were learning English and were also preparing for their Erasmus placement either in the UK or in Ireland. The Irish students

participated in the project on a semi-voluntary basis, i.e. as part of an option within a Spanish language module, while their Spanish partners received 2 ECTS credits for their participation.

2.2.   Project description

For their project work, students had to conduct a series of telecollaborative tasks covering a range of intercultural topics during a period of eight weeks in the semester prior to their stay abroad. The participants were advised to have two weekly exchanges with their international partner using e-mail or video-conferencing. Each exchange had to be divided between the two languages, and students were recommended to use more than one communication mode (verbal, images, videos, hyperlinks). The Skype conversation should last at least 40 minutes.

3.   Methodology

For this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The quantitative data were gathered using a feedback questionnaire which included a total of ten questions. Six of them were rating questions based on a five-point Likert scale. The remaining questions were multiple choice and yes or no questions. For each of the questions, students were invited to elaborate on their answers by leaving an additional comment. This allowed the researchers to explore different viewpoints.

The qualitative data were collected from participants' reflective portfolios completed at the end of the project and from focus group interviews.

4.   Results

In the following part, the main findings of the study will be presented, focusing on the impact of the project on students' language learning, intercultural awareness and preparation for the period abroad.

4.1.   Impact on language learning

In their feedback, students report that their grammar and writing/reading skills benefited from the exchanges. However, an analysis of the qualitative data reveals that they also increased their vocabulary (especially about university life). They highlight that they learnt new words and expressions in context and from peer native speakers. This seems important to them as it allowed them to develop their repertoire of colloquial expressions used by people their own age. As the exchanges between partners were not monitored, they felt free to use their own language, thus making the interactions more authentic: "…*and it's not like you were being watched by a teacher or someone, even though the teachers here are very friendly and all, they're in a position of authority*".

Moreover, most pairs engaged in peer-correction within all the tasks, even though this was just required for one of the tasks. They developed techniques to provide feedback to their partners (e.g. highlighting errors, sending back comments…). This led them to engage in reflection about their own learning (e.g. "*one thing that struck me is I had been using some words/expressions in the wrong context so it's great to have that corrected now*") and to further develop their learning and communication strategies (e.g. "…*antes de empezar este proyecto siempre intenté de traducir una palabra inglés al español*" ["*Before starting the project I always tried to translate each word from English into Spanish*"]).

4.2.   Developing intercultural awareness

The data we analysed contain many instances of intercultural learning taking place within the exchanges as the tasks carried out by the pairs led them to discuss each other's culture. They compared aspects of their everyday life, such as daily routines, and discussed cultural events in their countries. More importantly, they developed their socio-pragmatic competence by sharing concrete information about their own culture to help their partner's integration, such as ways to address lecturers: "*I think it gives you good information you wouldn't find out otherwise (…) general things that you wouldn't do if you don't want to offend someone*". One student reports that she felt more "*street-smart*" after the project.

Witte (2014) argues that the intercultural competence develops in stages. Some evidence of these stages can be traced in the qualitative data collected. The discussions between the learners went from factual exchanges to deeper reflection on culture. In the first instance, differences were perceived as strange and the feeling of alienation dominated ("*Creo que su calendario es muy extraño en comparación a nuestro*" ["*I think that their calendar is very strange compared to ours"*]). They then became aware of the cultural differences and were able to anticipate their cultural shock ("*Ahora sé que llevará tiempo para adaptarse a las diferencias entre Irlanda y España*" ["*Now I am aware that it will take time to adapt to the differences between Ireland and Spain*"]) and discuss stereotypes: "*We talked about stereotypes of both of our countries and what's true/untrue*".

4.3.   Period abroad preparation

Data results show a positive impact of the project on students' preparation before their period abroad. Thanks to exchanges of information, students gained some guidance regarding the university system (class sizes and dynamics, academic calendar, university services) and cultural recommendations. The analysis of the interviews and the portfolios reveals that, during the exchanges, students also received emotional support from their partners as they shared their feelings, fears or worries about living abroad. Reflection about their time abroad made students aware of the adaptation time needed when living in a different country ("*Ha cambiado la manera abordaré mi viaje allí para Erasmus. Ahora sé que llevará tiempo para adaptarse a las diferencias entre Irlanda y España*" ["*It has changed the way I am going to face my trip there for Erasmus. Now I am aware that it will take time to get used to the differences between Ireland and Spain*"]) and the difficulties that could arise.

5.   Conclusion

Overall, I-Tell was successful. Our students and their partners fully engaged with the project and showed a strong preference for working autonomously. Our initial

outcomes were achieved: students had a relevant linguistic practice during the eight weeks the project lasted and the cultural dimension was a crucial part of the exchanges, developing students' intercultural awareness and cultural learning. Students also shared practical advice and provided emotional support, thus increasing the motivation for the period abroad and reducing anxiety. At the end of the project, most of the students involved reported that they were going to keep in touch with their partners, making the links between the two cultures longer lasting.

We were very satisfied with the results from this first stage of the project and we are now planning to extend the project to other languages (namely French, German and Japanese) as well as to offer the project to advanced and beginner students of Spanish in a regular basis. It will also be interesting to analyse whether the preliminary findings from this first stage are confirmed in subsequent iterations of this initiative.

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