

30 Intercultural communication for professional development: creative approaches in higher education

Linda Joy Mesh¹

Abstract

This study examines the development of telecollaborative exchange activities within blended language courses that are aimed at preparing post-graduate students for an intercultural workplace by developing valuable transversal competencies and intercultural awareness, which enable one to better adapt to changing work situations. A description is given of the collaborative activities completed by students at the University of Siena, Italy, and the University of Maastricht, Netherlands. The relevance of intercultural communication exchanges for meeting the needs of students who are searching for career opportunities or research collaboration abroad is also highlighted. The study concludes with a discussion of how activities and applications can be used to increase motivation and critical thinking skills as students work together collaboratively.

Keywords: intercultural communication, tandem, workplace skills, language learning.

1. University of Siena, Siena, Italy; linda.mesh@unisi.it

How to cite this chapter: Mesh, L. J. (2016). Intercultural communication for professional development: creative approaches in higher education. In S. Jager, M. Kurek & B. O'Rourke (Eds), *New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education* (pp. 253-259). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.515>

1. Introduction – intercultural competencies and workplace skills

This study aims to present how telecollaborative exchange activities have been integrated in language courses for students learning English at the University of Siena, Italy, and students learning Italian at the University of Maastricht, Netherlands.

The teachers involved in this project adopted a blended learning approach, including an average of 50 per cent of course hours in the classroom and an online component of 50 per cent of the total course hours, composed of guided forum activities, wikis and the optional use of social applications to provide communicative opportunities for interaction in the second language.

The English courses in Siena are part of an innovative project, *USiena Open – Constructing Competences for the Future*, funded by the Italian Ministry of Instruction, University and Research (MUIR), which aims to provide outgoing orientation to students to facilitate entrance into the workplace by developing transversal competencies. These skills include the ability, digital competence and initiative to manage one's learning throughout life, as well as being able to communicate effectively in foreign languages, in cross-cultural situations and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the objective of the language courses that are part of this project is to provide opportunities for improving transversal competencies through guided activities based on mobile and social applications.

The effect that mobile devices have had on developments in communicative language teaching has provided new opportunities, as well as the reconceptualisation of materials and methodologies. A learner-centred perspective suggests that “mobile devices can support self-directed forms of language learning and greater learner autonomy” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2013, p. 5), which is supported by a growing body of evidence to that effect. With this in mind, the intercultural exchange in this study includes several collaborative applications compatible with mobile devices.

2. Project description

Maastricht, Netherlands, and Siena, Italy, are both relatively small European cities that are steeped in historical and cultural relevance, although they are located in very different areas of Europe. Intercultural exchanges, which may be carried out through internet technologies, can provide interesting ‘windows’ through which students who are studying languages in distant universities can exchange viewpoints and enhance their language-learning experiences. The groups that have participated in this project are students who are studying Italian at the Maastricht University Language Centre and students who are studying English at the University of Siena Language Centre. Therefore, a tandem approach lends itself naturally to the organisation of the activities, providing mutual interest and linguistic appeal.

3. Intercultural exchange

This section will describe the characteristics of the groups of students in Siena and Maastricht, as well as briefly illustrate the various aspects of the intercultural exchange activities.

3.1. Siena

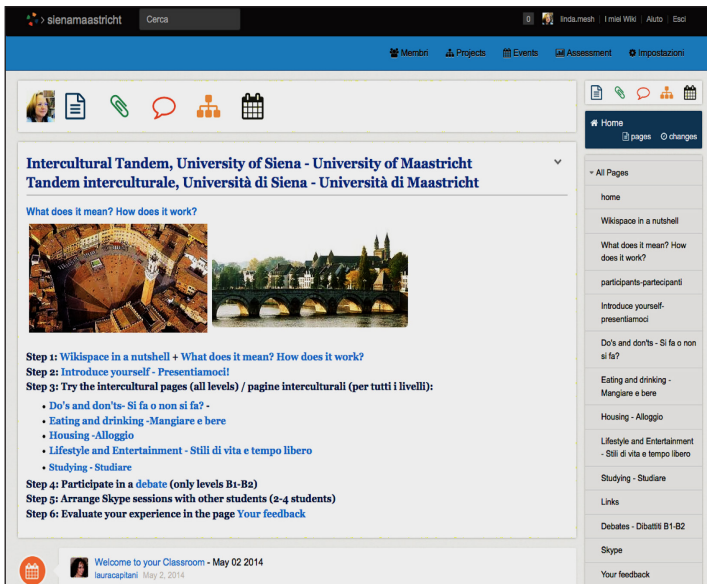
The students from the University of Siena Language Centre are studying for second cycle degrees (Master’s degrees) and Ph.Ds and have attained an upper-intermediate level B2 in English. The students, who are from many different regions of Italy, are taking one of two blended courses in *Moodle*, with a combination of face-to-face lessons and online activities, offered at levels B2+ and C1 as part of the project *USiena Open*, mentioned above. Since the participants are concluding their university studies, they are strongly motivated to look for employment or research opportunities abroad. Therefore, they feel a need to develop effective intercultural communication skills. As part of the blended courses, students are asked to participate in guided online forum discussions that are closely integrated with the classroom lessons. The teacher

facilitates the online activities, providing feedback and assessment of the skills-based projects that are completed. For the students in Siena, participation in the tandem exchange is obligatory.

3.2. Maastricht

The students from Maastricht University Language Centre are studying for a variety of degrees taught in English as a lingua franca, and are primarily enrolled in the European Studies programme. Although most of the students are German and Dutch, there are also many students from Eastern Europe, Italy and Saudi Arabia, who are taking blended Italian courses at intermediate levels. Some are preparing for an Erasmus exchange program in Italy, while others began studying Italian in Maastricht, then went to Italy for their Erasmus experience. When they returned, they enrolled in a higher-level course because of their studies abroad.

Figure 1. Wikispace home page for the Siena-Maastricht intercultural tandem exchange



The learning environment used for communication and interaction between the students is *Wikispaces Classroom* (Figure 1). The wikispace provides not only course information, but is used primarily for exchanging opinions and ideas for collaborative assignments.

3.3. Collaborative exchange – ‘Getting to know you’ (part 1)

The first part of the tandem exchange involves an ice-breaking activity in which students from Siena introduce themselves in English as their target language, whereas those in Maastricht participate in Italian by describing aspects of everyday life, cultural aspects and their activities as students. The purpose of this activity is to provide a space for virtual storytelling in which students can develop personal narratives, an important skill for developing effective interpersonal communication at both personal and professional levels. The students decide how to write the wiki and are encouraged to offer each other language support. A mobile application is used in this part, *Fotobabble.com*, for posting photographs with audio clips.

3.4. Collaborative exchange – discussion of intercultural issues (part 2)

During the second part of the telecollaboration activities, students are given a more challenging activity that increases motivation between the two groups. First, a topic of mutual interest is selected by the students from a suggested list of options; for example, in this case the topic of immigration and migration was chosen. The students from Maastricht and Siena were asked to read two articles in Italian and two in English, which were chosen to present various points of view. Then students expressed their opinions by writing individual compositions in the wikispace in their target language. Some also chose to create digital posters illustrating their opinions by using the application *checkthis.com*. On the basis of the written discussion that was generated (27 short compositions), the students in Maastricht conducted a classroom debate on the topic in Italian. Two student moderators summarised the opinions found in the wikispace and stimulated the debate in class. As a result, the students

were able to carry on a long discussion in Italian with good competence in both language and content. A similar in-class debate in English was held in Siena. The students were given the task of managing the discussion, hence improving motivation and critical thinking skills, which can be further developed as life-long abilities (Aguilar, 2010).

3.5. Reflection and evaluation

At the end of parts 1 and 2, students were asked to write a series of reflective diary entries about their feelings and experiences, reflecting on the learning that took place and any changes they noticed in communication abilities, their perspectives of cultural issues as well as any approaches needed for effective communication across cultures. The design of the activities used in the intercultural exchange is evaluated at the end of each course by using Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence.

4. Conclusions

The result of the entire collaboration has certainly been positive regarding both the improvement of intercultural competences, the first objective of the project, and the more advanced development of both writing and speaking abilities that are directly related to skill-based applications. Moreover, because mobile and social technologies are a part of students' lives, the careful integration of selected applications enhanced the learning process. The opportunity to develop cross-cultural exchanges in which aspects of the learning process can be handed over to the students promotes ownership and helps to foster learner autonomy.

Finally, we have demonstrated that language competences that are developed in conjunction with intercultural exchange activities can provide opportunities for students to develop a range of transversal skills that may aid their transition into the global workplace.

References

- Aguilar, M. J. C. (2010). Intercultural communicative competence as a tool for autonomous learning. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 61, 87-98.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2013). *Re-skilling language learners for a mobile world*. Monterey, CA: The International Research Foundation for English Language Education. http://www.tirfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/TIRF_MALL_Papers_Kukulska-Hulme.pdf

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

© 2016 by Editors (collective work)
© 2016 by Authors (individual work)

New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education
Edited by Sake Jager, Malgorzata Kurek, and Breffni O'Rourke

Rights: All articles in this collection are published under the Attribution-NonCommercial -NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Under this licence, the contents are freely available online as PDF files (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.9781908416414>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.



Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design and cover photos by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
UNICollab logo – Harriett Cornish, Graphic Designer, KMi, The Open University

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-40-7 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-41-4 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-42-1 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: novembre 2016.
