11 Virtual exchange across disciplines: telecollaboration and the question of asymmetrical task design

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Abstract

This paper discusses an experience with an asymmetric online intercultural exchange between three different groups of students which took place during a specialised soft skills-focussed language class of Business Networking in English (BNiE) at the MIAS School of Business, Czech Technical University, Prague (MIAS). The results of the post-project discussion and perceptions of MIAS students participating in the asymmetric telecollaboration are analysed and conclusions are drawn.

Keywords: telecollaboration, task design, symmetry, and asymmetry.

1.   Introduction

The growing importance of combining content and language teaching in higher education poses new challenges to course and task design. One of the most acute questions is how to successfully incorporate Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) into specialised language courses which focus on developing specific soft and/or transversal skills. It is often the case that introducing OIE into such courses would be clearly in line with the aims of the given course, yet finding a suitable OIE partner with perfectly symmetrical pedagogical aims

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might prove rather difficult. Although it has been argued that OIEs are never entirely symmetric (Loizidou & Mangenot, 2016, p. 155) and various forms of asymmetry, e.g. the asymmetry of student/institutional status, students' language and/or other skills, motivation, prior knowledge, needs, or class/group size and heterogeneity (Wigham, Mayer, & Fumagalli, 2014, p. 3), exist in all OIEs, course designers should always pay close attention to any asymmetries that threaten to negatively impact the outcome of the OIE. An asymmetry which can easily put at risk the outcome of an OIE is the asymmetry of workload. This asymmetry played an important role in the discussed three way OIE between the students of a specialised Bachelor of Science (BSc) course of BNiE at the MIAS, students of English for special purposes from École Nationale Supérieure de Chimie, de Biologie, et de Physique, Bordeaux (French partner), and students of Business English from Budapest Business School (Hungarian partner)[2].

Business networking is an umbrella term which describes "the creation and use of personal contacts for one's own benefit or for the benefit of the group" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 65), including "the process of creating, cultivating, and capitalising on trust-based, mutually beneficial relationships" (Baber, Waymon, Alphonso, & Wylde, 2015, p. 22). Elaborating on this definition, Sharma and Barrett (2010, p. 7) describe a good networker as a competent communicator with solid vocabulary, grammar, and cultural awareness, and good command of communication strategies and interaction patterns. In addition to this, competent networkers are said to be capable of "educating their contacts" about who they are, what they do, and what they have to offer (Graham, 2012, p. 26).

The need to expose advanced BNiE students to cognitively stimulating real-life networking situations which would allow for systematic development of the above defined skills led to the idea of constructing the NiE curriculum

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around an OIE based on "student-centred, collaborative approaches to learning where knowledge and understanding are constructed through interaction and negotiation" (O'Dowd, 2016, p. 292). Given the fact that telecollaborative tasks involving "different linguistic and cultural communities […] have a strong possibility of producing negotiation of meaning" (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009, pp. 174-175), the course designers decided to modify an OIE, which was in previous years implemented symmetrically (i.e. with only one partner), by expanding it to a cooperation with two different international partners. The rationale behind this decision was that the comparison of results achieved in cooperation with Hungarian and French partners would allow for knowledge being constructed through a contrast between different experiences rather than being simply transmitted by one partner and/or directly by the teacher. In addition to this, this approach provided individuals with more space to pursue their specific pedagogical aims, e.g. differentiate the amount of workload the students can devote to the project as part of the given course and focus on a different project output, while mutually benefitting from an OIE.

2.   The online exchange

Given this situation, the BNiE syllabus was built around a synchronous OIE[3] focussing on training and development of personal and interpersonal skills, team-work, business communication, and networking routines. The nine week OIE, which took place from March to May 2018, comprised of a series of online encounters simulating the launch of a fictional product onto the international partner's market. Importantly, from the perspective of MIAS students, the project ran in two parallel lines: MIAS students cooperated with their French and Hungarian partners while these two partners were, given their specific educational aims and the role of the OIE in their course, not in touch during the project. This situation created the task and workload asymmetry between MIAS students and their international partners.

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3. For the full description of this original project module entitled 'Negotiating with International Partners', see ICCAGE (2017, pp. 125-154).

Table 1 below describes individual project tasks, detailing the two project lines which the MIAS students had to accomplish in cooperation with their Hungarian and French partners.

Table 1. Project tasks table

	Hungarian Branch	French Branch
1.	Chose a product you will export to your partner's market, consider you product strategy, product description, product marketing materials, etc.	
2.	Get in touch with your Hungarian partner.	Get in touch with your French partner.
3.	E-mail a product description and questionnaire about your partner's market in relation to your product to your Hungarian partner.	E-mail a product description and questionnaire about your partner's market in relation to your product to your French partner.
4.	Answer the Hungarian partner's questionnaire.	Answer the French partner's questionnaire.
5.	Change your product description, strategy, etc., based on your partner's feedback.	Change your product description, strategy, etc., based on your partner's feedback.
6.	E-mail your preliminary quotation.	Shoot a video pitch.
7.	Skype negotiation.	Watch and evaluate partner's video pitches.
8.	Follow-up e-mail and minutes.	Share feedback on your partner's video pitches.

For MIAS students, the asymmetry in workload was compensated for by the fact that the "information exchange" (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009, p. 175) tasks 1-5 were analogical in both project lines. First, MIAS students chose a product to export, developed a cohesive product strategy and description, and then exchanged information about the product and target market with their respective partners. Based on their partner's feedback, students adjusted their product description/strategy to suit the specifics of the French and/or Hungarian market. Their partners followed the same procedure, however, did not work with two partners at the same time. The final outcome of the French project line was a product video pitch followed-up by feedback activities; the outcome of the Hungarian part was a simulated Skype negotiation in which two student teams pretended to be importers/exporters of their respective products and attempted to negotiate the best contract. The negotiation was

concluded by a follow-up e-mail summarising the details of the contract and negotiation minutes.

3.   Method and results

To decide on the feasibility of the asymmetrical arrangement of the project, which was two years previously implemented symmetrically, the MIAS teacher decided to run a simple post-project survey among involved MIAS students, and organise focus group discussions. The survey comprised of 16 questions addressing various aspects of the project; 13 were five point Likert scale questions and three were open ended questions. Question 11 focussed on the project workload asymmetry and asked students to express their (dis-)agreement with the statement: "International students I cooperate with are assigned the same amount of work as part of the project as me/my team". Out of 32 participating students, 18 chose to 'fully agree', 10 chose 'agree', and 4 preferred 'undecided'; options 'disagree' and 'fully disagree' were not selected.

The results, however, contrasted with answers provided in open-ended question 15, which asked students to name the main problems they experienced during the project. Despite generally perceiving the project as successful and beneficial in terms of developing their real-life networking skills, students reported the following problems: (1) problems in communication, mainly their partners' (un-)willingness to meet deadlines (22/32), (2) their partners' unwillingness to keep the project on a formal level (21/32), (3) problems caused by the institutional setting (21/32), and (4) telecollaborative task scheduling (18/32); interestingly, none of the responses spontaneously pointed out problems with task/workload asymmetry. This was confirmed during focus group discussions where students admitted that the biggest frustration was the lack of fast-enough and/or appropriate responses from the partner team (Problems 1, 2, and 4 above) affecting their ability to meet project deadlines, as well as the fact that the project took place during the final semester of their studies and took away time they would have otherwise spent writing their thesis (Problem 3 above).

4.   Discussion

Despite the limited scope of the survey, the given answers make it safe to assume that the encountered problems are to be attributed to the micro-asymmetry between the cooperating student teams rather than to the macro-asymmetry of the project design and task sequencing in general. When inquired directly, students naturally did not see the workload asymmetry as something desirable, but at the same time did not see it as an impediment to successful completion of the project.

The phenomena of micro/macro-asymmetry are naturally linked, however, it might be argued that in the case of this particular project, the organisational and communicational problems might have appeared due to an asymmetry of student/teacher expectations rather than as a result of the quantitative asymmetry in workload. Although the workload asymmetry was not perceived as desirable per se, it seems not to have been mentioned as a problem simply because it was something the students could deal with on their own; in other words it was something that, unlike the need to rely on their international partners, was not 'beyond the student's control', and thus did not prevent the students from completing the project. From this perspective, the asymmetry in workload did not significantly influence the project outcome.

5.   Conclusion

As various asymmetries naturally exist in most OIE projects, OIE designers should not automatically perceive them as factors negatively influencing the outcome of their OIE. The experience drawn from this project, however specific to the given context and limited by the number of student responses, suggests that OIE designers should carefully distinguish between different asymmetries and draw from past experience in order to anticipate which asymmetries might impede the project and which might be productively embodied into the project design. At all times it is crucial that all relevant project asymmetries should be carefully explained to involved students.

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Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship
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