

10 Task-enhanced virtual exchange between University of Sfax, Tunisia, and Hacettepe University, Turkey

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Abstract

This chapter presents a case study of an online task-enhanced Virtual Exchange (VE) project that involved 19 English students at Hacettepe University, Turkey, and 19 students of English at Sfax University, Tunisia. The objective behind the VE was to provide students with opportunities for intercultural and interactional development through the performance of collaborative intercultural tasks. At the end of the project, students' performances were assessed and graded, and the project was evaluated by Tunisian students, by means of narratives. The case study concludes with recommendations to be taken into consideration for future VE projects.

Keywords: virtual exchange, task-enhanced project, intercultural tasks, Skype, intercultural communicative competence, collaboration.

1. Context

The VE project described in this chapter took place under the umbrella of the Erasmus+ VE program and involved two groups of students based in

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Turkey and Tunisia. The Tunisian group included 19 second year students majoring in English and taking an intercultural communication course at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Sfax, Tunisia. The Turkish group also consisted of 19 students taking the advanced speaking class at Hacettepe University, Turkey. The project designers' participation in the project was motivated by their interest in providing Tunisian and Turkish students with a practical experience of working collaboratively on virtual intercultural tasks in an authentic context for intercultural learning. Added to that, the teachers wanted to introduce their students to new ways of learning based on the use of video-mediated communication tools. The teachers were also interested in exchanging teaching practices and techniques to benefit from a better quality of learning and teaching.

2. Aims and description of the project

The VE project was based on the performance of intercultural tasks where participants collaborated and communicated to seek and exchange cultural information (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2010; Lewis, 2017; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). It aimed to promote participants' intercultural learning and development of intercultural communicative competence. More specifically, the project sought to improve students' intercultural communication skills which required gaining knowledge of the culture and attitudes of openness, empathy, and respect.

To achieve these objectives, a task-based approach was used (Balaman, 2018; Hauck, 2010; Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2017; Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009). The task performance started by giving participants the necessary instructions and materials. Collaboration and interaction were emphasized to achieve the interactional and intercultural purposes of the tasks such as informed decision making (taking decisions about an issue after doing some research about it), categorizing and classifying cultural information, discussing cultural norms from different perspectives, applying intercultural skills such as comparing cultural aspects, and managing misunderstandings in interactions. After receiving and

understanding the instructions for the tasks, partners started discussing, sharing, classifying, collaborating as well as using different language functions and conversation mechanisms.

3. Tasks and tools

The VE started in April 2019 and lasted for one month. Each student in Sfax, Tunisia was paired with a partner based in Hacettepe University, Turkey. The first meeting consisted of an ice breaking activity, and was followed by a further five meetings during which they completed ten tasks (two tasks per meeting). The tasks were designed by another group of Turkish students taking the “Instructional Technology and Materials Development” class at Hacettepe University. These students had been asked to design interactional tasks as part of their pre-service teacher training assignments⁴ (cf. Balaman, Ekin, & Badem-Korkmaz, in review). The tasks were meant to be performed by Tunisian students and their Turkish partners. Part of the pre-implementation procedure included an email that was sent to all participants containing details about recording their performance of the tasks, an instruction video, and further documents setting out general arrangements for communicating with their partners. Instructions included the suggested duration of the tasks, which were to be completed within a recommended 20 minutes and should in any case not exceed 40 minutes.

It is to be noted that participants performed the tasks at home outside ordinary class time using English as the medium of communication. The following is an example of a task designed for the project: it consisted in having partners collaborate in making choices and taking informed decisions after looking for cultural information on the net. Participants had to imagine that they had to visit the maximum number of places in Cairo during 14 hours. They were given a list of places they could visit and a timeline on which they had to put the places they would visit and the time they would spend there. The first and the last places were given to them. Finally, partners had to decide on the other places and put

4. The task design procedures are beyond the scope of the current study.

them on the timeline after searching the internet for information about those places and the time the visit would take.

4. Assessment and recognition

The Tunisian students were taking an intercultural communication course which was based on engaging in different VE projects – including an exchange with a French university the previous semester. The VE project with Hacettepe University was based on the program of the advanced speaking course at Hacettepe, which aimed to improve the students' interactional and intercultural competencies mainly by engaging in the VE project.

At the end of the project, the Tunisian students were assessed and graded on the basis of the interactional and intercultural skills they used with their partners. Each pair's interactions were recorded and the students' development of interactional skills were tracked and compared over the period of the exchange (Balaman, 2018; Balaman & Sert, 2017; Sert & Balaman, 2018). The criteria adopted for the assessment included maintaining smooth interactions with the other, discovering the other culture, and reflecting on one's own culture, avoiding communication breakdowns, readjusting and revisiting one's own attitudes, and creating new ones (Moalla, 2015). The Tunisian students were awarded grades based on local institutional assessment requirements while the Turkish students were assessed on end of project self-reflection reports on each of the VE tasks and overall changes in their interactional practices based on screen-recordings of each meeting. All students were granted online badges in recognition of their participation in the VE.

5. Evaluation of the exchange

The Turkish students' evaluation of their experiences was limited to self-reflections toward their interactional gains, and is not within the scope of the current study. The Tunisian students were asked to write a detailed narrative

about the challenges they faced, the way they handled them, and the lessons they learned.

From the outset, the Tunisian students were excited to embark on VE because of the Turkish series broadcast on Tunisian TV. The presumed familiarity with the Turkish culture prepared students for motivating interactions as they were curious to discover whether what they knew about Turkey was right or wrong.

The Tunisian students reported that they found the exchange “mind-provoking”, “fulfilling”, “unforgettable”, and “priceless”. The analysis of students’ narratives revealed their attitudes toward the video-mediated interactions (via Skype), the topics they discussed, the tasks they performed, and the relationships they built.

Skype proved to be beneficial as a tool of instruction and interaction because it provided participants’ with flexibility of time and place as well as multiple opportunities for intercultural development. One Tunisian student, for example, explained: “the best thing was that we could work from any place at any time”. Another student reported: “we had the possibility to choose which time to talk without pressure or a supervisor”. Participants expressed preferences for Skype as it enabled them to see their partners’ reactions and interpret them in the right way: “there is always something special about getting to see people’s reactions for yourself and not just interpreting their feelings throughout text messages”.

Additionally, students appreciated working in pairs because they had more space and time to engage in more enriching conversations and to collaboratively join their efforts in completing the tasks. From the students’ perspectives, the tasks provided them with a secure context for learning as they were clear, well-structured, and guided by teachers. The topics discussed could promote culture learning for they were varied and motivating. Using one student’s own words:

“these tasks were really meaningful and they succeeded to reveal the main cultural features of both Tunisia and Turkey. For instance, I still remember that Kebabs is one [sic] of the favourite dishes in Turkey as well as the refreshments such as the Turkish coffee or the Turkish tea”.

In their accounts on the exchange, most participants focused on the human dimension and relationship building. They asserted that the exchange helped them make friends and maintain contacts with their partners after the end of the exchange. They have even invited their partners to visit their own country. Some students managed to develop a more universal view of human relationships. One participant believed that the exchange could help rethink and strengthen the relationship between people and cultures across the globe. He argued:

“it is fairly safe to say that intercultural communication was a unique experience because it re-established the relationships between different people from different countries; especially that globalisation today is creating a real gap between nations”.

Despite the generally positive attitudes toward the project, participants evoked some limitations. They believed that the design of the exchange relied on the performance of tasks and gave little time for personal interaction. While some students reported that the tasks were clear and motivating, one participant found the tasks to be poorly designed and did not meet her expectations.

6. Lessons learned

As a result of the video-mediated interactions, students became more aware of the differences and similarities between the two cultures:

“with these activities, we noticed the similarities and differences between the two cultures for example the attitude of drinking tea many times during the day, the similar recipes of food, and believing in the evil eye in both countries”.

Moreover, participants recognized that they learned about themselves and their partners at the same time:

“there were moments when I was puzzled and I was positioned in an emergent situation where I had to explain something in my culture that I myself do not know anything about”.

Finally, participants became more aware that human behavior, thoughts, and beliefs were culture-bound and that ‘cultural conditioning’ could hinder communication:

“also, we are always stuck in our own cultural conditioning. We have always been ingrained since our childhood by certain values, certain assumptions, worldviews and behavior patterns. This could create problems for us when we are coming to different cultural environments”.

In terms of communication skills, participants reported learning how to handle emerging situations of intercultural misunderstanding by explaining and clarifying its underlying causes:

“what is important is how to handle a situation like this and how to explain to the other . . . , and if we want the conversation to run smoothly, then, the best way is to explain in order to make them understand”.

Some participants came to realize that the attitudes of respect and tolerance were necessary to manage challenging situations and build relationships:

“also respect has to be the first stone in the building of intercultural communication”.

One of the key outcomes of the exchange was the change in the participants’ attitudes toward their partners’ culture and their attempts to challenge the stereotypes they had from the Turkish TV series:

“this experience had a great impact on me. First, it changed my opinions towards the Turkish cultures that I got them [sic] from media and series”.

They learned to understand and tolerate their partners' perspectives and abandon ethnocentric attitudes:

“first of all, this experience helped me a lot to avoid ethnocentrism which is to think that our culture is superior to other cultures in background, attitudes and values. It also allowed me to break down stereotypes and have more respect and acceptance towards others”.

7. Final recommendations and conclusion

One of the students' achievements from the exchange is building strong ties with each other despite the limited duration of the exchange (Moalla, 2015). Having two meetings a week during a month made their timetables tight, which put some pressure on them in terms of time and efforts. Having one meeting a week over a 14 week semester could produce better results in terms of relationship building and development of intercultural and interactional skills. Not limiting students to the 20 minutes of the task could have also brought about better results. Tunisian students reported that they stayed focused on the task to abide by the time limits set for them, which made them avoid initiating new conversations. The conversations they had after the task was performed were reportedly more meaningful and spontaneous and led to the emergence of interactional skills that did not feature during the completion of tasks. The time constraint, therefore, seemed to hinder opportunities for further gains.

The flexibility of the use of Skype encouraged interactions and gave participants freedom to choose the time and place convenient to both. Skype could have been supplemented by other tools including emails and learning management systems (e.g. Moodle) as a potential solution for some of the problems encountered regarding VE procedures in the current project and for incorporating a lived sense of a community of practice in future implementations.

The tasks have a high potential to promote intercultural skills such as the ability to compare cultures and seek cultural information (Dooly & O'Dowd,

2010; Lewis, 2017; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). The mere exposure to culture, however, may not help students develop the skill of interaction (Byram, 1997); especially managing situations of misunderstanding due to cultural differences. The topics discussed including exchange of cultural information may lead to enriching students' knowledge of the other culture but not to the development of interactional skills. Selecting authentic video-recorded situations of misunderstanding from the participants' interactions or from everyday social interactions could be beneficial, especially if the partners are asked to identify the problems and the underlying causes.

The topics and tasks designed for the project were mainly addressed to tourists such as describing tourist attraction places, looking for information about food, artistic choices etc. Such types of cultural information can be useful for a tourist who needs some knowledge before traveling to a particular destination. It, however, might not be enough for people who travel for other reasons, including work, education, business, and medical care. Communicating with people from other cultures requires knowledge of the conventions and norms of social interactions and relations. The topics suggested in this project, furthermore, do not reflect real life as lived by Turkish and Tunisian people. Raising awareness of differences in body language, norms of social interaction, social life, gender roles, and relationships could better prepare students for future intercultural communication.

This case study reported on the objectives, design, and assessment of a VE project carried out between the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sfax, Tunisia, and the Department of English Language Teaching, Hacettepe University, Turkey. The data obtained revealed that the use of Skype, as an interactional tool, offered students flexibility of place and time and the opportunity to interact directly with real people. Additionally, participants' collaborative efforts to perform the tasks led to maintaining and strengthening their relationships. The discussion and negotiation of intercultural tasks helped students come up with accommodating strategies to maintain smooth and coherent conversations and to handle communication breakdowns. The dyadic nature of the interactions allowed students to revisit and adjust their attitudes and judgments, and led to the emergence of a new, shared identity.

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