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Computers as Toolkits: Language E-learning through International Collaboration

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The idea of collaboration, especially international collaboration, is a powerful means of teaching a language through genuine language use. In this article, the authors provide a general review of a collaborative e-learning project carried out between a Spanish and an American university. The project was based on the belief that the use of virtual partners through internet should be seen as a “constructivist toolkit” for educators, thus propagating student-centred learning; particularly computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL). The article then discusses some issues and unexpected outcomes stemming from students’ collaborative work as well as outlining general observations about virtual collaborative projects.

Introduction

The role of computers in the ESL/EFL classroom is increasingly important in today’s educational environment. While it may be the case that many computers in the classrooms sit idle or are used for simple exercises, there is a growing movement to make use of computers to engage in authentic communication with native speakers. This type of communication is often referred to as Network-based Language Teaching, but is also called Computer-Mediated Communication. According to Richard Kern, “NBLT is language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either local or global networks. Whereas CALL

(Computer Assisted Language Learning) has traditionally been associated with self-contained, programmed applications such as tutorials, drill, simulations, instructional games, test, and so on, NBLT represents a new and different side of CALL, where human-to-human communication is the focus” (2000: 1).

Among the numerous potential benefits of CMC in comparison to the traditional role of computers in the classroom is that it may “enhance student motivation, supposedly by providing a less threatening means to communicate,” provide “stimulating international contact,” and “facilitate work on meaningful projects” (Warschauer 1996: 31). Orlando Kelm agrees with this notion, stating that “CMC’s create a natural language environment in that the conversations focus almost entirely on content” (1996: 21). According to Kern, this view also “shifts the dynamic from learners’ interaction *with* computers to interaction with other humans *via* the computer” (2000: 11). Whatever one’s feeling about the role of computers in the classroom, it is impossible to deny that many students are now making extensive use of them for communication outside of educational environments. This also holds true in the business world, where “E-mail is now surpassing face-to-face and telephone conversation as the most frequently used communication tool...” (Shetzer and Warschauer 2000: 171). Therefore, “if our goal is to help students enter into new authentic discourse communities, and if those discourse communities are increasingly located on-line, then it seems appropriate to incorporate on-line activities for their social utility as well as for their perceived particular pedagogical value” (Kern 2000: 13).

This article will describe a project which took advantage of the opportunities deriving from the Internet as a communicative tool, and furthermore, trained student teachers in those methods in order to perpetuate the use of the tools beyond the class. The project began as a collaboration between two university classes in the U.S. and Spain: one at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC); the other at the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona (UAB). The focus of the project was to potentialize the use of the Internet as a tool for student-centered collaborative projects, utilizing a variety of CMC tools, with a possible range including email, message boards, MOOs, text chat, audio chat, and video chat. Being a task-based approach in which a foreign language was the medium of communication, this inevitably produced other outputs and results, such as opportunities to explore cultural differences, cultural nuances and other social dimensions of the use of Internet-based communication. The students were able to focus on both their own culture and other cultures’ use of English and how a multicultural use of “international English” can pose problems for intercultural communication. The article will discuss the project design, implementation and student products and results, along with unexpected outcomes which are relevant to any future project along the same lines.

Brief outline of the participant profiles, project design and development

The project conception was largely due to a fortuitous meeting online between the two teachers involved. In fact, the entire project was designed and carried out through virtual contact and the two teachers did not actually meet face-to-face until after the project had ended. The class profiles were quite different, in terms of both student composition and subject matter. In the case of the UIUC participants, the 17 students were primarily MA TESOL students, with 3 Ph.D. students in Education. There was a high percentage of non-native English speakers (see Table 1) while all the 32 students at the UAB were non-native English speakers; out of these 32 students, only 23 remained in the class until the end of the course. In reference to UAB, the students were all undergraduate students working to become EFL teachers and were either in their 2nd or 3rd year of their first degree.

Table 1 The participants

	UAB	UIUC
Course title	Interlinguistics and International English	Computer-Mediated Communication
Student population	Education Students, 2 nd or 3 rd Year – Specializing in EFL	MATESOL students, with 3 Ph.D. students in Education
Number of students in course	34 Spain – 28 Czech Republic – 2 Belgium – 2 Norway – 2	17 Argentina – 1 Colombia – 1 Japan – 1 Korea – 6 Taiwan – 3 US – 5
Participants at start of Project	32	17
Participants at end of project	23	17

According to questionnaires filled out by the students before the project began, the students' knowledge of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools were quite similar in the more common areas of ICT skills such as use of emails, text chats and audio chats (see Table 2), however the use of video chats, message boards and MOOs was considerably lower for the UAB students.

Table 2 Student knowledge of ICT tools

ICT Tools	Percentage of participants familiar with ICT tools	
	UAB	UIUC
Email	23/23 (100%)	17/17 (100%)
Text Chat	20/23 (87%)	13/17 (76%)
Audio Chat	15/23 (65%)	8/17 (65%)
Video Chat	3/23 (13%)	8/17 (47%)
Message Boards	12/23 (52%) 2/23 used frequently (9%)	14/17 (82%) 4/17 used frequently (24%)
MOO	1/23 (4%)	4/17 (24%)

In designing the project, the most important principles underpinning the project were the (intercultural) Communicative Approach (Hymes, 1974), and an understanding of the need to prepare students for future needs (Belisle, 1996; Berenfeld, 1996). It was also felt that the emphasis must be on fluency first, and grammatical accuracy second. In order to promote student autonomy and ownership, the teachers decided to allow the students to decide the form of contact and topic which would be developed between the working groups.

The first steps included giving an explanation to each class about the opportunity to collaborate with students in another country. Expectations were discussed and possible topics of collaboration were suggested. The only requirement concerning the topics was that they

must deal in some way with language education or language acquisition. In order to facilitate the selection of working groups, the students in each class were asked to discuss topics of interest amongst themselves to form “local” working groups and then they posted their topics on a discussion board designed for this purpose. They were then expected to read the topics posted by the other class, match similar interests and get in touch with the students who had posted the message that they found to be most interesting and parallel to their own interests. This would then create the “global” working groups. Once these groups were formed, the students had to discuss, either by email, chat, or another ICT tool, the exact objectives of the collaborative project (active research about one of the ICT skills, applications of ICT to language learning, comparison of methodologies, etc.). They were also expected to work together online to design their collaborative project.

In the end, 10 collaborative projects were carried out, with topics ranging from “Computer Mediated Communication versus Computer Assisted Language Learning” to “E-tandem error corrections in transversal foreign language communication.” The amount of collaboration was equally diverse; some groups formed quite cohesive, collaborative partnerships whereas other groups did not seem to be able to reach much level of understanding between them. Possible factors for these diverse results and outcomes will be discussed in a further section of this article.

Unexpected outcomes and challenges

The means of communication between the global working groups can be divided into synchronous and asynchronous communication. In the case of synchronous communication, the principal challenge proved to be the busy schedules of the students, coupled with the difficulty of finding a suitable time for all involved, considering that there was a seven hour time difference. In many cases, the students were part-time students who also had work schedules and/or families, and the need to arrange for synchronous meetings around already difficult schedules seemed insurmountable at times. As one student from the UAB said, “Our greatest problem during the collaboration project was arranging meeting times, it was not possible because we all study and work and we do not have much free time.” These difficulties were exacerbated by conflicting holiday and semester schedules of the two classes. In their final reports, students from both groups mentioned the added difficulty of chatting with large groups (more than four), because it was difficult to know who was talking to whom. The lack of face-to-face nonverbal communication cues made interpretation of intended meaning completely textual and this proved difficult for some students, especially those who were non-native English speakers. Additional problems the students mentioned in their final reports dealt with a lack of punctuality in attending synchronized meetings (or not showing up at all) and problems with typing speed and language proficiency in the chat sessions. A student from UIUC said this:

My untimely responses sounded abrupt and stupid. Instead, I gave up sending my responses. Even when one question was addressed specially to a certain participant, other partners were in awkward position to jump in. It resembled the nature of multiple face-to-face conversation in terms of how to jump in and how to bid for turns.

As is the case with any Internet project, there were the inevitable technical glitches. These were especially evident in the case of synchronous communication because they could cause the entire collaborative session to collapse, something which would not necessarily happen with asynchronous communication. However, it must be mentioned that even with

asynchronous communication there were some technical problems mentioned such as emails which were immediately directed to “junk mail” and thus disregarded or students who did not use the “respond to all” button and thus delayed the flow of information between the global working groups. The lack of technical resources for the UAB students was also a hindrance for in-depth exploration into different ICT tools, a point mentioned by several of the UIUC students:

One goal for this project was to explore different CMC technologies. Even though I had all the equipment that I might need, including personal computer, webcam, headset and access to Internet at home, I couldn't try any other CMC technologies, except Email and MSN messenger because of the limited access to technologies that my Spanish partners had. (UIUC student).

Another issue mentioned by a number of students in both groups related to cultural misunderstandings. One UAB student found one of his counterparts used language which was quite offensive to him and another UAB student reported that her local group was surprised by the UIUC partner's attitude about work. A UIUC student stated that he felt frustrated because his UAB partner refused to state her mind: “Marta kept talking about very abstract thought without organizing her thought.” Also, many UIUC students were angered by perceived “impunctuality” of their Spanish counterparts and were noticeably indignant when some of the Spanish partners did not bother to “show up” for arranged online meetings. The actual use of the language also produced intercultural miscommunication as can be observed in this student's final report: “They did not use the polite expression of request, such as “Will you..?”, “Would you...?” or “We want you to do...”

Pedagogical Implications

One of the more relevant pedagogical issues was the obvious lack of ownership within the global working groups. In retrospect, it can be surmised that, while the desire to give the students liberty in the decision of their topics and working groups is a valid pedagogical approach, in the case of virtual collaboration wherein the students have had no previous contact there was simply not enough cohesion and contact for the roles which normally emerge in working groups to develop. Unless there was a person with an exceptionally strong personality, no “leader” emerged from the working groups. In fact, no one took the initiative to go beyond a polite contact with other members concerning topics (e.g. it seems interesting...) and the teachers had to intervene at that phase in the project to assign members to different groups and topics, based on the interests that they had ascribed to in the discussion board.

An associated pedagogical implication is the importance of interpersonal connections between the participants. It appears that the initial phase of “getting to know each other” is as necessary in virtual working groups as it is in face-to-face working groups. The groups which used “chats” to develop the collaborative projects eventually produced far more developed and indepth projects than the other groups and they also showed greater levels of enthusiasm for the entire project. Transcripts of their chat sessions indicate that they spent more time in “social exchanges” than the other groups and in some cases, the collaboration grew into solid relationships which continued even after the project had ended.

Another pedagogical factor which would require further exploration in the set up of a future project is the students' varying motivational levels. The initial enthusiasm in which the students from both classes began the project quickly waned among some when their

expectations concerning amount of contact, amount of collaboration and reciprocal interests and understandings were not met by their international partners. In some cases, students indicated in their final reports that they had felt frustrated and/or confused by their partners' lack of response or apparent apathy. One student stated, "Actually they were very enthusiastic at the beginning of the semester when they initiated this topic and posted many messages in the forum. However, as time went by and they got busier, they seemed to have less motivation to do this."

There were further implications which are related to the motivational levels of the students for this type of project. For instance, both teachers and students need to be fully aware of their capacities and limitations in material and human resources as far as ICT goes. Lack of awareness of this factor can have serious repercussions not only on the eventual success of the project but can also lead quickly to demotivation of the students if the expectations of the students' ICT skills are not realistic. The project itself must be designed to start from the students' knowledge and build from there, otherwise, as one student stated, "So far, computers and Internet connection is still privileged for certain social levels in certain countries. It is hard to argue whether utilizing CMC is empowering learners with new surviving skills, or widening the social gaps among learners." It should be noted, however, that the fact that the student came to realize this during the process of carrying out an ICT project is significant in itself because it demonstrates the kind of "lateral" learning and reflection which was taking place during the project.

As a counterpoint to apparent decreases in motivation in some of the groups, the groups which quickly established relationships and displayed consistent collaboration throughout the allotted period of time were also the groups with the highest level of motivation and enthusiasm. In this particular project, the groups with this profile were the groups which used Internet "chat" as their main tool of communication. While this study is much too small in numbers to be conclusive, it would seem to indicate that the groups which establish more "normalized" relationships involving at least some form of socialization tend to work more cohesively than the groups which do not allow time "to get to know each other". As a student very succinctly summarized the situation:

Finally, the most important implication is that building a relationship via CMC can really increase the motivation of a student. After I began building a relationship with Christian, I was much more motivated to complete the project. Furthermore, I was actually excited to discuss our assigned topic. This relationship proved to be a great tool in my learning about the topic.

On the whole, the students' final evaluation of the experience was extremely positive. One of the aspects the students from both groups evaluated most positively was the opportunity to contact people of their same field of study and with similar interests and enquiries. One UIUC student sums it up thus, "I had a good opportunity to meet qualified and filtered students living in outside the U.S., and learned their new cultures, school systems, interests, and even their religious perspective".

Pedagogical recommendations

Based on the transcripts, records of interactions, student questionnaires and students' final evaluations, we have been able to draw up some orientative points concerning the implementation of joint international virtual projects. These recommendations include the following:

- Collaborative projects must activate and integrate prior ICT knowledge.
- Tasks must have a concrete framework, with a clear purpose
- Tasks must be motivating and engaging
- Task instructions should be available to all students in various formats
- Cultural aspects of communication should be discussed
- Provide students with a “collaboration contract”
- Collaborative projects should include “getting to know each other” time

In retrospect, collaborative projects carried out via the Internet can and do provide students with new learning incentives, opportunities for “lateral” learning beyond language acquisition or ICT skills, provide access to new means of communication, establish lasting personal and professional relationships and explore intercultural aspects which emerge during their communication.

CMC seems to enhance intercultural understanding and motivation. In most cases, EFL students have not many chances to meet and chat with students in other countries (...) CMC can bridge the gaps between how students superficially perceive toward the target cultures and how they understand them through the voices of partners. (UIUC student)

The project was initially conceived from the inquietudes of two teachers who felt the need for imaginative pedagogical approaches which involved the use of ICT as a tool for facilitating *collaborative approaches* rather than *instructivist content driven models* which is quite often the main use of Internet for language teaching. The use of collaborative tools such as ICT can enhance processes of constructivist, collaborative learning by opening up an infinite number of opportunities to contact other people and explore and construct knowledge and experience together. As Westera and Sloep have pointed out, the Internet offers students boundless possibilities for exchange of ideas (Westera and Sloep 2001). The innovative teacher can help orient such opportunities for individual and collective construction of new knowledge and “new classrooms”.

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