"English notes filled with notes; a scenario for teaching English based on telecollaboration"

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to propose an indicative scenario for teaching English as a second language based on telecollaboration. The last is an alternative approach to teaching foreign languages and, besides target language skills, it is intended to promote electronic literacy, as well as intercultural awareness and communicative competence through authentic interaction mediated by technology. The scenario in question has been structured according to the detailed framework proposed by Kurek and Hauck (Kurek & Hauck, 2014) for training learners on using digital environments and modes while collaborating. It displays step by step how two cohorts of students guided by their instructors can collaborate online from distance in order to perform a joint task. Specifically, in our case two Greek State Music Schools are expected to telecollaborate deploying the English language with the aim to agree on the content, rehearse and finally coexist on stage in mixed student groups of both schools in order to present a joint art product consisting of poetry (in English) and music.

Keywords: scenario, telecollaboration, task, framework

Introduction

Telecollaboration or "virtual exchange" (Dooly & O' Dowd, 2018) is a network-based approach to foreign language teaching which emerged in the 1990s and is increasingly gaining ground due to its perceived advantages. Drawing on O'Dowd and Waire (2009), the benefits attributed to telecollaboration are multiple. First of all, learners from different regions develop linguistic accuracy and fluency in the target language through authentic interaction. In the author's view, this approach -when integrated alternatively or supplementarily in the foreign language class- is likely to trigger them more than a form of learning based exclusively on a traditional coursebook or school context. What is more, students are aided to develop electronic literacy, as they are engaged in handling electronic settings, tools and modes of communication (Hauck, 2010b). In this way they prepare to face the challenges of a demanding digital era, in which managing electronic settings and their affordances has become as important as handling a pen used to be for someone who wishes to be considered literate. Last but not least, they are offered the opportunity to familiarize themselves with elements from other cultures and to acquire intercultural communicative competence so as to share experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings with peers from disperse parts of the world.

The present telecollaborative scenario is not an intercultural exchange, therefore it is not focused on sharing cultural elements with partners from different countries. Instead, it is designed with the aim to potentially involve two Greek State Music Schools, indicatively those placed in two neighbouring towns, the Music School of Drama and the Music School of Kavala. However, it is expected to boost authentic interaction in the target language (English) based on a task related to a field of the students' interest and love, music. In addition, it is hoped to guide learners to skillfully manage electronic environments and thereby achieve online communicative competence, a type of knowledge which will definitely not be utilized solely for the sake of the present task. Finally, it is thought to reinforce the bonds between two institutes belonging to a special category of secondary schools and sharing a common ideological and aesthetic orientation.

1. Context and rationale of the exchange

1.1. Participants

Two English teachers (one per each school) are expected to be in charge of guiding and organizing this telecollaboration. The two student cohorts to be involved in the exchange are two groups of twelve 16-year-old first grade senior high school students. The two student groups are invited to telecollaborate in English (their target language) in order to organize and finally publicly present an event including poetry in English combined with music. The students' level in target language ranges from upper intermediate to proficiency. The exchange is to last two months (from March 1st to April 30th) and the event can potentially take place in the Concert Hall of the Music School of Drama at the end of the school year. Music Schools, especially the ones that are regionally close, are accustomed to presenting a music event together at some time throughout the school year, but each giving an individual music performance on stage as a part of this event. In the present case, the two Music Schools are expected to be involved in the aforementioned event by coexisting on stage in mixed student groups, after they have decided on the nature of the content to be included and gone through a series of rehearsals by interacting in the target language (English) via a variety of digital settings, tools and modes.

1.2. Technology to be used

Students are invited to select from choices proposed such as: BigBlueButton, FlashMeeting or other similar platforms, Skype, a wiki, a blog, Facebook or other social media, Cam Studio program, Audacity program, websites, YouTube, e.t.c.

1.3. Goals of the exchange

-To promote the idea of telecollaboration and a sense of community between two schools

sharing a common ideological and aesthetic orientation (love for art, especially music).

-To enhance target language (English) through authentic interaction including self or group context-specific as well as free expression, by making use of online environments and modes.

-To develop a cross-curricular approach of learning, relating four different subjects, namely English, literature, computer science and music.

2. Stages and sub-stages of the scenario

2.1. First stage: Informed reception

Objectives

- To familiarize students with the process of telecollaboration and multimodal communication through a model virtual exchange.

- To help students reflect on how telecollaboration can be applied to their expected task.

2.1.1. Cognitive level

In class (face-to-face) each of the instructors familiarizes their students with relevant electronic environments, modes and tools through which telecollaboration can be effected. They show their students a couple of recorded teleconferences taking place on well known digital platforms such as Big Blue Button and/or Flash Meeting. They explain the procedure through which people in videos participate in the teleconferences, that is the online conventions they have to abide by, the affordances each platform provides and the multimodal online alternatives participants are offered in order to make meaning. Also, they refer to common everyday means like blogs, wikis and social media which can additionally be deployed for the implementation of their task. Finally, they thoroughly explain the task in which the students are invited to engage. Specifically, the students are expected to communicate in English through all modes and settings available, in order to organize and present an event including poetry in English combined with music. For instance, they have to agree on the content of the poetry to be included in the event (the theme, the creators, the period of reference, whether it is going to be translated or original, if students' creations are to be included e.t.c) as well as the kind of music intended to accompany the poetry.

2.1.2. Social level

The instructors explain to the participants that they are expected to be divided in groups of four (two members from the Music School of Drama and two from the Music School of Kavala) and inform them of the constitution of their group, for which they need to think of a name. They notify the students of the online support and/or constructive criticism they have to

be providing their group and the other groups throughout the implementation of their task.

2.1.3. Discursive level

After watching the recorded teleconferences previously mentioned, the students discuss in class how online conventions can be achieved and in which ways interaction and negotiation of meaning can be effected e.g. how someone asks for the right to speak, how they quit a conversation, how they negotiate meaning online and in which ways participants in the videos have or haven't been responsive to the utterances of their interlocutors and able to maintain discussion.

2.1.4. Operational level

After the presentation of a plurality of e-settings, modes and tools, instructors prompt the students' reflection on what online means of expression they would choose as most appropriate or helpful for the implementation of the different parts and aspects of their own task to be performed.

2.2. Second stage: Thoughtful participation in opinion-generating acts

Objective

-To enhance context-specific L2 production through authentic online interaction

2.2.1. Cognitive level

Students are expected to collaborate online practicing what they have learnt in theory, in other words they have to handle electronic environments, modes and tools in the right way so as to make meaning and at the same time abide by online conventions. They set a particular day on which they have to attend a teleconference on a digital platform every week. The two instructors coordinate online conferences by keeping turns, aiding in case of technical difficulties and managing well-organized conversations on a weekly basis. Students are expected to know how to handle the affordances of all electronic settings in use (the ones they have chosen) in order to successfully provide positive or negative feedback to the members of their group and/or to other groups by commenting on their ideas and thoughts.

2.2.2. Social level

Each group needs to come to an agreement within the group itself first, concerning the kind of poetry and music to be included in general terms, by using an easy and immediate means like, for instance, Skype. Then, a representative of each group will report the group's ideas in the

scheduled weekly teleconference. Supplementarily, in case there are more issues to be clarified, different representatives will post their group's main ideas on a social medium like Facebook, receiving and providing support and/or constructive criticism.

2.2.3. Discursive level

At this level students, following their instructors' guidance, try to be as responsive and context-specific as possible, by explicitly expressing themselves orally in teleconferences, as well as by writing on a social medium like Facebook. Members of groups are expected to persuade the other groups of what themes or creators should be included in the poetry to be presented and what kind of music would most appropriately accompany this poetry. The coordinators (instructors) raise new topics of discussion, aid in the smooth transition from one topic to the other, prompt discussion by providing some key words or hints and offer help in cases of misunderstandings and problems in communication. In face-to-face classes students have already been taught language related to poetry and music (e.g. periods in literature, literary genres, music terms e.t.c) as well as the language functions of agreeing, disagreeing, suggesting, justifying and negotiating meaning. This kind of language is expected to be used in the oral (through Skype and Big Blue Button) and written (through Facebook) communication. Also, students can present specific short texts they have written in order to introduce or link poems, asking for their colleagues' feedback. These texts may be written in a romantic, humorous or witty way and students need to decide whether they are compatible with the content or mood of the poems that precede or follow.

2.2.4. Operational level

Students are expected to provide their colleagues with samples of poetry and music they would like to include in the event by posting authentic videos (e.g. from YouTube) that have drawn their attention, on their Facebook page. Additionally, they can use Cam Studio program in order to present their colleagues with a part of their group's online rehearsal via Skype. In particular, students can present (short at this level) videos showing, for instance, part of a recitation of a poem accompanied with a guitar or a dialogue intended to smoothly introduce a particular poem, by posting the relevant videos on Facebook. In all cases, the aim is to elicit context-specific feedback from the other teams on the appropriacy of the content presented and/or the students' performance.

2.3. Third stage: Creative contribution

Objective

- To promote individual and joint creation by making use of multimodal ways of expression.

2.3.1. Cognitive level

Participants make use of all electronic environments chosen in order to reveal their creations.

2.3.2. Social level

All students are inspired by everyone's ideas, written texts or performances and offer their personal contribution by adding or adapting in an oral or written way. Everyone is oriented to the fulfillment of their common goal: the organization of an unforgettable event, full of art. Each member provides support and constructive criticism to their group first, and each group to the other groups.

2.3.3. Discursive level

Each group member contributes to his/her group's collaborative written creations by writing original ideas in a wiki or transforming (adding, subtracting, replacing or adapting) parts of the already existing ones. Such creations could be translations of poems in English, students' original poems or short texts intended to introduce or link poems. Students are triggered by their colleagues' inspiration channeled into texts and elaborate on what has already been written in order to turn it into something even more inspiring.

2.3.4. Operational level

Students can use Cam Studio program to present their colleagues with videos of their rehearsals on Skype. These videos can be posted on a social medium or blog to elicit peer feedback. Moreover, they can record their personal or joint attempts of reading out a poem, carrying out a dramatized dialogue or playing music, by using Audacity program and present the recorded performances to their fellow students to reflect upon. Finally, all students can have their final joint performance on stage recorded and the relevant video uploaded on a social medium of their choice. In this way, they will be able to capture this experience and their peers' reactions for ever.

Conclusion

Leveraging telecollaboration for language education has undoubtedly drawn researchers' attention and a multitude of research projects have indicated certain promising findings in the field. Nevertheless, the defining pedagogical decisions, principles and/or methodology underlying the design of tasks on which virtual exchanges are based, remain underexplored (Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Hauck, 2010a; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). In the author's view, the attentive design of telecollaborative tasks is of paramount importance and can determine to a great extent the overall success of such endeavors as well as the achievement of specific

learning objectives that need to be focused on. A variety of factors like the learners' needs and interests, prior knowledge as well as cultural characteristics and preferences should be taken into consideration. Additionally, a discreet but carefully organized guidance following a well-suited methodology oriented to the fulfillment of concrete educational goals would be opportune.

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