Culture in the EFL Classroom through Technology:

the Use of Telecollaboration

Dr. Anissa Khaldi

Department of English, Tlemcen University, Algeria

Abstract:

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed an increasing need for intercultural communication in English, which has led to the rise of a new pedagogy focusing on developing EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence. With the emergence of the internet as a tool of communication, researchers have started to explore ways to supplement traditional classroom activities. Hence, telecollaboration has been introduced to link EFL learners and teachers from different cultures through the internet for communicative interactions. The present article discusses the pedagogy of telecollaboration, highlighting the activities that can be used in the EFL classroom, as well as issues related to assessing intercultural communicative competence.

Key words: culture, EFL, technology, telecollaboration.

Introduction

Developments in business, industry, and increased human mobility lead to extensive intercultural interactions, arguably, resulting in a greater number of learners whose overriding aim is to be able to communicate effectively in cross-cultural contexts. For this reason, foreign language education has been concerned with intercultural communicative competence. A recent trend has been using online communication technologies to bring the foreign society into the classroom for learners through interacting with groups of other cultures using online collaborative projects (Byram et al., 2001). This intercultural interaction seeks to help learners develop the ability to mediate between different cultural perspectives in real communicative situations. There is evidence that this technology-mediated communication has effects on cultural acquisition, increased students' motivation and participation (Guarrett-Rucks, 2014).

Intercultural Communicative Competence

EFL learners are now viewed as intercultural speakers who should have the ability to interpret L2 texts, behaviours, events, and interactions within culturally appropriate contexts. They should also possess the ability to view the self through the eyes of the other: an act of psychological de-centring which may lead to a critical assessment of one's taken-for-granted

world. Such abilities are often expressed in the concept of intercultural communicative competence, which is viewed as encompassing two major broad aspects: linguistic and cultural (Byram, 1997). The former includes the following subcompetences:

linguistic competence (i.e., the ability to produce and interpret spoken and written language using knowledge of the rules in that language), sociolinguistic competence (that is, the ability to understand what the interlocutor takes for granted), discourse competence (i.e., the ability to use the strategies for the production and interpretation of texts). The cultural aspect includes attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness/political education. Attitudes refer to openness and readiness to suspend negative attitudes about foreign cultures and beliefs about one's culture. Knowledge is described in terms of knowledge of social groups, their practices and interaction patterns. Skills are of two types: skills of interpreting and relating (that is, the ability to interpret the target culture, to explain it and relate it to one's own) and skills of discovery and interaction, i.e., the ability to learn knowledge of the target culture and the ability to use knowledge, attitudes and skills in communication). Finally, critical cultural awareness/political education entails an ability to evaluate critically practices in one's own and other cultures.

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Telecollaboration

One way to develop inter cultural communicative competence is through engaging learners in online intercultural exchanges, i.e., telecollaboration. It is viewed as "the use of Internet communication tools (e.g. e-mail, chat, blogs, videoconferencing) to link linguistically and culturally disparate groups of language learners and teachers in institutionalised settings for the purposes of (bilingual) social interaction and project-based intercultural collaboration" (Belz 2007: 127). Online collaborative exchanges have begun since the early 1990s. With the appearance of journals dedicated to technology and language learning, the publication of articles about telecollaboration has dramatically increased. They tackle issues such as: the extent to which telecollaboration contributes to the development of intercultural awareness and learner autonomy, the way tasks should be structured so as to encourage and support interaction and language learning (O'Dowd, 2007).

Some Pedagogical Principles

In order to implement intercultural language teaching and learning, Liddicoat (2011) suggests some principles that provide a starting point for the EFL teacher. They are:

1. Active construction: Learning is an active construction of meaning.

2. Making connections: Connections should be made between previous knowledge and experiences on the one hand and new knowledge and experiences on the other hand. This process helps students connect, re-organise, and extend their information.

3. Interaction: communicating interculturally means continuously developing one's own understanding of the relationship between one's own framework of language and culture and that of others.

4. Reflection: Learning involves becoming aware of how individuals think, know, learn about language and culture, as well as understanding the relationship between them. Thus, learners' attitudes and values should become intercultural over time.

5. Responsibility: Learner autonomy in this context means that learners have to decide on, and be clear about their goals and their preferred means for achieving them. In order to sustain the learning goal, they must also monitor and evaluate both objectives and means, being prepared to change both of them in the light of experience.

The aforementioned principles should be applied when engaging learners in online intercultural communicative activities. Examples of such activities are discussed in the following section.

Telecollaboration-based Tasks

In many telecollaborative partnerships learners are instructed using a series of teacher-guided tasks, such as construction of websites, culture surveys, communication writing.

Construction of Websites

In this activity, individual or groups of learners prepare websites containing a 'web-biography' in order to introduce themselves and aspects of their university life to their foreign partners (Belz, 2007). When constructing 'web-biographies', learners need to prepare drafts and receive extensive feedback from their teachers on the target language (e.g. vocabulary and grammar needed to use to convey the information). In case students want to add images in the websites, teachers should make learners aware that such images contribute to the identities that they construct and present to their partners. Hence, the images should carefully be selected. Before getting in touch with their partners, learners might need to be familiar with some conversational styles that exist in different cultures such as taboo topics and politeness, and some language functions such as how to ask questions and clarification requests.

Once learners have exchanged initial messages with their partners, teachers should organise a session in which students introduce their foreign partners to their classmates at the home location. This activity will give students a chance to practice language functions related to personal introductions, and to make comparisons between their own lives and those of their

partners. In order to prepare for this session, learners can fill out a worksheet containing prompts like the following ones: "(1) My partner(s) is (are) called . . . ; (2) She/he (they) is (are) from . . . ; (3) In the first e-mail my partner(s) . . . ; (4) I was surprised because . . . ; (5) In my response to my partner's/partners' first e-mail . . . ; and (6) In my opinion . . ." (Belz, 2007, p.142).

Cultural Surveys

A survey is of a list of teacher-formulated questions designed to deal with various cultural points. The aim is to provide learners with factual knowledge concerning the beliefs, practices, meanings and values of his learners and their partners. Topics of surveys may revolve around issues like: politeness, social behaviours, everyday life, etc. The following questions are taken from a cultural survey of an exchange between students at the University of South Florida in the USA and the Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport in Alexandria, Egypt:

1. Is it absolutely necessary for you to obtain your family's approval of the person you want to marry? Explain.

2. Do you think women should have the right to have an abortion? Explain.

3. Do you think it is ok for one to marry one's cousin? Explain.

4. Do you think elderly people should be sent to nursing homes or live with their families? Explain.

5. What do you think about people who have sex before marriage?

(cited in Belz, 2007, p.146).

Questions may also encompass hypothetical situations. The survey should be posted online so that learners answer the questions conveniently, and all responses should be available online. For example, the responses to each question can be displayed in a table where the left-hand column represents answers from Group A and the right-hand column represents answers from Group B. After that, learners reflect on similarities and differences both within and across groups, and prepare a summary for the online intercultural discussion of the survey's results.

Communication Writing Activities

These activities encompass: writing a specific genre, parallel texts, and projects. As far as the first type is concerned, students write on specific genres such as a travel brochure about a country's monuments. Alternatively, learners may be instructed to work on a genre transformation activity (Ware and Canado, 2007) which entails reading a text dealing with a cultural point, and rewriting it in a different genre (e.g., letter to a friend, newspaper story, fiction story etc.). The first step in communication activities is that partners should agree on the

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theme, they have to select and organise the necessary material, brainstorm their ideas, prepare drafts. During this process, teachers should monitor learners' work, guiding them through the writing processes, helping them with style, syntax, and vocabulary when necessary.

Parallel texts task requires both groups of learners to read parallel stories or short texts about the same theme. Learners should prepare a summary about comparison of cultural beliefs and practices. Teachers design worksheet of cultural differences to be under focus to help learners in their preparation. Teachers should make sure that learners know some language functions such as expressing opinions, making comparisons, and using literary terms like plot, character, setting. Finally, the last activity in telecollaborative exchanges to is usually working on projects (Belz, 2007). Each pair of partners chooses a topic that arises in the course of the intercultural exchanges to prepare a project.

Assessing Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence

Teachers can examine to what extent their students are developing intercultural communicative competence with reference to the linguistic and cultural components of this competence (Byram,1997). Teachers need to understand very clearly the construct of this type of competence, in order to achieve validity. Formative assessment can be done through examining the content of students' correspondence with their partners, the activities learners are instructed to do (writing, projects…), and students' diaries to find out learners' progress. Summative assessment should also focus on testing learners' knowledge, attitudes, and skills to interpret and analyse the intercultural events into which they were engaged, during the telecollaboration events. In a telecollaborative project, which took place during the academic year 2005-2006, Vinagre (cited in Vinagre, 2007) asked students to regularly write about vocabulary (making note of the new words learnt from the partner), errors (noting the errors that the partner corrects), culture (writing aspects related to the partner's culture and way of life, and comparing them with one's own as well as giving opinions briefly). The diary had to be handed to assess learners.

Conclusion

Advances in internet communication technologies have enabled intercultural interaction between different groups of learners from around the world, for the purpose of developing intercultural communicative competence. Telecollaboration is an authentic and effective way for providing learners with an enriching experience of foreign language and culture learning. Learners critically explore their culture and other cultures through engaging in a number of

communicative tasks using the foreign language. This online intercultural exchange is guided by pedagogical principles like: meaning construction, interaction, reflection, and responsibility.

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