When Three Cultures Meet: Enhancing Intercultural Communication Through Virtual Story Telling

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ABSTRACT

The study includes the use of technology to offer opportunities for international collaboration and learning among the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), Spain; the Macquarie University (MU) in Sydney, Australia; and the University of British Columbia in the Okanagan (UBC Okanagan), Canada. These institutions have come together to facilitate virtual encounters among the Spanish, the Australian and the Canadian culture. The proposed program provides more varied forms of study that are venue-independent with more personalized opportunities for the students. The initiative aims to follow latest methodological trends such as the promotion of autonomous learning, self-assessment and peer-assessment as well as the incorporation of new technologies to the learning process. Students will learn not only about writing and speech but also about how to question the effects of globalization, intercultural communication examining their assumptions of technology, culture and location. Hence emphasizing the analysis of culture will let the students understand the contextual and situated nature of communication processes. In such encounters, the ultimate goal is to raise culture awareness and inspire linguistic confidence in the students. In turn, by sharing experiences with each other via e-mail or Skype, it is expected that their knowledge of English and Spanish respectively will improve.

Key words: Innovation, second language learning, virtual exchange, new trends in education, international cooperation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Current perspectives on how students learn have resulted in significant redirections in establishing learning environments, and the Information Age has provided an excellent means for teachers to create virtual spaces for students to learn. (Garcia-Perez, 2011b, 2011c, and 2008; Niess et. al, 2008; Niess, 2005; Dede, 2004a; and 2004b). Virtual encounters not only reduce communicative distances between people, but they can also serve as a tool to enhance language proficiency and develop intercultural awareness in Second Language Teaching and Learning (SLTL).

Contemporary universities operate within a dynamic, international, global community, and the desire of students to learn a second language, and function in a foreign culture has become evident over the past few years (Lupart, 2009; Hoff and Paige, 2008; and Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2005). Being aware of the cultural diversity of the communities around the world and being able to work and study within such diversity is of vital importance for the formation of global citizens (García-Pérez, and McLeod, 2010; García-Pérez, and Ragoonaden, 2009; Derwing, et. al., 2009; and Cohen, et. al, 2003).

Second language teachers usually speak to diversity in their classrooms in order to promote intercultural awareness among students (García-Pérez, 2011a, 2011c, and 2008; Egbo, 2009; Hernández Sheets, 2005; Banks, 2004; and Gay 2000); however in many cases, direct exposure to the foreign culture is missing from second language curriculums. Making assumptions about what people from other cultures are trying to say can lead to erroneous conclusions. Intercultural sensitivity, that is "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" and intercultural competence, that is the "ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways, are central to understanding and improving relations across cultures in a globalised world (Bennett, 2007; Taylor & Francis, 2005; Bennett, et. al., 2004a; 2004b; and Hammer et. al., 2003).

In recent years SLTL have been giving particular attention to the understanding of how language and culture work (Holmes, 2008; Watanabe, 2008; and Utley, 2002). In particular, special emphasis has been placed on the relationship of language competence and intercultural encounters. From a SLTL point of view, this can have both practical and theoretical implications. In theory, teachers could determine variables that develop intercultural competence which consequently facilitate second language learning. In practice, they can develop practical ways to help the students be linguistically prepared for intercultural encounters.

Using a case study to explore the impact of virtual encounters with a focus on the development of language-culture awareness, this investigation will both assess the effectiveness and explore the nuances of an innovative integrated learning approach. More specifically its objective is to develop a program of learning that links second language learning with intercultural contacts in a virtual way. The impact of the proposed learning model will then be assessed.

Context

Successful second language acquisition is of outmost importance in this type of study, since communication is central to understanding and acquiring intercultural knowledge. (Paige, 2006; Bonvillain, 2003; and Utley, 2002). The assumption is that language and culture acquisition are interrelated and interactive. The creation of a community of learning sharing a common goal may be crucial to attain the proposed goal, and the students' learning will be shaped by the completion of the assignments they are invited to do.

The framework of the study is based on The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). This model was created by Milton Bennett in 1986 and further developed in 1993 as an explanation of how people construe cultural difference (Hammer, et. al., 2003). It is a theoretical framework used for conceptualizing intercultural sensitivity and competence. Bennett's observations of intercultural adaptation

allowed him to identify six orientations that people seem to move through in their acquisition of intercultural competence.

In the first three stages of the model (Denial, Defence, Minimization) the individuals experience their culture as central to reality. Denial of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is seen as the only one. Defence against cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture may be perceived to the only real viable one. A variation of defence is reversal where an adopted culture is experienced as superior to the culture of one's primary socialization. Minimization of cultural difference is the state in which elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal.

In the final three stages (Acceptance, Cognitive and Behavioural adaptation, and Integration) the individual's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. Acceptance of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. Adaptation to cultural difference is the state in which the experience of another culture produces perception and behaviour appropriate to that culture. Integration of cultural difference is the state in which one's experience of self is expanded to include movement in and out of different cultural worldviews and one acquires bi-cultural competence.

This six stage developmental model provided conceptual guidance for the construction of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) developed by Hammer in 1998. The IDI is a statistically reliable, cross-culturally valid measure of an individual's and a group's intercultural competence used to measure orientations toward cultural differences. It is comprised 50 statements with an additional 10 demographic items (which could be changed according to the characteristics of the population) to which participants rate their agreement or disagreement on a five point Likert scale. Factor analyses indicate that the items are highly reliable (alpha coefficients of 0.80 or higher). Both the content and construct validity of the IDI have been addressed. The content validity has been addressed through in-depth interviews conducted with people from a variety of cultures. The construct validity of the IDI has been confirmed through the relationship between the respondents' scores for the DD (Denial & Defence), R (Reversal), M (Minimization), AA (Acceptance & Adaptation), and EM scales to two theoretically related variables: World mindedness and Intercultural Anxiety. Overall, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis completed as part of the development of a revised IDI instrument indicate that a five factor solution (DD, R, M, AA, and EM scales) provides a good fit for the data (Hammer, et. al., 2003).

This project is unique because it is based on a model that will test the hypothesis that the development of intercultural awareness, language proficiency, and the diversity of learning environments are synergistic. If a rigorous inter-cultural virtual learning experience has a positive result in both the IDI and language proficiency, there will be a clear impetus to create new research, and indeed new educational programming, to shape and augment this effect.

Background

The promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity in the European Union (EU) has been in progress over the last years. More particularly, since 1995 the White Paper on Teaching and Training has urged EU citizens to attain language proficiency in two languages different from their mother tongue. This implied a multilingual perspective on linguistic development, and a total rethinking of language training programmes across Europe. As a consequence, the UPM encouraged its graduates to obtain a good level of proficiency in the English Language, first, because there was a growing demand in the workplace; and second, because it is nowadays a basic requirement for engineers, architects, scientists and researchers all around the world.

One of the measures to promote language learning, development and proficiency in the UPM is the 'B2 accreditation requirement'. This means that UPM graduates have to prove that they can use the necessary language skills specified in the Common European Framework for Languages (Little, 2001) as a basic condition to obtaining their degree. The level required is B2 (equivalent to Cambridge First Certificate in English or, more generally, to an upper intermediate level).

At present, students need to submit an official B2 certificate prior to registering in *'English for Professional and Academic Communication'*, a new compulsory and transferable subject in all UPM Schools and Faculties. To help students achieve the B2 level, one of the steps that was launched in October 2010 at Escuela Universitaria de Arquitectura Técnica de Madrid (EUATM), now School of Building Engineering, was a virtual exchange program between the UPM and the Macquarie University (Fernández, et. al., 2011). This was done in order to promote and facilitate not only linguistic knowledge but also intercultural diversity through academic interaction. More specifically, the School of Building Engineering and the Macquarie University in Sydney aimed at fostering the students' knowledge of the second language (L2) learning (English/Spanish), by means of exchanging successful communication in the students' target language.

The project included two target groups: 25 UPM first and second year students of the Building Engineering Degree, and 25 Macquarie University partners in the Department of International Studies at the intermediate and advanced level for a total of 50 partnerships (or matching). The students were tutored by 5 lecturers in the UPM and by 3 lecturers in the Macquarie University. All assignments in both institutions were compulsory as they were part of the course evaluation.

The procedure was based on establishing one-to-one matches, or partnerships, between Spanish and Australian students with a view to improving the four main linguistic skills, that is, reading, writing, listening and speaking, and also to promoting the intercultural and socio-linguistic competences. On the first stage, students from both universities engaged on a variety of written assignments graded according to their language proficiency level; then they sent their work to their respective virtual mates who in turn gave them feedback on their linguistic production. Following positive outcomes in previous similar studies, this was finally assessed by the tutors in both universities (Paige and Stallman, 2007; Tudor, 2001; and Porter; 1997).

In the final stages of the project the Spanish and Australian students enjoyed the activity so much that some of them continued their relationship beyond the project requirements. Moreover, all students experienced and valued the benefits and challenges of working in collaborative groups across space and

time, and expressed their willingness to contact other students from other parts of the world.

With this in mind, UBC Okanagan, in Canada, has been invited to participate in this stage of the project. The Spanish program in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies (FCCS) at the University of British Columbia in the Okanagan (UBC Okanagan) mostly attracts students who may want to satisfy the language other than English requirement and to a lesser extent, students who may be pursuing a major or minor in Spanish. In addition to language skills, students pursuing a B.A. in Spanish are presented with literary master pieces of Spain and Spanish American, and acquire a basic understanding of the Spanish and Latin American culture.

The language-learning aspect of the program covers practical skills and daily application of Spanish, as well as skills that are transferable to a work environment and an academic setting. After completing Span-101, Span-102, Span-201 and Span-204 the students should be fluent enough to carry out a conversation in Spanish. This is achieved through courses in grammar, conversation and translation. Also, students have the option of spending a semester abroad studying and experiencing life in a Spanish-speaking environment. The program follows a standard university four-year B.A. structure and length (four years, eight terms, 120 credits) and offers between 19 and 20 courses per school year plus 2 first and 2 second year language courses in the summer. Because of the characteristics of the program and because of its commitment to creating opportunities for students to participate in international types of learning, we thought it could be a perfect addition to this project.

One of the most important drawbacks encountered during the initial launching of the project was general coordination of activities and Skype encounters. The fact that the participating universities are located in different, and quite distant, hemispheres, with different time zones and different academic year programmes, made it difficult to meet deadlines for the assigned tasks. Considering this, we intend to include a more flexible and doable program that leaves a more spaced timeframe for the completion of the activities.

2. METHODOLOGY

We expect that by developing the intercultural competence of the students learning Spanish at UBC Okanagan and the Macquarie University in Sydney (Australia), and English at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, their language proficiency will improve. We also expect that by providing the students with virtual intercultural encounters their intercultural awareness will be raised. We will use an experimental design with a pre-test/post test procedure in order to determine the subjects' intercultural and language proficiency before and after a guided program virtual encounters. The intercultural development and language proficiency of the participants undergoing the program of language-culture learning will be compared with that of a control group of language learners (in the three locations) undergoing more traditional language instruction.

Participants

Twenty Canadian and twenty Australian adult students enrolled at the intermediate Spanish Language Program at UBC Okanagan, in Canada; and at the Macquarie University, in Australia; and fourty adult Spanish students enrolled at the intermediate English Language Program at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, in Spain will be grouped into three experimental groups and three control groups. After a virtual 'get to know each other' activity, the experimental groups will receive a guided program of virtual encounters requesting information on early events in each country, national creatures, accomplishments, famous peoples, global connections, provinces and territories, traditions, and national holidays. Through virtual story-telling, the students will provide their counterparts with the requested information. The control groups will receive a regular on-campus language class.

Procedure

The procedure below will be subject to input from Ethics review at the three institutions. We anticipate the following: Students will be invited to attend an information session in their respective institutions where the objectives of the study will be explained. Those interested, will be asked to sign a consent form; then, complete a language background questionnaire and complete a language proficiency test. The students will then be asked to complete the IDI online for a small fee of $10 USD.

The students will be randomly assigned to the experimental groups and control groups. The students in the experimental groups will be provided with a guided program of virtual encounters while the control groups will receive regular in campus language class. At the end of the school semester, all participants will be requested to complete both the language proficiency test and the IDI one more time. A direct comparison between the two variables (group: experimental and control and time: before and after) will be established for the proficiency tests and correlation scores will be measured between the IDI and the proficiency test. If this inter-cultural virtual learning experience has a positive result in both the IDI and language proficiency, there will be a clear impetus to create new research, and indeed new educational programming, to shape and augment this effect.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Universities around the world are looking for ways to give their students a more international training in order to prepare them for a future that will increasingly involve global problems and partnerships. However, the fact is that exchange programs are expensive and difficult to handle. One way to offset the costs of such programs is by implementing virtual encounters meant to supplement the physical mobility models.

In Second Language Teaching, these programs can offer more varied forms of study that can be shorter, time-specific and venue-independent. Besides, they can provide the students with a more personalised and specialised opportunities. This type of virtual learning environment provides a different dimension of mobility, and also facilitates international collaborative work between faculty members in different countries and with different academic cultures: they can share their views regarding their student-centred pedagogic styles.

The reality is that planning of assignments and in-class instruction is time consuming because of the detailed nature of the program. In addition, the pedagogic style demanded in this type of teaching is structurally different from the traditional pedagogic style where the instructor is the focus of students' attention. In this type of environment, participants gain a sense

of ownership when they are asked to give feedback to their pen pals. Through virtual interactions, they start to feel a sense of learning community: groups sharing the same values who are actively learning together from each other. At the same time, they may become more aware of their own language development and of the problems they have with grammar and pronunciation, and start being more conscious of the mistakes they make. As students are cultural ambassadors of the country they represent, their cultural awareness augments as they exchange views related to the commonalities and differences of the cultures they share. Besides this ultimate goal, it is expected that by sharing experiences with each other via e-mail or Skype, their knowledge of English and Spanish respectively will improve.

This initiative aims to follow latest methodological trends such as the promotion of autonomous learning, self-assessment and peer-assessment. The problems related to defining and convincingly laying out the outcomes for classes/projects that use technological environments in conjunction with student-centred pedagogy are a challenge faced by many instructors who attempt to apply new technologies in an effort to enhance student interaction, creativity, and learning.

In view of all the above, it can be concluded that this kind of project demands innovation and creative responses. Through the implementation of virtual partnerships students can enhance their linguistic skills and reinforce their self-confidence in the use of native and foreign languages; furthermore, they can learn and become aware of the effects of globalization and the need for a more open attitude toward intercultural diversity, different university background cultures and technological progress. Finally, this project can promote life-long friendship and learning overcoming time and space restrictions.

The present virtual exchange program is expected to be extremely valuable for students on the three participating universities. It is hoped that it will help them to further engage with their learning process through communication with English/Spanish native speakers, thus increasing student interest by exchanging experiences, and developing cooperative learning skills. Furthermore, students could benefit from this project since it will provide them with, not only the basic ability to employ innovative and modern communication hardware and software, but also to develop self-teaching and self-learning skills that are highly demanded in all workplaces.

To sum up, project acts as a model for sustainability innovation and language/culture engagement because the students are exposed to the language with native speakers, and are provided with cultural encounters at no cost: they do not need to travel to get exposure to language or culture. While Spanish, Australian and Canadian students experience and value the benefits and challenges of virtually working in collaborative groups across the world, they will be opening a window for intercultural communication.

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