

ON BLENDED LEARNING: JAPANESE AND ROMANIAN TELECOLLABORATION – POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES

Andreea NECHIFOR¹

Abstract: *The aim of the present paper is to analyse the outcomes of a project based on telecollaboration, as the basic teaching tool, belonging to a blended learning approach to teaching, in terms of student satisfaction against the degree of novelty that such a method entangles. The research is based on the opinions expressed by the direct participants in the exchange, students in the second year of study from the previous academic year, and represents part of a greater analysis considering that the project is still unfolding and that a new series of students, whose opinions are yet to be measured, have meanwhile participated in it. The conclusions of the study can be summoned under the positive side and reflect the opinion of the majority of the subjects interrogated proving once again the appreciation that modern teaching methods and techniques enjoy nowadays among students.*

Key words: *blended learning, telecollaboration, joint curricula, students, outcomes.*

1. Introduction

The project that this paper is based on started last year, in 2014, as a result of a fruitful collaboration, in terms of conference bonding and professional sympathy, between *Transilvania* University of Braşov, Faculty of Letters, and Otaru University of Commerce in Japan, represented, at the time of the 12th proceedings of the Conference on British and American Studies, by Ph.D. Daniela Caluianu. Reference to this project was made in *Transilvania* University's Newsletter, June 2014 issue [13] and interest was manifested in it immediately after its release, by members of the teaching staff belonging to both universities.

It all began from the desire to develop a joint audacious project which would offer students a new perspective over the teaching process and which would open not only minds, but also hearts. Eventually, the team welcomed more members, as professor John Thurman the leader of Otaru University's blended learning project suggested including the telecollaboration idea into the wider frame of the project managed by him in order for the participants to be able to benefit from all the aspects that a blended learning concept entangles: technical equipment, a team of professional technicians providing support and assistance whenever the face-to-face interactions would take place (and thus Tomoe Horii joined the team as well, mastering the whole process of live

¹ Faculty of Letters, *Transilvania* University of Braşov

interactions), joint curriculum, and extended collaboration in point of time span. Reports on the development of the activities taking place in this way are posted on the official site of the blended learning project each and every time a new teaching event takes place [14].

2. Theoretical insights on “telecollaboration”

Also known as “computer supported collaboration” (CSC) [4] or “computer-supported collaborative learning” (CSCL) [9] in its initial forms, the concept of “telecollaboration” started to be used in fields that had nothing to do, at the beginning, with that of education, i.e. working and business environments, as “a set of software technologies that enable the integration and extension of personal desktop collaboration into high definition videoconferencing solutions” and whose “high definition video conferencing environment is supplemented by spontaneously shared personal content thereby putting a remote meeting's emphasis not only on face to face communication but concurrently on collaboration” thus enabling users to “share and edit documents, files and applications in real-time synchronously” [11].

Yet, in time, the educational field has come to benefit a lot from this modern teaching tool, being mainly used in projects dealing with language learning, intercultural exchanges, teacher trainings, content learning, as well as mobility. Research was invested in this approach, and comprehensive views have looked at this concept from different angles, being considered as having a linguistic perspective, a social dimension, a teaching methodological insight, an IT specialised facet, as well as an integrative perception, encompassing all opinions under the form of mixed studies that unified all voices [10].

In relatively more recent years, “telecollaboration” was described by Julie A. Belz in the following way: “...internationally-dispersed learners in parallel language classes use Internet communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat, threaded discussion, and MOOs (as well as other forms of electronically mediated communication), in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange” [1].

In 2010, at the Eurocall Symposium, Robert O'Dowd discussed “telecollaboration” in terms of “The application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work.” [6]

More recently, i.e. 2012, “telecollaboration” has been replaced with a newly coined term by Melinda Dooly and Robert O'Dowd, “Online Interaction and Exchange” (OIE) [3], who also suggested a division of it into three sub-categories: in-class interaction, class-to-class interaction (Online Intercultural Exchange or Telecollaboration exchange), and class-to-world interaction (Telecollaboration 2.0). [3]

The first sub-category was previously known as Computer-Assisted Classroom Discussion (CACD), a concept defined by Ortega, in 1997 as a “student to student type of interaction within the same class using online networks for learning a foreign language” [7].

The second sub-category refers to “class-to-class interactions via virtual intercultural interaction and exchange between classes of FL learners in geographically distant locations” [3]. And nowadays this is possible by means of synchronous oral communication (e.g. videoconferencing) and multimodal

exchanges (e.g. combination of different media such as forum, wiki, blog, etc.) [10]. The authors also enlarge upon the concept of “telecollaboration” as such, which, they say, “takes one of the two forms or models according to the leaning objectives they focus in FL education: eTandem (on fostering linguistic skills, learner autonomy and life-long language learning ability) and telecollaborative model (on intercultural communicative competence (ICC))” [3].

The third sub-category refers to “FL learners using their target language to interact with individuals or groups in the ‘real world’ without participating in a language course” [3].

It is obvious that, in light of the above mentioned categorisations, the approach our project falls into is the second category, the paired classes that got into direct contact being focused on the same syllabus, even if adjustments were made in order to meet a common ground in point of a joint curriculum, and the “geographically distant locations” being Romania and Japan.

What is absolutely interesting, from the point of view of the academic sense of belonging to the world of previous experiences tackled under similar conditions and on the same idea, is that, for example Belz, in 2004, published an article which was meant “to investigate the effects of technology-mediated language use on FL learning processes and learning outcomes among intermediate-level learners” [2], as a result of a three-year project developed in terms of “telecollaboration” by the Pennsylvania State University. At the same time, he wanted to “establish optimal practices and models for the incorporation of telecollaborative study into the language curriculum” [2], an initiative which was further developed by Sarah Guth, Francesca Helm and Robert O’Dowd,

under the form of an even larger-scale project, called INTENT, which practically reported on the integration of telecollaborative networks in European universities [5].

3. Staging the teaching performance

The challenge that the students from *Transilvania* University of Braşov were faced with when asked to participate in an intercultural exchange with Otaru University of Commerce from Japan couldn’t be completely and thoroughly named at the beginning. As part of a practical course on writing skills (Text Writing), which, when the call was made, had already reached its four last classes, our students accepted to participate in this endeavour without basically knowing exactly what was awaiting for them either in point of gains (or losses), relative to their student status, or in point of knowledge enhancement.

Firstly, as they confessed, they took it as an extracurricular activity, taking into consideration the fact that their performance for the end-of-term exam with the above mentioned practical course had already been marked by the professor, under the form of a continuous assessment type of testing. But then, while actually facing and dealing with the challenge, they came to realize that they had been offered a real opportunity to get in contact with another culture, so remote and so different from theirs. In this way, they could meet peer-students from Japan, under the form of a dialogue which proved to be fruitful not only for everybody involved in the activity, but also for other purposes that, in the long term, could prove beneficial from different points of view.

At the incipit of the whole adventure, the students, majoring in English, in their 2nd year of study, were gathered and presented the core of the mission we were together

about to embark. The tutors of this venture, Ph. D. Marinela Burada and Ph. D. Andreea Nechifor, established the groups – 5 in total, in order to meet the equilibrium desired by our partners from Japan – and assigned the topic on which each group, recently formed, was supposed to research into and prepare a presentation on, as, again, commonly agreed upon with our peers from Otaru University.

Thus, our students were supposed to choose the main aspects related to our university and present them to their colleagues from Japan, under the form of power point presentations, and, in their turn, the students from Otaru University had to select the most interesting pieces of information about their university and deliver presentations on them, as if the international educational market were waiting for their offer. Both sessions of presentations, as initially discussed, had to be video-taped and posted on Google Drive in order to be made available to both parties involved in the exchange.

Regarding this particular aspect, in what the Romanian party was concerned, the requirement was met, but the Japanese party chose to upload on the Internet platform only the presentations, in their power point versions, without taping the performance of the students anymore. This happened on account that the Japanese students felt intellectually, culturally and psychically more comfortable if they didn't expose themselves from the very beginning to a foreign unknown audience, as we eventually learnt, when we came to know each other better and when we also learnt about the characteristics of the Japanese educational culture, customs and background. The specificity of their educational behaviour, and not only, dwells on the idea of proficiency, professionalism and perfection which demands extreme severity, self-management and self-control each and

every time an answer or a response is provided to a questions or task.

In what this aspect of incongruence was concerned, our students responded neutrally, by simply working with the materials they were provided with by their colleagues from Japan, without being, at that stage, too curious about the reasons which had triggered it, especially because they had just taken part in the first most challenging part of this intercultural exchange.

Moreover, and probably just because of that, the Romanian students were absolutely enchanted with the idea of being video-taped, after having carefully prepared their slides on the common topic assigned, and that was why they didn't feel frustrated when they weren't offered the same type of material for analysis, for the next phase of the project. Counting out their nervousness, which cannot but go with the territory under any similar circumstances, our students performed very naturally in front of the camera, enjoying the idea of, first of all, being part of such an activity, second of all, being able to share information about their home university with students from across the world, third of all, feeling happy about their success in meeting the demands of the activity, and last of all, feeling challenged about the next steps in this project.

The reason that added to the natural factor which allowed them to also enjoy what they were doing and enabled them to get rid of the possible "stage fright" was two-fold, but bloomed from the same root: a very relaxed and pleasurable atmosphere. To this contributed, as I have already mentioned, on the one hand, the fact that the "stage crew" was made up of their own professors, no outsiders having been asked to operate the technical filming equipment in a more professional way, and on the other hand, but directly derived from the

above mentioned argument, the fact that these professors were hardly any established directors or camera specialists. As a matter of fact, they were, more likely, enthusiast beginners in handling one piece of personal technical equipment, brought by one of them and tempered with so that the photo camera should be able to film sequences of more than 7 minutes. Hence, the need to shortlist, next to urgent needs, a more performant taping device, in order to ease a similar experience, in case the project would develop.

4. Reactions on the side of the Romanian students

The outcome, in what the Romanian students were concerned, related to this first level of exchange, reflected upon several zones, as the students themselves put it.

One first aspect can be linked to the learning experience, in these terms: “We learnt a lot of things” (Guzu Ioana, Niculescu Ana Maria, Pascu Daniela and Șerban Edalina) – which can only be translated into having developed better research skills, having improved their ability to select and systematize important and relevant information about the content of their task, as well as having acknowledged interesting information about their own university as such, in a manner they hadn’t been challenged to do before this project, which enabled them to have another perspective over their own institution and student life.

Another aspect can refer to the opportunity they were offered to open their horizon, “*we had the chance to talk about our university to other people*” (Guzu Ioana, Niculescu Ana Maria, Pascu Daniela and Șerban Edalina) – which can be associated not only to the idea of students having developed their presentation and communication skills, but

also to cross-curricular skills and intercultural awareness in point of exposure and marketing, in a mutual and perfectly equal type of exchange: “*we have found some information about their university and how their study programs are.*” (Guzu Ioana, Niculescu Ana Maria, Pascu Daniela and Șerban Edalina).

The points of view of the active students who participated directly in the exchange (mention should be made here, that some other students, from the same year of study, or from different other years of study, participated passively in the project, by simply witnessing the interaction, or supporting their colleagues in their presentations, out of pure curiosity and pleasure) seem to converge, as the spokesperson of another group mentioned as well the component related to the benefits of having learnt “*from each other what it is that makes the difference between the two university systems*” (Scăunaș Izabela) which automatically, leads, and again in their own words and according to their own interpretation, by simply exposing “*students to people from different cultural backgrounds*” (Scăunaș Izabela), to providing “*the opportunity for students to develop a greater understanding of diversity*” (Scăunaș Izabela).

Moving to the second phase of the activity, that one in which the real interaction, via Skype, was enacted by both parties, the thrill and excitement doubled, as this time, not only that our students could actually see their peers and get into real contact with them, addressing each other direct questions, but also, the Japanese students had the chance to meet their fears, overcome their frustrations regarding their language barrier, as well as their sensitive educational issues referred to in the previous chapter of the present paper. Thus, they talked, interacted, asked and answered questions, socialized, in

English, with European students from afar, students belonging to a completely different cultural background and displaying a completely different profile in point of social interaction, class behaviour and level of English.

Fortunately, the ice was broken almost instantly, when the first group of students from Romania addressed their first set of questions to the peer group of Japanese students. Beyond the technical problems which, this time, accompanied the progress of the interaction, and which would only make that shortlist of absolutely necessary electronic devices get bigger, but up to a certain extent, possibly due to them, as the short moments of electronic failure introduced a couple of minutes of psychological detention on both sides, the whole exchange grew in intensity. It practically turned from shyness and nervousness, to interest, fun and pleasure, culminating with the courtesy of saluting in each other's languages at the very end of the interactions and with a sort of farewell under the form of a parade in front of the camera, on the Japanese side, and of a standing ovation, on the Romanian side.

All in all, when invited to express their feelings about this entire experience ["What, in your opinion, is the benefit (if any) of taking part in such activities?"], the vocabulary that was used in the analyses made by the Romanian students who kindly answered the above mentioned question abounded in semantic paradigms of positive distinctive features, such as [+novelty], [+high degree of importance], [+related emotional state], [+natural ranking]: new, unique, important (x2), appropriate, happy, good, and positive.

The categories under which the outcomes of the second phase of the activity can fall serve different areas of interest, as follows:

Firstly, the personal level, taking into account opinions like the following: "to

develop positive relationships with others" - Scăunaş Izabela, "We were interested in participating in this project because we knew that it would be an experience that would help us to develop ourselves", "important in developing us as persons", "This allows participants to step out of the comfort zone and identify the values that each person has" - Guzu Ioana, Niculescu Ana Maria, Pascu Daniela and Şerban Edelina.

Secondly, but nonetheless important, the professional level, considering opinions like these: "Talking with the students through Skype has been interesting because they talk differently in English because of their accent and it has been fascinating to hear them", "it would make us think about the possibility of studying abroad" - Guzu Ioana, Niculescu Ana Maria, Pascu Daniela and Şerban Edelina, "to have in mind a broader range of perspectives regarding future projects like this" - Scăunaş Izabela.

Thirdly, but again equally significant, the social level was accounted for as students felt that they could "make new friends", "This is an appropriate way to make new friends that have different skills and exchange ideas" - Guzu Ioana, Niculescu Ana Maria, Pascu Daniela and Şerban Edelina, "to learn and to participate in new and unique experiences beyond their own communities" - Scăunaş Izabela.

5. Conclusions

As I have recently stated in a paper on the efficiency of teaching techniques, "we have come to live in an era in which, from the point of view of the educational system, things have evolved and have changed a lot, the development in approaches enabling the idea of e-learning, distance learning, massive open online learning, blended learning, tele-

collaboration, the access to education being thus generalized and diversified. In this way, the entire teaching-learning-assessment process had to be re-evaluated, starting with the teaching methods and techniques used by the tutors, teachers, professors and any education providers, continuing with the individual approaches to learning that each candidate to new content acquisition must improve in order to be productive and efficient and ending with the assessment criteria and methods used in the evaluation process of the subjects that need to be tested in order to be able to measure the quality of the didactic act in an appropriate manner.” [8]

The project which was described in this paper is a proof that our system is ready to evolve, is open to the new and is able to understand the necessity to introduce and to work with modern technology and modern teaching approaches.

The positive response provided by our students is a powerful argument that the above referred to elements are not only a matter of trendy decisions that an educational establishment needs to take nowadays in order to survive on the educational market and to be competitive, but also that they come as a natural consequence of the students’ desires which simply mirror up-to-date necessities in natural terms.

The drawbacks, especially related to technical aspects, dwell on issues which need to be further improved and developed in case the blended learning project continues and expands. Steps have already been taken, negotiations started and physical improvement has already been attended in terms of new equipment and means of electronic communication, but details about the follow-up of this initial exchange will be tackled and displayed in another paper.

Keywords such as “creative teaching”, and “creative teacher”, all spinning around

the concept of “creativity” in teaching, as mentioned in Purcaru and Nechifor, “have come to be fostered by all sorts of centres for excellence in learning and teaching, belonging to famous universities from abroad [12], which, in this way, by adopting a policy of permanent openness regarding their educational offer, they also had to re-invent themselves as both providers, facilitators and assessors of the very same educational services marketed” [8].

And this is what practically this project, as part of the blended learning approach to teaching, managed to offer.

Other information may be obtained from the address: andreeabratana@unitbv.ro.

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