Chapter 12
Enhancing Students' Intercultural Competence and Learner Autonomy via Facebook Telecollaboration

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a Spanish-Finnish telecollaborative task-based study that was conducted with a view to exploring students' intercultural learning experience via Facebook employed as the educational platform. Nineteen Spanish and 17 Finnish students were afforded the opportunity to interact with each other in an authentic environment on the social networking site outside of class to elicit relevant information regarding each other's culture in terms of leisure activities and university education. Data analysis showed that the participants felt stimulated to take part in this novel learning experience and adopted a positive attitude towards their online interactions. They were able to manage their tasks without the assistance of their tutors, which encouraged them to become autonomous learners. Facebook can be considered an effective tool to foster intercultural competence development through successful exchange of pertinent information.

INTRODUCTION

In language learning contexts telecollaboration, which is also known as 'online intercultural exchange' (OIE) (O'Dowd, 2007), applies to the use of Internet communication tools to engage students from distant geographical locations (Dooly 2008) in online intercultural exchanges with a view to developing their language skills and intercultural competence. It has been defined as "internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds set up in an institutional context

with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (as defined by Byram, 1997) through structured tasks" (Guth & Helm, 2010, p. 14). Research has also shown that telecollaboration is a potential activity for online collaborative projects in foreign language learning (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). Furthermore, telecollaboration research has developed from a compilation of classroom practice and anecdotes to a deeper exploration of online exchange studies (Dooly & O'Dowd 2012). In the last approximately twenty years several models of telecollaboration have emerged, with the most well-established ones being the Cultura (Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillet, 2001) and the e-Tandem (Kötter, 2003; O'Rourke, 2005), which involve students in bilateral and bilingual online interactions (Thorne, 2006). In addition, telecollaborative projects have exponential benefits since they integrate Web 2.0 activities in the form of text, audio or video, one example being Skype or desktop video-conferencing (Tian & Wang 2010; Wang & Tian, 2013; Kroon, van der, L., Jauregi, K. & Thije, J. D., 2015; Puranen & Vurdien, 2016). Other Web 2.0 tools (Twitter, blogs, wikis, social networking and podcasts) can also facilitate cross-cultural communication (Lee & Markey 2014; Guth & Thomas 2010).

Telecollaboration plays a significant role in fostering intercultural competence (Chun, 2011; O'Dowd 2003) and especially in higher education, when students can benefit from such exchanges prior to travelling abroad on their study programs. Web 1.0 tools, for instance, email, online discussion boards or chat, have been widely used in telecollaborative intercultural projects; however, scant research has been conducted into the use of Web 2.0 Internet tools, such as blogs, podcasts or social networks. Facebook, for example, the most popular social network tool, can offer numerous possibilities for language learners to collaborate online to develop intercultural learning (Chen, 2013; Jin, 2015). Nevertheless, once again little is published with regard to its potential (Jin, 2015). Orsini-Jones (2015b), meanwhile, whilst conducting an exchange through Facebook, posits that she is quite resistant to the exclusive use of social media for academic purposes as productive debates were not as well developed here as via MOOC, which was more motivating and thought-provoking. The present study will report on how a group of Spanish and Finnish students interacted on Facebook as a platform with the aim of learning about each other's cultural traits, whilst developing at the same time learner autonomy through the tasks designed for this purpose.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Development of Intercultural Competence Through Telecollaboration

In foreign language learning Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been extensively used (Byram, 2009). Intercultural competence refers to *the ability to interact effectively with people with different cultures other than one's own* (Byram, 2000, p.297). Successful intercultural speakers should possess the following five key components of IC ((a) knowledge, (b) intercultural attitudes, (c) skills of interpreting and relating, (d) skills of discovery and interaction and (e) critical cultural awareness) (Byram, 1997), in addition to linguistic competence (Byram, 2009).

In the recent literature many projects have reported that learners can develop intercultural competence through telecollaboration (Chun, 2011; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Schuetze, 2008; Orsini-Jones, M., Lloyd, E. Gazeley, Z., Lopez-Vera B., and Bescond, G., 2015; Hockly, 2015; Lázár, 2015). Telecollaboration may offer a framework for the acquisition of online literacies and *provide authentic communication with expert speakers* (Helm & Guth, 2016, p. 241). Telecollaborative exchanges create the affordances

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