Chapter 29
Intercultural Learning via Videoconferencing:
Students' Attitudes and Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Although asynchronous communication tools have traditionally been used in online interactions, recently increasing popularity has been noted in the application of synchronous communication tools to facilitate intercultural learning. This chapter will explore and report on a study of how students from two countries, Spain and Finland, developed intercultural competence through the use of a video-conferencing platform, Adobe Connect, as a learning context. English was the lingua franca and the exchange of information was aimed at helping the students to learn about different aspects of each other's culture to develop intercultural competence. The findings suggest that the students' attitude to their learning experience was positive, since they were curious to explore each other's cultural traits. Videoconferencing was considered an effective tool because it enabled them to share experiences and build up a relationship, thereby enhancing their knowledge of both cultures. Body language also encouraged interaction since they could see each other via videoconferencing.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades the increasing use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, such as videoconferencing, blogs, wikis or social networking sites, has changed the way people communicate. For interaction to be successful in CMC, people need to be constantly negotiating and producing meanings, particularly when their linguistic and cultural backgrounds vary (Street, 1993). As a result, in today's globalised world language teachers have become aware that their students will be requested to interact with people of diverse cultures, and that the aim of foreign language teaching should not be

restricted to linguistic and communicative competence development, but should also be concerned with assisting students in developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Furstenberg, 2010). This may be described as an awareness of cross-cultural differences and understanding of foreign attitudes, beliefs, values and practices to avoid possible misunderstanding and enable effective and successful communication (Byram, 1997; Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002). Furthermore, students need to have a good knowledge of their own culture in order to understand those of other people. To assist students in developing intercultural competence, online intercultural exchanges with "the focus of research in the learning technologies" are now popular, and teachers are becoming increasingly skilled in attempting to "connect learners in different parts of the world with the dual aim of improving their linguistic competence and developing their intercultural knowledge and skills" (Hockly, 2015, p. 81). Online tools, which prompt student interaction "in a broader international community rather than a single classroom" (Basharina, 2009, p. 390), can be deemed valuable sources for intercultural exchanges which provide meaningful and authentic input in addition to creating new contexts for students to interact socially (Guth & Thomas, 2010).

CMC tools have been found to have great potential for intercultural learning (Basharina, 2009; Belz, 2007; Liaw, 2006). For instance, in an email telecollaborative project between one American and two German students, Belz (2003) reported that after a period of time development of intercultural competence (IC) was noted among the students, especially in attitude changes towards the target culture. Likewise, Liaw (2006), who conducted a study between EFL Taiwanese and American students via an e-forum, found that the learners displayed intercultural knowledge about their own cultures and curiosity about American culture. Mernard-Warwick (2009), on the other hand, examined the chat transcripts of a telecollaborative project between college students in Chile and California regarding the issue of immigration rights. His findings suggested that all learners had enhanced their ICC.

Although asynchronous communication tools have traditionally been used in online interactions, recently increasing popularity has been noted in the application of their synchronous counterparts to facilitate intercultural learning. For example, videoconferencing, which has rapidly evolved from group-to-group equipment to desktop, such as Skype (Wang & Tian, 2013) or mobile applications, has been found to be highly motivating for students participating in intercultural exchanges (Helm, 2015).

Most studies describing experiences through the use of synchronous communication tools have significantly contributed to communicative or intercultural development, and they can be considered more explorative in terms of presenting information, rather than providing "strong empirical evidence for it" (Canto, Jauregui & van den Bergh, 2013). In an endeavour, then, to add to the existing research on the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication, this paper reports on an intercultural telecollaborative project via videoconferencing, which involved students from a private language school in Spain and a university in Finland. The students engaged in synchronous interaction on the audio-visual web communication platform Adobe Connect, with a view to learning about each other's cultural traits. The aim of this research is to give some insight into the use of videoconferencing to enhance intercultural learning, by exploring the effectiveness of students' learning via such a tool as well as their attitudes to their learning experience.

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