


Chapter 3

WhatsApp and Jitsi to Foster Student Engagement in an American–Spanish Telecollaboration Exchange

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores students' engagement in a telecollaboration project between a Spanish and an American university. Students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement were evaluated throughout the project. A total of 53 students participated in an online exchange during one and a half months through two different applications, WhatsApp representing the text-based environment and Jitsi representing the synchronous videoconferencing platform. The engagement construct was explored using pre and post measures as well as tracking students' conversation in the platforms. Results yielded high levels of cognitive engagement as a result of the interaction. Values for emotional engagement were found to be higher in the instant messaging platform and behavioral engagement did not present significant values. Implications and recommendations for future research were drawn.

INTRODUCTION

Telecollaboration processes, which involve the interaction of students that are geographically distant from each other (Dooly, 2008), have normally made use of the available technological resources to develop virtual exchanges between classes with similar aims. From an early use of email exchanges (O'Dowd, 2005) to the development of gamified environments and videoconferencing tools to simulate real-life

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interaction (Andujar, 2019; Melchor-Couto, 2019), telecollaboration processes have experienced a gradual change. This evolution of the technological choice in telecollaboration environments has contributed to enhancing the possibilities of foreign language interaction between peers which can access these virtual environments anytime and anywhere. Likewise, the possibilities of developing students' linguistic competence have been also enhanced due to the different channels of communication that can be implemented in telecollaboration projects. However, this technological evolution has also entailed teachers and students' adaptation to the new virtual environments in which the projects take place. So as to guarantee an adequate adoption to the new tools in use, researchers as well as language practitioners need to further understand students' behaviour in technology-mediated learning and how the use of certain technological tools instead of others can modify the quality and perceptions about a telecollaboration project. Notwithstanding that factors such as the task design, the type of interaction and the aims of the virtual exchange play a fundamental role in the overall perception of the telecollaboration process, students' use of technology as well as their degree of engagement with the virtual environment may also be of great interest for the success of this type of projects.

Students' engagement has been scarcely investigated in the telecollaboration literature which have normally focused on factors such as developing language skills and intercultural competence (e.g. Helm & Guth, 2016; Gimeno-Sanz, 2018; Yang, 2018), or tutoring language learners (e.g. Angelova & Zhao, 2016) among others. Likewise, telecollaboration projects have frequently made use of a single virtual platform for the development of the interaction, in some cases, limiting students' possibilities of using oral and written modes of communication. Nevertheless, advancements in technology allow students to access a videoconference through the browser or keep a text-based conversation through a ubiquitous device. These new possibilities offer a fertile ground for language teachers willing to connect classes and implement telecollaboration exchanges through the Internet. Mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp, Wechat, Line, or Facebook messenger allow participants to interact through text messages, voice recording and video calls allowing participants to interact ubiquitously through different channels. Similarly, applications such as Jitsi provide a private videoconference room in the browser through the Web Real-time communication protocol (WebRTC). Students can access the room and start the interaction through a link without the need to register or download any specific software, avoiding difficulties of previous videoconferencing platforms. In this context, understanding students' patterns when using the aforementioned technological tools and measuring the degree of engagement generated in students seems fundamental to develop successful telecollaboration processes. This greater understanding may contribute to the subsequent integration of telecollaboration projects into the language curriculum, which may benefit language learners at all levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual Exchange

Telecollaboration between learners has taken place since the late 1800s with occasional developing spurts, but it was the advent of personal computers and the Internet in the 1990s that led to the current surge in this type of instructional practices, also known as virtual exchange (VE) (Dooley and O'Dowd, 2018, pp. 11-15).

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