

Strengthening the Inter-Cultural Communication Competence through Tele collaboration: A Case Study

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Abstract: The present study reports a case study on an international telecollaboration conducted with a diverse group of learners from a university in India and a university in France. The objective of the project was to provide innovative learning environments to the learners for language learning. The participants were Law students from India and Education students from France. It was a diverse group of learners from different linguistic, cultural, social, educational background. Multiple tasks were assigned to the students, and they worked in groups to complete the assigned tasks and accomplish the goals. The study discusses the innovative methods used by the learners and researchers to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers; moreover, it also discusses the dynamics of teaching English as a second language and as a foreign language. Task-based approach was used as the pedagogy. The study also discusses briefly about the ethical issues emerged during the tele collaboration.

Keywords: Tele collaboration, Linguistics, Barriers, Communication, English Language Teaching

Introduction:

Language teaching is not only a question of teaching a language but also opening the landscape of a culture of the target language (Isro'iyah, L., & Herminingsih, D. I. 2023). Languages through literature carry cultures with them and it is normal to think that teaching English is not only about teaching the vocabulary and grammar but also about understanding and negotiating the 'other' culture (Jiang, W. 2000; Durham, C. A. 1980). Today in the era of globalization it becomes extremely crucial to prepare culture sensitive people so that a more peaceful and empathetic society can be created (Kim, J., Heo, J., Lee, I. H., Suh, W., & Kim, H. 2015). For the present study, participants were involved from two different cultures from two different continents. In these exchanges, the languages or linguistic repertoires of the participants are all backgrounds which can be invited for questions of clarification or simple linguistic curiosity in the communication (Carter, P., & Darling-Hammond, L. 2016). The cultures present (Indian and French) are directly mobilised to enrich the intercultural skills of the participants during these exchanges. At the same time, English language skills are called upon and developed to negotiate the meaning given by the participants, and this was the mediating objective of language teaching/learning (Liddicoat & Derivry-Plard et al, 2023). To go as far as possible in understanding and interpreting the

meanings given and transmitted during exchanges, intercultural communication, which is itself situated and indexed to national contexts, takes place mainly within teaching/learning contexts. These contexts include intercultural telecollaboration environments which provide mediation and third-party spaces between learners and teachers of languages and cultures (Derivry-Plard, 2020; Castro-Prieto et al. 2022, Derivry-Plard et al. 2022; Potolia & Derivry-Plard, 2023). The objective of these exchanges was to create innovative learning environments for enhancing language and communication skills as well as making the participants sensitive and empathetic towards each other's cultures. Such interchanges and collaborations enhance the language and communication skills as well as increase the cultural sensitivity of the involved learners (Godwin-Jones, R. 2019; Osborne, M. 2016). The significance of cultural sensitivity and empathy has its roots in various previous studies and research (Steward, R. J., Jo, H., & Roberts, A. 1998) and empathetic individuals will help in creating a peaceful global village.

Methodology:

The learners involved in the studies were different for each year. For every year first year undergraduate students from Law school Bennett and first year masters' students from Bordeaux university were chosen for the study. Every year the learners and instructors meet for four times in Fall Semester. The formal meetings are conducted on zoom at 12 and 4:30 French and Indian time, respectively. Apart from these formal sessions the students are expected to meet on non-formal and informal platforms as per their convenience to complete the assigned tasks. All the 4 sessions are of 2 hours each in which the initial half an hour is a joint lecture by both the instructors and later the participants work in groups in their breakout rooms. Certain specific tasks are given to these learners who are working in breakout rooms. Each team comprised of a mixed group of learners from France and India so that a third space can be created where people from these two different cultures and language capabilities come together. The learners are put in a situation where they are "forced" to use the target language, i.e., English. Language is learnt best when taught by using the direct method (Haliwanda 2019; Sitorus, N., & Silitonga, H. 2018; Price 1926). These types of tasks were provided to the learners' groups- "Discuss the way people address themselves to others in France, in India and in the country or location other students may be. You present the way you would normally address a friend, a member of your family, a teacher, a child, an elderly, at work with your direct boss and with people with a "lower status" (maintenance or cleaning people). Discuss as many situations as possible, explaining, the form of address, the set-phrases to start a communication, the pronoun used in your native or "non-native" language, the distance you should be, the gestures that accompany the address, the spoken form of address vs written form etc." The learners were asked to understand the power structures and hierarchies communicated through language, through the usage of pronouns and so on and so forth. Once the

learners submit their tasks, they were instructed to reflect upon their findings and compare the similarities and differences between the two different cultures. In the end of the sessions, responses from the learners were collected through a questionnaire every year.

Results and Discussion:

The findings of the study indicates that learners developed a new approach after working with their peers from a different culture. Almost 70% of the respondents reported that they feel more comfortable, and the level of hesitation has decreased to a certain level after meeting a working with people from a different cultural background. The learners have also reported that the study has helped them in their personal development and growth. It has enhanced their ability to understand other person's perspective. One more important factor came out through the data was curiosity. The learners reported that a sense of curiosity was developed over a period during these meetings. Development of curiosity is an important factor in increasing the creativity skills of learners (Gross, M. E., Zedelius, C. M., & Schooler, J. W. 2020).

An extremely important finding was 'the necessity to use the target language'. The learners have reported that their language and communication skills improved since they had no choice left but to use the target language only. The target language must be used as much as possible to enhance the language and communication skills of the learners (Brevik, L. M., & Rindal, U. 2020). Learners reported that these spaces gave them enough time, exposure, and practice for the target language and in a very fun way. Language learning becomes fun when there is a relaxed environment (Stoimcheva-Kolarska, D. L. 2020). The learners reported that initially they were hesitant in using the language with strangers but gradually the hesitation vanished due to the guidance and support provided by the instructors as well the support provided by the peers. The results also supported the earlier research that assistance and support is not only required from the instructors' end in such situations but also from the peers (Swain, M., Brooks, L., & Tocalli-Beller, A. 2002).

The results also highlighted that how important the skill of listening is. The learners mentioned after the sessions and in the feedback survey also that such environments gave them ample chances and scope to enhance their listening skills and they tried to be patient while they were listening to the speakers who were taking extra efforts to express themselves in a language which is not their mother tongue. This experience also taught them the 'normal' interference of the native language. The experience made them realize that the motive behind any communication is 'communication' and the accent does not matter. This also led them to understand and catch the flavor of the emotion while communicating and evoke empathy among the communicators. The results also suggest that an important aspect of a smooth and fruitful communication is- not to interfere and not to overstep. The experience has taught them the virtue of adaptation according to the other speaker. The experience gave

them a chance of cultural enrichment and it has boosted their confidence. After the sessions, the learners felt more confident and felt that the fear of making mistakes had reduced.

73% of the respondents reported that they prefer intercultural telecollaborative sessions over the traditional methods of language teaching. The finding is in alignment with various previous studies conducted in the field (O'Rourke, B. 2007; Dooly, M. 2017; Chun, D. M. 2019; Helm, F., & Guth, S. 2016; Godwin-Jones, R. 2019). Such learning environments keep the learners in active role, and they learn in a very self-motivated way. The responses of the participants recommend that such interactions must be a part of the pedagogy since it provides learners autonomy. Autonomy leads to self-confidence which is a skill needed in the globalized era (Saeed, M. A. 2021).

Challenges and Constraints:

Various challenges and constraints were faced during the study. One of the major challenges was the difference of time-zones in the countries. Since there were a few students from the US in the Bordeaux university, it was even more challenging to meet on a specific time.

Another challenge was of the age gap. The student group from India were undergraduate students (falling somewhere between 18-21); whereas the French group consisted of learners from 25-40. The scale of the French group was vast. Also, the French also have working individuals. Time-management was a huge challenge for the working group.

Apart from these, there were some cultural barriers also which existed, and the learners were trying to negotiate and derive meaning from some of the existing cultural practices. One of such discussions was food and wine. The learners used to have lengthy and meaningful discussions about the relationship between food and drinking and its relationship with the geography and climatic conditions of a certain geographical location.

Conclusion:

The world today is rapidly changing so as the educational needs of the learners. Today we live in an era where technology, artificial intelligence has left no sphere untouched. In education field also learners look for innovative and experience-based learning. Language learning and acquisition has also taken a new shape. Today when we talk about learning a new language, it is not limited to vocabulary and grammar, but the major component is the reflection of culture. An attempt has been made in the present study to provide innovative learning environment to the language learners where they could communicate with people from a different culture in a common language which was not a mother tongue of any of the group. The language English

was used as a connecting language. Learners not only enhanced their communicative abilities but also developed a more open perception about a different culture.

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