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Connecting cultures and broadening participation through WhatsApp: assessing students' perception in the ClerKing telecollaborative project

Oneil Madden¹, Anne-Laure Foucher²

Abstract: Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) has become very trendy in the field of language learning; however, while there are many studies that include WhatsApp, used here to connect cultures and/or broaden participation, very few articulate how students view it or its impact in acquiring and developing linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competencies. This paper reports on ClerKing, a Franco-Jamaican telecollaborative project, which occurred in two phases between Applied Foreign Languages (AFL) students from University Clermont Auvergne (UCA), France, and Modern Languages students of French from Shortwood Teachers' College (STC), Jamaica. WhatsApp was used in both phases. Using the exploratory approach, this study seeks to provide insight on students' perception of the use of the WhatsApp in the project, as well as potential moments of learning sequences. Preliminary findings show that WhatsApp is considered to be practical, popular, and preferable. Students acquired knowledge about religion and homosexuality, improved on expressions, and strengthened their grammar.

Keywords: WhatsApp, culture, ClerKing, telecollaboration, perception

1. Introduction

The perpetual advancement of technology continues to serve as a premise for the revolution of foreign language education, especially as it helps to bring cultures together and broaden participation. Telecollaborative projects help foreign/second language learners to connect and collaborate with other cultures. Helm (2015) describes telecollaboration as the act of bringing together learners of different geographical locations to engage in online, collaborative interactions, by using diverse internet-based communication tools/platforms to develop their linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competences.

Nowadays, thanks to smartphones, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is becoming more integrated in foreign language education, and the use of MIM, primarily WhatsApp, has become a powerful tool in second language development (Andújar-Vaca & Cruz-Martínez, 2017). WhatsApp, also known as WhatsApp Messenger, is a cross-platform instant messaging subscription service for smartphones which uses the internet for communication. It allows users to send messages, images, video, and audio media as well as their location (Alsanie, 2015). Its features such as accessibility, interactivity, immediacy and permanency (Sa'aleek, 2014), help learners to improve their language skills (Mistar, 2016).

Chinnery (2006) posits that MALL facilitates social interaction, data exchanging and collaboration with other learners. Learners, thus, can telecollaborate with native speakers to improve linguistic, cultural, and intercultural skills, despite being separated geographically.

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Andújar-Vaca & Cruz-Martínez (2017:43) contend that MALL offers “an environment where learners can ubiquitously negotiate meaning and reflect [on] and evaluate their own performance through authentic interaction and feedback”. Madden and Foucher (2019:268) conclude that WhatsApp is a suitable platform for telecollaborative projects, notably because students are already familiar with it.

Concerning students’ perception of WhatsApp in foreign language education, very little is known, and the current literature only provides generalised information. Malecela (2016) reports that WhatsApp helps students by facilitating communication with other students and with the instructor, by enhancing collaborative learning, and by sharing educational information. According to So (2016), some other advantages of WhatsApp are that it provides immediate messaging support, brings new learning opportunities, facilitates communication between students and teachers, provides flexible learning, and supports multimedia learning. However, for some participants, the use of WhatsApp in their learning might interfere with their private lives (So, 2016).

Using the exploratory approach, we specifically sought to explore students’ perceptions regarding the use of WhatsApp in the ClerKing project, as well as possible potential learning sequences in the areas of language, culture, and interculturality.

2. Method

As explained in Madden and Foucher (2019), the telecollaborative project, ClerKing, occurred in two ten-week phases between AFL students of English from UCA and Modern Languages students of French from STC. The 50 participants were of mixed genders, between the ages of 18 and 33. There were slight differences in the pedagogical scenarios (See Table 1). Students were paired/grouped according to their profiles submitted prior to the start of the project. The primary objectives of this project were for students to practice the target language(s) studied and to develop and/or improve their linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competences in said language(s) – speaking, listening, and writing, based on their respective levels (Jamaican students were between A2-B2 in French on the Common European Framework for Languages, while French students were B2-C1 in English). Students discussed different intercultural topics weekly (for example, festivals and celebrations, places of interest and nightlife, education systems, religion, and homosexual unions), and specific instructions were given regarding communication tools, language choice, and the desired outcome of each session.

Table 1. Differences in pedagogical choices between the two phases

Elements of pedagogical design	Phase 1	Phase 2
Languages of interaction	English and French (Imposed by coordinator) Some tasks in French and others in English	English or French (Free choice)
Formats of communication	Pairs (One Clermontois and one Shortwoodite)	Groups of four (Two Clermontois and two Shortwoodites)

Communication platforms	Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Skype, WhatsApp	WhatsApp
Tasks and topics given	All topics imposed Complete guided and systematic tasks One imposed final task	Choice of two out of ten topics Complete tasks in a personal manner Choice of one of two final tasks

The data collection for this study comprised all the interactions that happened within ClerKing, including the individual tasks done, such as Learning Journals, as well as the two questionnaires completed – one at the start of the project, and the other at the end. The former gathered data on the participants’ biography, linguistic competences, usage of communication tools, and elements related to intercultural communication, while the latter examined the same elements, but within the context of the project at the end.

2.1 Usage of WhatsApp

Given that WhatsApp was the communication tool prioritised in Phase 1, we decided to use it as the sole platform in Phase 2. Table 2 gives a breakdown on students’ usage of WhatsApp before and during Phase 1 of the project.

Table 2. Students’ Usage of WhatsApp in Phase 1

Questionnaire 1	Questionnaire 1	Questionnaire 1	Questionnaire 2
Use of WhatsApp prior to the start of project	Frequency of WhatsApp usage prior to the start of the project	Reason for using WhatsApp	Technological device used the most in the project
80% Yes 20% No	70% Very regularly 20% Not regularly 10% Never	80% Private (family, friends) 45% Academic (group work) 15% Professional (interview)	100% WhatsApp

3. Discussion of preliminary results

In assessing students’ perceptions on the use of WhatsApp in the ClerKing project, findings show that WhatsApp is practical, popular, and preferable (see Figure 1), and is an appropriate communication tool for telecollabative projects. However, some students thought a common WhatsApp group may not be as effective as smaller groups, because interactions can become chaotic. This can lead to an awkward and reserved atmosphere due to lack of understanding on certain points and reluctance to see things from different perspectives.

Figure 1. Excerpts of declarations of students' perspectives on WhatsApp in ClerKing

		Translation French to English
Practicality	<p>« Très interactif et du coup plus intéressant, c'est ici que j'ai le plus appris sur la culture et le peuple jamaïcain. »</p> <p>« Intense et plus utilisé que fb [Facebook] car plus pratique »</p> <p>« C'est une bonne plateforme pour des communications à l'étranger, elle permet un lieu de discussion optimisé pour les étudiants. »</p> <p>« Je n'utilisais pas cette application auparavant mais je trouve qu'elle convient parfaitement à ce genre de projet car une discussion en groupe est facilement possible. »</p> <p>“It was a great choice because with WhatsApp, we can video chat, voice call, text, voice note, and enjoy sharing with each other.”</p> <p>“It was a good approach because WhatsApp is a versatile means of communication.”</p>	<p>“Very interactive and therefore more interesting. This is where I learned the most about Jamaican people and their culture.”</p> <p>“Intense and more used than Facebook because it's more practical”</p> <p>“It's a good platform for communicating abroad. It allows an optimised place of discussion for students.”</p> <p>“I did not use this application before, but I find it suitable for this kind of project because group discussion is easily possible.”</p>
Popularity	<p>“Genius. Everyone uses WhatsApp anyway, so why not incorporate it in educational endeavours?”</p> <p>“WhatsApp was the easiest medium, in my opinion. because persons go on WhatsApp every day.”</p> <p>« WhatsApp est une très bonne application pour ce genre de projet car tout le monde de nos jours a cette application que ce soit pour la famille ou pour les études. »</p>	<p>WhatsApp is a very good application for this kind of project because everybody nowadays has this application, whether for family or for studies.</p>
Preference	<p>« ... on peut envoyer des messages quand on veut donc on est plus à l'aise. »</p> <p>“My partner didn't connect on Skype except when we decided to Skype. So I had to use WhatsApp mostly to keep talking to him.”</p> <p>“Preferred by partner”</p>	<p>“...we can send messages when we want, so we are more comfortable.”</p>

3.1 Potential learning sequences

A potential learning sequence refers to the process through which the learner captures linguistic data in his/her interaction with a native speaker and makes them the object of internal cognitive activities (De Pietro, Matthey, & Py, 1989). This can be in the form of negotiation of meaning, reformulation, etc. However, this concept could also be applied to include the learner's cultural and intercultural positioning.

3.2 Cultural and intercultural competence

One area in which several students demonstrated potential new knowledge was religion. There were marked differences between both cultures concerning views on certain controversial topics, such as homosexual unions and religious beliefs. This sparked a heated group discussion, especially in Phase 1 (See Figure 2). Talking about controversial topics can prove to be a good source of knowledge acquisition; however, it can cause intercultural friction.

Figure 2. Excerpts of declarations of demonstration of students' cultural and intercultural competences

FR: "I discovered that the Jamaican people was really religious. In the group talk, we discussed homosexuality in general and one thing led to another which led to religion. At that point we, the French people, realized how much religion was important to them. The Jamaican people seem to build their life around it. So it was consequently a sensitive subject. However, some made efforts to communicate "peacefully" with us, some couldn't. Religion was so much important for some, that they couldn't stay in a group talk where God's existence was not undeniable, so they called Blasphemy and left the group talk. I had personally never heard anyone called Blasphemy, except in movies about the Crusades, so it was an interesting experience."

JA: "I am going to exit this group and when this blasphemous conversation finishes the admin for the group adds me back."

[This comment is in relation to the topic of homosexual unions.]

FR: "[I learned] about Rastafarians and that they are very religious."

JA: "French people are not very religious, more free-minded."

3.3 Linguistic competence

There were also potential learning sequences in regard to new expressions and grammar. In Phase 1, students noted different new knowledge obtained in their Learning Journal, as seen in Figure 3. They seemingly demonstrated understanding of the context in which the new expression was used and are likely to reuse it at a later time.

Figure 3. Examples of expressions learned in Scenario 1

Student 1
New expression: To manage the heat in the kitchen Situation context: We were exchanging in the group talk, and things got a bit tensed. Language co-text: "Where did everyone go? – They can't <i>manage the heat in the kitchen</i> " Meaning: To deal with pressure.
Student 2
New expression: Call off Situation context: My partner and I were arranging a meeting time. Language co-text: We should probably <i>call off</i> the meeting and put off to tomorrow.

Meaning: It means cancel the meeting.

It was also observed that learning opportunities arose for Jamaican students to strengthen French syntax in Phase 2. As seen in Figure 4 (translation in supplementary materials), throughout conversations, French students were able to guide their Jamaican counterparts in better formulating some of their sentences, wherever inaccuracies were identified. In the first screenshot specifically, a Jamaican student demonstrated active learning, while being helped by her French colleague. Here, we can see negotiation of meaning taking place.

One useful feature of WhatsApp is that it helps users to select and respond to specific messages instead of searching through a pile of messages.

Figure 4. Screenshots of excerpts on grammar acquisition in Phase 2



4. Conclusions

Our study suggests that WhatsApp is a suitable communication tool for telecollaborative projects, as it is the application that is prioritised when multiple platforms are proposed. When used as a sole platform, we observed potential learning sequences on different levels: linguistic, cultural, and intercultural. In addition, students perceive WhatsApp to be a practical, popular, and preferable MIM application, which can help in second/foreign language development; this is supported by Andújar-Vaca and Cruz-Martínez (2017) noted. WhatsApp practicality is also due to the fact that it does not require much cognitive manipulation (Madden & Foucher, 2019) and because of the other features it offers (Sa'aleek, 2014).

In regard to intercultural topics covered in telecollaborative projects, coordinators should be intentional when choosing them but should also be mindful of the sensitivity that some of them may provoke.

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Supplementary material

So, what do you think about
Valentine's Day?
Even between girlfriends?

Generally, I don't go out. I just stay
at home

We say rather "Je reste chez moi" –
I stay home

Me also, I stay home. It's not a
celebration I particularly like. Just
why not have a party, but that's just
it.

Thank you
Ok