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Understanding the complexities associated with conceptualising pedagogical scenarios for online multimodal interaction between two languages and cultures: a case of the ClerKing telecollaborative project

Oneil N. Madden¹, Anne-Laure Foucher²

Abstract

The complexity surrounding the design of collaborative pedagogical scenarios can allow foreign language learners to develop intercultural and linguistic skills, despite the many elements that must be considered when conceptualising telecollaborative projects. Many research studies have been conducted which led to significant discoveries, but only few studies examine the intricacies of developing pedagogical scenarios for online multimodal interaction and the outcomes of these complexities. This paper reports on a Franco-Jamaican telecollaborative project, ClerKing, which took place in two phases between Applied Foreign Languages (AFL) students of English from University Clermont Auvergne (UCA), France, and Modern Languages students of French from Shortwood Teachers' College (STC), Jamaica. Each phase had a different pedagogical scenario, with the first being restricted and the second being more open. Using the exploratory method, various parameters of online pedagogical scenarios were identified and examined with varying degrees of granularity. Preliminary findings show that a less restricted and more flexible pedagogical scenario allowed for students to develop language and intercultural competencies, while strengthening negotiation skills.

Keywords: complexity, pedagogical scenario, multimodal interaction, clerking, telecollaboration

1. Introduction

The 21st century requires the education system to help learners cultivate the skills necessary to survive in this globalised world. One way to prepare our students with the linguistic and cultural skills to communicate successfully with people from varying backgrounds is to foster their development of linguistic and intercultural competence; this can be achieved through telecollaborative projects. Helm (2015:197) defines telecollaboration as the “practice of engaging classes of geographically dispersed learners in online exchange using Internet communication tools for the development of language and/or intercultural competence.”

Critical to telecollaborative projects is a pedagogical scenario. This is a plan that outlines the expectations of and instructions for the learner. Nissen (2006) states it includes the objectives of the project, prior and targeted skills, resources and tools made available for accomplishing proposed activities and tasks Nissen.

Closely associated with the pedagogical scenario, or even sometimes included in it, is the communication scenario. Nissen (2006) explains that this entails all the possible

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forms of interactions that the learner has at his disposal and which are clearly communicated to him as part of his online project. Nissen (2006:4) also identifies five variables for defining the type of communication scenario in an online project: the prospective conversation partners (who communicates with whom?), the status of the learner and his interlocutors (novice, expert), the purpose of the interaction (e.g. practice of the language), the temporality of the exchanges (duration, frequency, rhythm), and the communication tools used (the choice of platform may lead to more synchronous or asynchronous exchanges). To this list, Foucher (2010:86) adds the following: the language(s) of interaction (native, foreign, third language), the objective of the exchanges (collaborative realisation of a final task or 'simple' communication), and the number of interlocutors possible (in a chat session, for example). All these elements play an essential role in regard to how the learner will position himself throughout the project.

Pedagogical scenarios can either be restraint or open. Pernin and Lejeune (2004:6) explain that the former describes precisely to the learner the activities to be executed. This type of scenario leaves a low degree of initiative to the actors of the learning situation. Conversely, they note that the latter outlines the activities to be achieved, leaving the actors in the learning situation varying degrees of freedom to organise the activities or determine their course.

Findings from numerous online intercultural exchanges have identified some of the complex elements that could have implications on the success of telecollaborative projects. O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) established areas such as low participation and motivation, negative evaluations of the target culture, and failed opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. Kötter (2002) underlined delays in asynchronous communication, while Kern (1996) noted challenges regarding mismatched language levels. Additionally, the methodological aspects of telecollaborative projects such as task design and evaluation play a significant role in the outcome of these projects. It is, therefore, evident that the success of a telecollaborative project is dependent on several combined, interconnected factors, as failure in online communication is not attributed to any single factor.

Using the exploratory approach, we are particularly interested in the complexity associated with the following elements of pedagogical and communication scenarios: language(s) of exchanges and communication platforms.

2. Method

ClerKing, a Franco-Jamaican project, was conducted in two phases for 10 weeks in the second semester between Applied Foreign Languages students of English from University Clermont Auvergne, and Modern Languages students of French from Shortwood Teachers' College. A restrained pedagogical scenario was used in phase one, while the second phase was more open (see table 1 for differences). There was a total 50 participants of mixed genders, between the ages of 18 and 33 years. Participants were paired based on their profiles submitted before the start of the project. Clermontois students were between levels B2-C1 in English on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), while Jamaican/Shortwoodite students between A2-B2 in French. The main objective of this project was for students to practise the

target language(s) studied and to improve their linguistic and cultural competencies in said language(s). Students discussed different intercultural topics weekly, and specific instructions were given concerning the use of communication tools, language choice, and the desired outcome of each session.

Table 1. Differences in pedagogical choices between Scenario 1 & Scenario 2

Elements of pedagogical & communication scenarios	Scenario 1 (S1)	Scenario 2 (S2)	Comments
Language of exchange	English & French (Imposed)	English or French (Free choice)	In S1, the language of communication was imposed by the teacher weekly and varied depending on the activities being done. In S2, students had a free choice to communicate either in English or French or whatever other mutual language(s).
Communication platforms and types of communication	<p>Facebook: Blog</p> <p>Moodle: learning resources, tasks submission</p> <p>Skype: video call</p> <p>WhatsApp: video call, voice call, voice note, text, image, group chat</p> <p>Students were paired (1 Clermontois & 1 Jamaican).</p> <p>There was also a common WhatsApp group with all the students.</p>	<p>WhatsApp: video call, voice call, voice note, text, image, group chat</p> <p>Students were grouped in fours (2 Clermontois & 2 Jamaicans).</p> <p>There was also a common WhatsApp group with all the students.</p>	<p>4 primary communication platforms were used in S1 and specific instructions were given to students from time to time in regard to which platform(s) to use for different activities.</p> <p>In S2, all interactions took place using WhatsApp.</p>
Objective of exchanges	<p>Exchange with your partner.</p> <p>Complete individual, pair and group activities.</p>	<p>Exchange with your partner.</p> <p>Complete individual and group activities.</p>	<p>There were fewer individual tasks given in S2 and students had a choice in terms of the final</p>

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The data collection for this study included all types of interactions that occurred within ClerKing, as well as two questionnaires: the first one, which was administered at the start of the project, gathered information on participants' biography, linguistic competencies, usage of communication tools, and elements related to intercultural communication. The second one, administered at the end of the project, examined the same elements but in the context of the project.

3. Discussion

In assessing the objectives of the ClerKing, findings show that students declared greater improvement in culture compared to linguistic gains in both scenarios. In Scenario 1, 60% of the students declared to have benefitted linguistically from the project, while 66% indicated to have gained cultural knowledge. In Scenario 2, 55% of the students noted that they improved on a linguistic level, while 88% mentioned that they improved on a cultural level. The less restricted scenario seemed to have allowed for more cultural development.

In citing examples of cultural gains on the second questionnaire, students provided the following responses in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Excerpts of declarations of students' cultural gains in both Scenarios

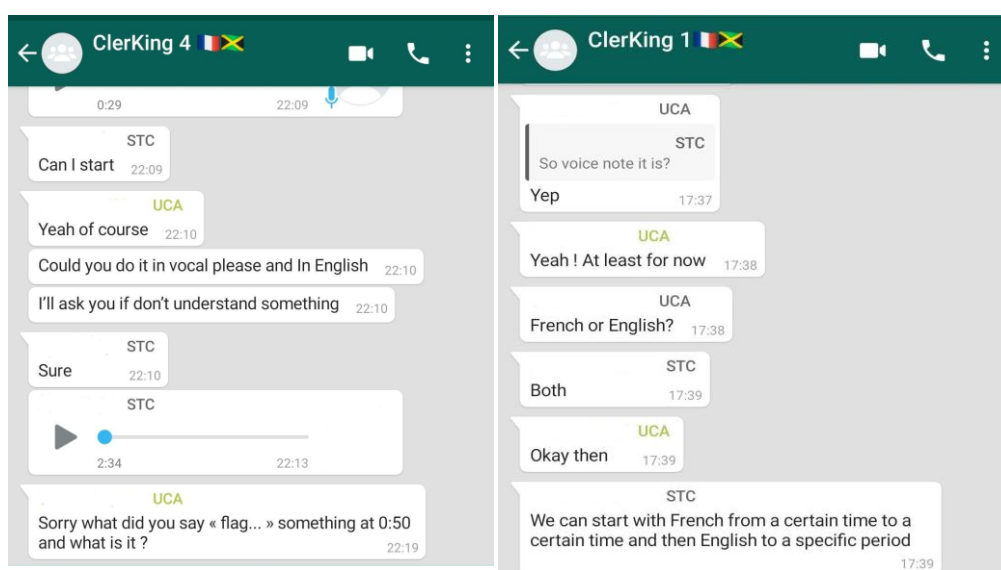
Scenario 1	Scenario 2
“France is a very beautiful country and the government takes care of its citizens by offering free healthcare and education.”	« Au niveau du créole jamaïcain et de leurs coutumes traditionnelles ou encore sur l'histoire du pays. »
“Certain stereotypes were cleared up. I learnt that the youth of France don't drink as much wine as their predecessors. I also learnt that religion doesn't play an important role in government in France.”	« Le créole jamaïcain, le night life en Jamaïque, Anansi, les espaces touristiques de la Jamaïque. »
« L'importance de la religion en Jamaïque. »	« A propos des rastafaris et qu'ils sont très croyants. »
« Le système éducatif, la façon de vivre, l'éducation religieuse... »	“French people are not religious, more free-minded.”
	“I learnt about the protest culture in France.”
	“Certain stereotypes were cleared up. I learnt that the youth of France don't drink as much wine as their predecessors.”

3.1. Choice of language

It was observed that even though students were instructed in Scenario 1 to use a specific language at given points, most of the exchanges happened in English as this was the more comfortable mutual language within each pair.

In Scenario 2, the non-imposition of language not only led to the development of linguistic skills, but also negotiation skills. On many occasions, students had to agree on which language to choose to discuss the given topics (See Figure for examples). Provisions were also made on both ends to utilise both languages to facilitate adequate practice.

Figure 2. Screenshots of excerpts from conversations in Scenario 2



3.2. Communication platforms

Even though there were four communication platforms in Scenario 1, it was found that only two of them were given priority, WhatsApp and Skype. Students attested that these two platforms were the most feasible for communication: Skype for video and WhatsApp for chat.

Students from Scenario 2 also confirmed that WhatsApp was, indeed, an ideal platform because of its features; however, certain functionalities such as voice and video call proved difficult in a group of 4 people.

4. Conclusions

As established by O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) and Pernin and Lejeune (2004), we have observed that the design of a pedagogical scenario plays an important role in telecollaborative projects. Open scenarios seem to allow for the development of linguistic but more so cultural and intercultural skills in foreign languages such as negotiation.

Noteworthy, Skype and WhatsApp are suitable communication platforms for telecollaborative projects. Therefore, it would be wise not to use multiple tools, but to choose the pertinent ones that require less cognitive manipulation from the students because they are already with them.

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