An interdisciplinary telecollaboration in ESP classroom: a study involving Business and Law students

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Abstract

Despite the rapid development of telecollaboration in the language classroom, interdisciplinary telecollaborative exchanges in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms have not received much attention. This paper examines students' perspectives on an interdisciplinary telecollaboration project conducted in the ESP setting. This three-month project involved 23 Law students from France and 24 Business students from Sri Lanka (SL). Their English proficiency ranged from B2 to C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale. They were divided into eight groups. One group consisted of three Business students and three Law students, except the last group, which had only two Law students and three Business students. In each group, Business students had to suggest a business plan to be positioned in Europe, while Law students had to offer legal advice to establish the business in France. They were required to hold at least three Zoom meetings and were allowed to communicate through any other media. Data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that interdisciplinary telecollaboration not only enhances language skills but also soft skills like organisation and time management skills. The paper also discusses the challenges encountered by students and their recommendations.

Keywords: ESP, Telecollaboration, Online Interactions, Professional Knowledge, Collaborative Learning.

1. Introduction

Telecollaboration is a project that allows geographically distant parties to engage in authentic communication in a foreign language (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). These telecollaborative projects have proven to develop learners' linguistic accuracy and fluency (Kinginger & Belz, 2005; Manegre & Udeshinee, 2022), intercultural awareness (Manegre & Udeshinee, 2022), communication skills (García-Sánchez & Gimeno-Sanz, 2022), and digital literacy (García-Sánchez & Gimeno-Sanz, 2022). Such a project promotes the skills that are needed for learners to be competent communicators in the global world. Learners must be equipped with not only language skills but also the social knowledge of how and when to use specific expressions appropriately (Chun, 2015) and the skills required to work in the global market. Therefore, instead of focusing only on second/foreign language learning, it is important to focus on content-based telecollaboration projects (O'Dowd, 2016). English for Specific Purposes (ESP) telecollaboration would provide students with the required practice to work in the professional environment they would be working in future (Lindner, 2015).

Even though there are telecollaboration studies that engage ESP classes, limited research focuses on interdisciplinary virtual exchanges (e.g. Háhn & Radke, 2020; Walker & Brocke, 2009). Further, there are very few telecollaboration projects that involve South Asian universities. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by conducting a telecollaboration between Sri Lanka (SL) and France, employing students from two disciplines.

The objective of the project was not only to increase their subject-specific language skills but also soft skills, such as communication and teamwork. Thus, through the analysis of the perceptions of the participants of the project, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

    1. Does participating in a telecollaboration improve students' ESP skills?
    2. Does participating in a telecollaboration improve students' soft skills?

2. Method

2.1. Context and participants

The study employed 23 Law students from a French university and 24 Business students from a Sri Lankan university. Their age ranged from 18 to 25 years, and English proficiency ranged from B2 to C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale.

2.2. Procedure

Business students were expected to suggest a business plan (aligned with Sustainable Development Goals) to be positioned in Europe. Law students were expected to provide legal advice to establish the business in Europe because the SL students were unfamiliar with European legal procedures. For this three-month telecollaboration, eight groups were formed. One group consisted of 3 Business students and three Law students, except the last group, which had only two Law students and three Business students. Since both multimodal and multimedia are necessary for communicative performance (García-Sánchez & Gimeno-Sanz, 2022), several means of communication were allowed. They were required to have Zoom meetings for their discussions, and they needed to record three meetings and upload them to the Google folder shared by the researchers. They could also communicate through WhatsApp or any other media which researchers did not have access to. Further, all their draft documents were shared in the Google folder for researchers to access. More details of the project are given in Table 1.

The telecollaboration project was integrated into the assignments of the Legal English module of the French students; therefore, they received marks for completing tasks. However, the Business students did not receive any marks or a grade. Still, they were given a certificate for participation, and the best business plan and promotional video were selected at a competition held at the SL university.

Table 1. The weekly project plan.

Week	French Team	Sri Lankan (SL) Team
1	Introduction to the project/local teams created	
2	Preparing questions to get to know their partners (cultural information) Recording introductory local team video and uploading it to Soqqle	
3	Workshop on how to think legally: Structures of "social entrepreneurship"	Workshop on Sustainable Development Goals – by an expert

4	Meeting 1	
5	Present information in class collected from meeting 1	Workshop on video making – by an expert
6	Workshop on creating a binding contract	Workshop on business plans – by an expert
7	Meeting 2	
8	Working on the contract	Working on the business plan
9	Meeting 3	
10	Writing a reflective report on the meetings held. Creating a binding contract with insights from Business students	Working on the business plan with insights from the Law students
11	Working on the promotional video	
12	Promotional video	Final competition among the local teams – Presentations on the Business plan (PPT + promotional video) Judged by a panel of judges

2.3. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected from semi-structured, focus-group interviews with students at the end of the project. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes derived from the data have been listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Main themes emerged from the data.

Main findings	Themes emerged in the analysis of SL students' perceptions	Themes emerged in the analysis of French students' perceptions
The difference in evaluation methods causes conflicts.	Ungraded tasks resulted in less motivation among students.	Challenges encountered due to less interest among some of the SL students
Telecollaboration helped both the English language and soft skills.	The telecollaboration helped improve soft skills more than language skills.	The telecollaboration helped improve speaking and listening skills in English more than ESP skills.
Open-mindedness in participants could overcome the barriers caused by cultural differences.	Cultural differences did not affect the telecollaboration because participants were open-minded.	Cultural differences did not affect the telecollaboration because everyone was open-minded.
Too much work and less explicit instructions could cause challenges.	Telecollaboration amidst other university work and vague instructions posed challenges.	Too much work and insufficient instructions created stressful situations.
Telecollaboration helped gain cultural competence.	Telecollaboration helped learning new things about French culture.	Telecollaboration helped in understanding the social, cultural, and political situation of the country.
The differences in work schedules posed challenges to the effectiveness of telecollaboration.	Different deadlines for the two parties resulted in conflicts.	Different deadlines for the two parties resulted in conflicts.
The different tasks for two parties could reduce the collaboration.	The difference in some tasks reduced the collaboration between the two parties.	The difference in some tasks reduced the collaboration between the two parties.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Improvement of ESP skills

The students believed they did not learn any specific business or legal English terms because they were already familiar with the terms used in the discussions. However, they acknowledged that they improved their general English language skills and gained some insights into the business and legal aspects of the project.

"We had to rephrase what we were saying to make them understand what we say, because we didn't have the same level of vocabulary like them, so that improved our English" – A French student

However, as García-Sánchez & Gimeno-Sanz (2022) highlight, learning ESP entails not only learning English specific to the profession but also the improvement of communication skills that will equip them to become international citizens. Some students whose language was already at the C1 level of the CEFR did not necessarily improve their language skills, but their organisation skills, time management skills, business knowledge, legal knowledge, financial knowledge, communication skills (minimising misunderstandings), convincing skills, and video-creation skills.

"Well, rather than English language skills, I learned how to manage time and get the work done without getting stressed. Also, how to work with people with different views " – An SL student

This study also corroborates the findings of Guarda (2013), that engaging non-native speakers of the target language results in less anxiety among students.

"Since English is not their first language, we also felt comfortable in using the language, to make mistakes" – An SL student

In terms of ESP skills, some students noted an improvement in their language skills, while some claimed the improvement in soft skills more than language skills. Thus, it indicates a modest impact of telecollaboration on their ESP skills. However, the reason for this difference could be the varying CEFR levels among students. If the study used elementary-level students, the results would have been different, but more research is needed to prove this claim.

3.2. Improvement of cultural competence

Students of both cultures revealed that the culture posed no barriers when communicating with each other as all the members were open-minded. In line with many previous studies (e.g. Lee, 2019; Manegre & Udeshinee, 2022), this study revealed that telecollaboration improved their cultural competence, which supports them to become global citizens.

"Collaboration is all about understanding each other and their expectations and coming to a middle point"- SL student.

SL students mentioned their perception of French culture changed after the collaboration because they had previously visualised its culture as it was portrayed in popular movies and TV series. Although SL students knew about the French culture more than French students did about Sri Lankan culture, they still learned new things about it. Similarly, French students obtained some insights into Sri Lankan people and culture through collaboration.

3.3. Challenges of telecollaboration

The project also encountered challenges. Confirming the findings of Helm (2015) and O'Dowd & Ritter (2006), this study reveals that lack of student motivation, the difference in aims and approaches to the exchange, students' workload, and different timelines were challenges encountered in the project. There seemed to be some conflicts between the two groups, mainly because they did not share the same purpose, leading to less motivation in some SL students.

"We were not stressed about the presentations, because we were not given marks, we wanted to have fun. Also, you can't experiment with things in assignments, this was a good opportunity to do some experiments, to try out new things" – An SL student

Another challenge highlighted were tight deadlines. Further, different deadlines for each party impeded effective collaboration. The allocation of different tasks, such as Law students handling contracts and Business students focusing on business plans, limited opportunities for collaboration.

3.4. Recommendations for better telecollaboration

Students suggested that the time a student can commit to the project should be considered when recruiting them. They also proposed enhancing flexibility in schedules and providing clear explanations of roles for both parties to enhance the success of the project. Further, SL students suggested that allowing both parties to present at the competition would increase collaboration.

4. Conclusions

This study examined how ESP and soft skills could be improved in interdisciplinary telecollaboration. The study's findings indicated that telecollaboration supported the students who were at the C1 level especially with improving their soft skills, while helping the rest of the students to improve both language and soft skills. The study had some limitations. First, the evaluation method used for the two parties was not the same. Sri Lankans were given a certificate, and the French were given marks; this may have affected the students' motivation level. Second, the deadlines differed for the two parties; this would also have affected the students' motivation and engagement. However, it would also be interesting to examine the results of such a telecollaboration, which includes the same evaluation method and deadlines. Finally, a greater collaboration could have been fostered if both parties were involved in the same evaluation process.

Acknowledgements

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