

Out-of-Class Online Language Learning Partnership Between Russian and American Students: Analysis of Tandem Project Results

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Abstract. A telecollaborative project between Russian and American students is analyzed in terms of its organization, technology, and linguistic and intercultural aspects involved. Conditions for creating a collaborative environment are described, with the conversational topics, intended outcomes, and some pitfalls of the project being accentuated. The main conclusion of the project is the necessity of introducing intercultural aspects well in advance in order to teach students to distinguish the cultural dimension of their communication in the tandem sessions of the project.

Keywords: Communicative skills · Native speaker · Non-native speaker · Instructor · Telecollaborative project · Student groups · Language level · Videoconference · Drawbacks of the project · Mistake correction

1 Introduction

One of the reputable ways of developing learners' communicative skills is their participation in tandem projects with partners from target language countries. Out-of-class interaction with native speakers (NS) is crucial to practice conversation and interaction management in real-life contexts. Such projects allow the participants to preserve the balance of interests because each of the participants plays two parts by turns: both of a learner of the foreign language and expert of the mother tongue. This decreases the risk of "face loss," stimulates negotiation of meaning of unknown words and notions, and contributes to familiarization with little-known cultural realities [1, 2]. Eventually it increases learners' motivation to study and "learners' confidence and intercultural competence." To make it more efficient, a proper preliminary task design stage should be paid serious attention [3].

Some researchers believe that "all language interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers have a cultural dimension even though it may not be foregrounded" [4], thus becoming intended outcomes of collaborative projects. Online intercultural

activities have become popular and are more and more successfully integrated into the foreign language classroom [5] in the format of telecollaboration.

The technology by which long-distance exchanges are carried out and the degree of access to it have an undeniably strong impact on the course of the exchange. Most commonly used communication tools today are still more text oriented, while video- and audio-based tools are gaining in importance. This consideration seems encouraging as we describe our pilot research into an online language learning partnership between Russian and American students, which was a semester-long project in 2013–2014 intending to evaluate the following aspects of collaborative learning:

- whether it increases the participants' motivation in language learning;
- whether the learners negotiate meaning effectively and whether native speakers can be real experts in the explanation of linguistic issues;
- which conversational topics are the most suitable for this type of collaboration;
- which format and technical means are suitable for this type of collaboration.

2 Background

The project under consideration grew out of the following prerequisites:

1. the steady interest in innovative approaches (particularly based on using ICT) in SLA which has been manifested for years through different projects at the Linguistics and Cross-Cultural Communication Department of SPbPU (see for example, [6, 7]);
2. substantial experience of Webilang developers in running Russian-American tandem projects for second language learners for 5 years (mainly for students of Omsk Law Academy and their American counterparts). (For details, see [8, 9]).

To create conditions for a collaborative environment for Russian students and teachers of English, and American students and teachers of Russian, the site Webilang.com was designed in 2012. The site offers a venue for delivering courses led by **native speaker instructors** and projects where students are connected with **native speaker students**. Webilang has audio and text blogs, a virtual classroom for synchronous communication, and a learning management system (LMS) called *Webilang Intranet* (Fig. 1).

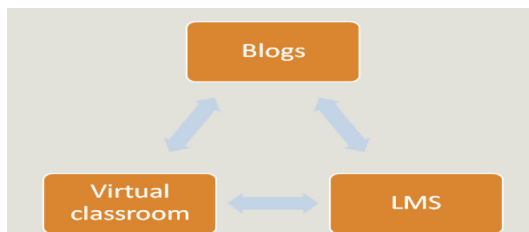


Fig. 1. The Webilang site architecture

3 Procedure

Instructors and learners met in the audio-video synchronous environment for eight sessions (1 h to 1 h 30 per session).

The project between a group of 8 SPbPU (St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, St. Petersburg, Russia) master's students majoring in civil engineering and a group of 5 UTA (University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA) university students studying Russian lasted for 14 weeks during the fall semester of 2013–2014. Five mini-groups of two to three students were formed. Students recorded each dyadic or triadic meeting with their partner/s and send recordings to their instructor. Instructors checked the submitted tasks, analyzed the discussions, and prepared individual recommendations for participants for the next meeting.

Students were required to do writing tasks related to the topic under discussion beforehand, so that their native speaker partners could correct it and provide feedback during the on-line session. It was agreed that the tasks should be alternatively conducted in English and in Russian during each on-line session. At the end of the course all the participants were asked to complete a final fourteen-item survey. Twelve of them were 7-point semantic differential scale questions aiming at measuring students' attitude toward learning English, their English teacher and English-speaking counterparts; their motivation to learn English; degree of anxiety while speaking the FL/TL in and outside the classroom; and preferences in suggested communication tasks.

The role of the instructors' collaboration in making decisions on task choice and sequencing [3] and preventing possible failures of telecollaborative projects [10] is of extreme importance. Most examples of task sequencing in the literature generally follow three different stages in their exchange: (1) an introduction/opening phase which gives learners the opportunity to get to know their remote partners and the latter's culture better through information exchange; (2) a comparative phase, in which students use different types of tasks to engage in comparisons of different aspects of their home and target cultures, and (3) a final stage, in which a result is produced in the form of a piece of work reflecting the students' collaboration [3]. According to the above schemata the instructors agreed upon the course design presented in Table 1.

4 Results and Discussion

The analysis of the questionnaire data from the Russian participants of the project showed that they have a high motivation to learn General English ($M = 6.7$) and English for practical purposes (career growth, participation in international conferences, exchange programs, etc.) ($M = 6.6$), and a very positive attitude towards learning English ($M = 6.7$), and toward their American partners ($M = 7$) and the English teacher ($M = 6.7$). Despite the last finding, students noticed that they felt more nervous while speaking at the lesson ($M = 4$) than during telecommunication sessions with their American partners ($M = 1.9$).

As for the course syllabus, the students approved of all the topics, except for the last one, which was the most professionally oriented. The reasons might be various: for example, it was not elaborated well enough by the instructors, which is crucial for

Table 1. Main topics and intended outcomes in Webilang course program

Task type	Description	Intended outcomes
(1) Information exchange on <i>cultural and geographical autobiographies</i>	1. Establishment of personal relationship with partners through answering a series of questions prepared by both parties beforehand 2. Presenting favorite locations to the partner and discussion through <i>Virtual Touring Around One's Native City</i>	Establishment of personal relationship with partners/increased awareness of cultural differences
Engaging in informal discussion based on <i>provoking newspaper articles</i>	Students are provided with general questions (topics 3&4 in our course) 3. <i>Science & the Future of the World</i> 4. <i>Global Warming: A Real Problem or a Bluff?</i>	Learner independence/development of fluency in the target language
Carrying out virtual <i>interviews on education</i> , producing a written report based on an interview process.	5. Group discussion on <i>Peculiarities of Russian and American systems of Higher Education</i> in an on-line conference mode	Familiarization with the differences in Russian and American systems of Higher Education
(2) comparison and analysis of job issues	6. Conducting <i>Job Interviews</i> based on the analysis of a target language CV prepared and sent to partner beforehand so that she/he can correct it and make up related questions in a partner's target language	Familiarization with the specificities of hunting for a job in the USA and Russia
(3) Collaboration on product creation	7. <i>Developing and promoting a new device</i> aimed at focusing on communication and productive activity for professional purposes	Mastering teamwork among students and developing reciprocity

success of such kind of task [11], requiring higher-order cognitive skills, according to the revised Bloom's taxonomy. Another matter of importance is that the last task was mainly oriented toward Russian students majoring in civil engineering, ignoring the fact that some of the American participants were from the Humanities domain and were not interested in device design.

According to the instructors' report and the students' diaries, the principal drawback of the project was related to technical glitches such as faulty connections

or problems with sound and image (no sound, poor image, distortions, etc.). The participants noted that technical problems had decreased their “useful” communication time. The experts stress technical difficulties remain the most important disadvantage of synchronous voice-based CMC projects. Therefore, teachers should be prepared to face and solve these kinds of unavoidable problems when using this medium [12].

Participants also criticized the complexity of the procedure for recording sessions on the Webilang platform. They recommended using a simpler and more easily available platform such as Skype or social networks in future telecollaborative projects. The participants also wished that they had more freedom to choose materials for discussion (films, songs, poems, articles, TV programs).

Despite these drawbacks, some of the participants arranged additional meetings using Webilang. One of them was devoted to idiomatic expressions in American English and Russian. When asked during a follow-up interview 6 months after the project had finished if they continued to contact their partners, the Russian participants answered that they hadn’t, stressing that if the project had continued they would have found ways to overcome such obstacles as the lack of free time and the above-mentioned difficulties. This proves that despite high internal motivation to communicate with native speakers of the target language, learners need external support, an organized framework, a teacher’s feedback, and an opportunity to report about their findings in order make such contacts long-lasting.

The main positive feature of the project was a very friendly atmosphere created by the mutual attitudes of the participants toward one another. Most of them would smile and even laugh during the sessions when discussing certain funny words and expressions in both languages. Both parties, especially the Russians, tried to make sure they were properly understood and repeated the necessary words over again for better comprehension by their American counterparts.

The following weaknesses were also noted and should be taken into account in future telecollaborative projects:

- The assumed “balance of interests” during each session (regular taking of turns and target/native language use) was not often preserved. Course instructors pointed this out in their after-session recommendations, but it did not improve the situation to a great extent. This is probably difficult to avoid if the project mainly runs outside the classroom.
- The Russian participants were more active, aggressive, and direct in correcting their partners’ mistakes, but at the same time demonstrated friendliness by facial expression and gestures. Thus, pre-teaching hedging structures and ways of politely interrupting partners (in both the native and target language) is desirable in such projects in the future. The Americans did not correct their partners unless the mistake resulted in communication failure. For example, no corrections were made in the question asked by a Russian participant, “*How much the house costs?*”
- Another shortcoming was a lack of instruction concerning the necessity of collecting more examples of appropriate language use by native speakers.
- The fourth drawback of the project was lack of participation on the part of the American students, as the Russian participants were generally more active. Unfortunately, lack of participation on one side jeopardizes the quality of the whole project.

5 Conclusion

Reflecting on our experience with the Webilang tandem learning project, we would definitely advocate for the continuation of similar projects in the future. In spite of certain pitfalls, partially of a technical nature, we consider the positive learning atmosphere to be the main achievement of this project. Taking into account the fact that direct instructor intervention into the communication process is less effective, one recommendation for the future of tandem learning projects is to draw attention to the problem of intercultural aspects well in advance. Students should be encouraged to be more active in their communication and see the enormous opportunities for cultural interaction afforded by the project.

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