

SUMMING UP: FIRST EXPERIENCE OF FOUR CIS UNIVERSITIES IN IMPLEMENTING A CROSS-CULTURAL INTERNET PROJECT

Alla L. Nazarenko

Ludmila G. Sizykh

Victoria A. Fandei

Faculty of Foreign Languages
Lomonosov Moscow State University

Elena A. Malashenko
Faculty of Medical Ecology
Sakharov International University of Ecology

Svitlana L. Bobyr
Department of Pedagogy and FLT Methodology

Shevchenko Chernihiv National Teacher Training University

Baktygul Zh. Kurmanova
Department of the Kazakh Language
Aktuybinsk State University named after Kudaibergen Zhubanov

Abstract

The article describes the first experience of four universities of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in conducting an international intercultural project based on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The goal of the project for the students was to introduce the traditions of hospitality existing in their cultural world to all the partners and to increase their own cross-cultural awareness. Implementing the project method with active use of various technologies including telecommunication systems, wikispaces.com, video technologies, etc. made it possible to solve a number of didactic tasks and get promising results.

Introduction

The rapid development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has affected all spheres of human activity and social institutions including education. First and foremost, education could not but adopt new technologies for their literally miraculous possibilities in terms of providing access to the richest educational and cultural resources existing in the world and the ability to ensure communication with colleagues in any corner of the globe to discuss mutually interesting issues. Making proper didactic use of ICT can contribute to raising the standards of education, increasing its quality and efficacy. It also opens up new opportunities for organizing cooperation and collaboration between universities enabling them to tackle issues topical for the whole globalized world.

Apart from that, today's children and grandchildren were born in the age of ICT, so they can handle them easily. They are even called "digital aborigines" and they expect that schools and universities will provide the electronic environment so "natural" to them.

The domain of linguistic education has its own benefits from incorporating technologies into teaching and learning foreign languages and cultures. Teachers and students can search the Internet for the information they need without going to their university / city library. The World Wide Web is a boundless "library" where one can find any text and authentic materials in any language. The technologies can connect people from different cultures, speaking different languages, so learners can benefit from communicating with native speakers, discovering nuances of language usage which might be unknown to their non-native teachers.

Knowing foreign languages and, first of all, English is surely a must for people who live and realize themselves as professionals in a globalized information society. But knowledge of a language, however excellent, is not enough for complete understanding of one's partner who has a different cultural background. Neither is language knowledge alone enough to avoid relying on false stereotypes that people are rather frequently inclined to do and which nearly as frequently deceives them and puts them into an awkward situation. One should definitely know his/her partners' culture's peculiarities so as not to touch upon some delicate subject or theme, and not to unconsciously offend or insult their counterpart with speech behavior or body language inappropriate in that other culture. Teaching the basics and laws of cross-cultural communication is also one of the tasks of contemporary linguistic education.

With all these aspects in mind, in 2004, American colleagues from East Carolina University (NC, USA) started "Global Understanding", an intercultural internet project involving several universities around the world, which has successfully been working and growing since that time. Lomonosov Moscow State University (LMSU) has had the honor and pleasure to be a part of this program since 2005 (Nazarenko & Sizykh, 2009).

The idea, goal and participants of the intercultural internet project

Our previous experience at LMSU gave an impetus to organize a project which would involve university students from four countries of the former Soviet Union: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine. The project was initiated by the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies of LMSU and implemented by a team headed by Prof. Alla Leonidovna Nazarenko, Doctor of Philology, Head of the Linguistics and Information Technologies Department. From the CIS, the team included Dr. Elena Alexandrovna Malashenko, Director of the Language Centre, Head of the Foreign Languages Department of the Faculty of Medical Ecology of the International University of Ecology named after A.D. Sakharov (Minsk, Belarus); Baktygul Zhakenovna Kurmanova, Doctor of Pedagogy, Head of the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy, Aktobe State University named after Kudaibergen Zhubanov (Kazakhstan); Svitlana Leonidivna Bobyr, Doctor of Pedagogy, Head of the Department of Pedagogy and Methods of Foreign Language Teaching, Chernihiv National Teacher Training University named after T.G. Shevchenko (Ukraine). Each of them monitored a group of students from their university.

A reason for starting the project among CIS states is that CIS peoples have a lot in common in terms of their history. After the collapse of the USSR many ties were lost. However, the logic of globalization presupposes/dictates their communication and interaction in various spheres, especially as they are close neighbors. Besides, the Russian language is still present in their lives: the parents and grandparents of today's students nearly all know it, so in many families it is not something alien. In quite a few universities of these countries it is on the curricula, so we were lucky to have a language which could be readily used as a lingua franca.

But, history separated these nations belonging once to the same country/state. New generations grew up out of direct contact with each other, in different environments. Thus, now young people in these countries know very little about each other's cultures. The idea behind the project was to bridge this gap and to introduce them and their cultures to each other.

Within the project, the subject of discussion was "Traditions of Hospitality". The reason was that in real life, acquaintance with a stranger who is introduced to a person or to his / her family or home, often starts with welcoming this "guest", paying special attention to him / her, showing respect and trying to please. This idea was introduced to students on the four sides and the main principles of cross-cultural interaction were explained to them: friendly attitude to the partners, tolerance to their "otherness" as representatives of other cultures with their specific characteristics, recognition of their right to be different as part of a multicultural diverse world. Once more it was emphasized that in our modern globalized world people cannot live in seclusion in their unique civilization. Humankind has already stepped over many borders separating and dividing them and modern society needs communication, joint discussions and joint decisions. To be able to perform successfully in this world people need to know about their counterparts. They should behave properly, both verbally and non-verbally. These needs are to be met by education. We consider this project as a modest contribution to the great task of education.

It is noteworthy to stress again that the implementation of the project became possible thanks to modern information and communication technologies which enabled the participants to have video conferences at an agreed time (across time zones), to see ("meet") each other, exchange information on the suggested topic and to ask and discuss various questions. The value of this intercultural on-line project is difficult to overestimate: the participants gained an experience which deserves a comprehensive and thorough analysis. This paper is a preliminary attempt to tackle this task.

The history and the didactic value of the project method

The project method is not new in education. It came into being in 1920 in the USA. It is also known as the task-based or problem-solving method. The founders of this method were the American philosopher and educator John Dewey, his followers W. H. Kilpatrick, E. Collings, J. Stephenson, and E. Thorndike. They were seeking ways to stimulate students' independent thinking and striving to teach them skills required to manage a knowledge organization that makes students active participants in the learning process. John Dewey (1997) defines reflection as the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends. E. Collings

(1926) pointed out that students are especially attracted by the ability to reach a new unknown goal (a target incentive) and to go through the experience of activity. J. Stephenson, who is famous for his concept of potential abilities, insisted that effective and adequate response to the unknown and varying circumstances assumes morality, prudence, self-confidence, ability to run risks and readiness to learn from one's mistakes (Stephenson & York, 1998). Russian contemporary followers of the project-based methodology (Polat, 2013) further developed the idea to be implemented with the use of ICT.

Summarizing common definitions, the project could be qualified as a scale creative task which assumes an important and long-term organized (often extracurricular) authentic information gathering and research activity. In the course of the discussion the students crucially examine, compare and contrast acquired information and then format it. The project presupposes the availability of the specific final product in the form of papers, movies, presentations, etc, produced by the students. The students are given *carte blanche* to choose any method of goal attainment. Project work is characterized by high interactivity ("communicativity") and assumes the expression of students' opinions, feelings, decision-making and personal responsibility for the result. Such highly personalized involvement of students accounts for a highly emotional spirit of educational activity.

Basic didactic principles of the project

Working on the project we leaned on the basic principles of project-based learning such as the methodological (interactivity, integrated learning), psychological (zone of proximal development, learner-centered education) and didactic (problem-based learning, collaborative learning, individualization).

The *interactive* methodology groups the students, promotes communication and discussions and favors the learner's active role. *Integrated learning* is the integration of students' knowledge and practical skills in various fields of activity and the development of their interdisciplinary and critical thinking. The principle of students' *zone of proximal development* (McLeod, 2012) refers to a problem-solving task which exceeds their cognitive abilities at the moment they start the project/task. The *learner-centered approach* focuses on the student as an agent of the educational process (Barraket, 2005). The principle of *problem-based learning* (Barge, 2010) stimulates students' research and creativity, the use of nonstandard thinking techniques, and the ability to take the initiative and independently plan their actions which would further develop their cognitive skills. *Collaborative learning* presupposes not only motivation to collaborate, but also the students' cooperation and lively participation in communication activity during the project preparation process. *Individualization* is a principle which recognizes that every person possesses unique psychological characteristics. The teacher should organize students' work focusing on their individual capabilities, interests and needs.

The stages/phases of the project

The project consists of a set of stages or phases. Each phase deals with definite tasks. V.V. Kopylova (2005) suggests seven phases: preparation, planning, research, analyzing, sharing the results, project evaluation report and future project planning. We highlighted three main stages in our project: preparation (including

planning), implementation (including research, processing the information, actual work on creating a 'product' and analysis of it) and the final stage – link with and presentation of the 'product' to the partners. The time for the completion of the project was one month. During the *preparation* stage (one week) the main goal of the teachers who monitored the project in the partner universities was to motivate students and create teams. Enrollment in the project was on a voluntary basis. At the first meetings with potential participants teachers explained the idea of the project and its place and role in the context of global intercultural communication available due to modern ICT. It was also made clear that students would be given a free hand as to the choice of the format of their 'final product' whether it was to be a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation or a video based on their own scenario. The students became familiar with the necessary elements of their work (looking for pertinent information and its processing according to the task of the project, compiling plans and writing scenarios, preparing costumes for theatrical actions if necessary and so on). They asked many questions about the details of the project.

At the initiative of the Russian partners an e-learning resource site on the platform of Wikispaces.com was created to support academic management, methodological activity and the process of creative work of all the participants in the project. The choice and successful use of this platform were determined by its philosophy based on the principles and key ideas of constructivism:

1. It is not possible to transfer knowledge to students 'as it is'. It is only possible to create learning conditions and environments for the successful construction of knowledge. The Wiki technology contributes aptly to the realization of this idea as it provides learners with the possibility to participate actively in cooperative website content compiling (Rudakova, 2006).
2. Learners are supposed to be "actors" of the cognitive process and maintain interaction with each other based on their preceding cognitive and empirical experience. This principle is supported by the availability of a large number of communication tools: public messaging service, built-in discussion forum, etc. with the help of which learners can exchange opinions, post their suggestions and comments, questions, etc.
3. Education is a social process. The principles of social constructivism are reflected in the possibilities to organize learning web-communities or groups and to establish and maintain interaction which is necessary for the effective cognitive process (Nazarenko, Sizykh, Fandei, 2012).

The didactic features of the Wikispaces platform were also taken into consideration. One of the most important features is the efficacy of presenting academic information: it is possible to upload files of different formats (audio, video, graphics, text documents), to create links to external and internal internet resources and so on.

Electronic Educational Resource (EER) "Culture for Understanding" created on the platform of Wikispaces.com (<http://culture-for-understanding.wikispaces.com/>) contains general information about this project (conceptual foundation, learning goals and tasks, issues for discussion), tutorial and reference materials referring to the theme of the project and a special section for publications of the final products

of all participants. Communication within the framework of the project among learners and between learners and teachers was also realized through the site.

At the *implementation* stage, which lasted about three weeks, the teams had once and for all been shaped (the students made a decision to stay or to leave the project) and the functions of each participant were defined. The Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian students chose to create a video of some theatrical performance. They drafted scripts, discussed the versions and then they dramatized, rehearsed, and prepared the scenery and theatrical costumes for the selected version. The students from Kazakhstan preferred to work on a PowerPoint presentation, so they concentrated on the plan of it, the search for appropriate thematic pictures, selecting the national ornaments and on writing the explanatory texts.

Within groups in each university (which acted as 'national teams') the roles were distributed by the students themselves: some sought pertinent information, if necessary translated texts they found, adapted them in compliance with the goal of the project and the strict time limit, wrote scenarios and scripts and rehearsed their shows being aware of the Internet specifics (sound signal, etc). Others, more technically experienced, were involved in the recording of video and making slide presentations. They made all sort of things: recorded video clips, took photos, selected and matched the background music, dubbed and tried to make it brief and representative. They were also concerned with finding a noise isolated place with suitable lighting to make video-recordings of good quality. Yet another part of a team worked on the costumes and props. Since the project was held soon after Easter, the Ukrainian and Belarusian students, for instance, decided to decorate their tables with ethnic embroidered towels, Easter cakes, painted Easter eggs, and a sheaf of wheat. The Ukrainian towels and painted Easter eggs on ribbons were hung upon the wall.

Belarusian students presented a video clip of a short theatrical show which started with greetings addressing all participants and were followed by a scene of welcoming visitors to a Belarusian home. They laid the table using a tablecloth and dishes decorated with ethnic ornaments. They wore ethnic clothes and surprised the participants from the three other countries by speaking the Belarusian native language. Belarusian is an Eastern Slavonic language with about 7.5 million speakers in Belarus. It is closely related to Russian and Ukrainian as they all have the same basis – the Old Russian language. So these three participants could feel that they were part of a single culture and have much in common.

Russian students also chose a video format to introduce their own perception of the given topic "Traditions of Hospitality": as Russia is a multinational and multicultural country and there exist various customs of hospitality in different regions, it is impossible to describe traditions of all nationalities at the same time. They thought that presenting traditions of only one or two nationalities would seem unfair of other nationalities. So they found a compromise: they decided to present the "hospitality of a town" to a foreigner. The choice of the format of presentation (a video clip) was justified by the fact that this way of presenting information is very dynamic. The students discussed all stages of the project elaboration and analyzed it in the section "Project Design" on the wiki site.

In their PowerPoint presentation students from Kazakhstan dwelt upon the plentiful traditions of greeting a male guest in a Kazakh home, of treating him with great respect and honor and a feast of national cuisine. Their slides were artistically framed with ethnic ornaments and the presenters wore national dress.

The climax of the project was certainly the *final stage*, i.e. the video link with partners and presentation of the 'products' (all the students' presentations can now be viewed on the wiki site: culture-for-understanding.wikispaces.com). This stage demonstrated not only the tangible outcome of students' work but also how students were excited, how deeply they were motivated and dedicated, and how much they wanted to present their culture in the most understandable way. They were eager to show generous hospitality as one of the characteristic features of their peoples, to promote their culture and make their partners like it. Technical problems that sometimes prevented them from performing with the best quality were taken very close to heart.

Summing Up

The intercultural project of four countries' universities was our first trial, a pilot project. To be able to make a broad generalization the experiment should be repeated several times. Still some positive didactic outcomes could be clearly seen even after this single experience. They can be summarized as follows:

- High motivation of the students, which is the "engine" and the "catalyst" of learning. It was reflected in students' enthusiastic independent work on the project and their strong desire to continue the collaboration in the next academic year;
- Undoubted academic achievements due to purposeful work with a big amount of information and learning a lot about their cultural heritage;
- Progress in terms of their cross-cultural awareness and competence as a result of the interaction with their partners and learning from their presentations about other cultures;
- Increase in their critical thinking ability expressed in the intention to improve their performance in the future on the basis of the critical assessment of their final 'products' and conclusions taken;
- Further development of their cognitive skills, their ability to research and analyze which revealed itself in their writing and publishing scholarly articles and giving papers at scientific conferences.

Apart from the above mentioned it is also worthwhile to accentuate that organization of such intercultural projects with the use of the information and communication technologies is a powerful tool of education and upbringing of the younger generation in the spirit of a respectful attitude towards the diverse cultures of the contemporary globalized world.

The first 'lessons' of the pilot project provided a strong challenge for all the participants to continue. At the same time, it was also recognized that some improvements should be made in terms of more detailed planning and analyzing every step of the project implementation.

References

- Barge, S. (2010). Principles of problem and project based learning: The Aalborg PBL model. Denmark: Aalborg University. Retrieved from http://www.pbl.aau.dk/digitalAssets/33/33124_pbl_aalborg_modellen.pdf
- Barraket, J. (2005). Teaching research method using a student-centered approach? Critical reflections on practice. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 2, 64-74. Retrieved from http://jutlp.uow.edu.au/2005_v02_i02/barraket004.html
- Collings, E. (1926). *Opit raboti amyericanskoy shkoli po myetodu proyektov* [The experience of using project method at an American school]. Moscow: Novaya Moskva.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *Psihologiya y pyedagogika mishlyeniya* [How we think; translation from English]. Moscow: Sovyershynstvo.
- Kopylova, V. (2005). *Myetodika proyektnoy raboti na urokah angliyskogo yazika* [The methodology of project work at English lessons]. Moscow: Drofa.
- McLeod, S. (2012). *Zone of proximal development*. Retrieved from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/Zone-of-Proximal-Development.html>
- Nazarenko, A., & Sizykh, L. (2009). From interpersonal international communication – to global understanding. *Proceedings of the 2nd GPE Annual Conference* (pp. 10-14). Beijing: China Agricultural University Press.
- Nazarenko, A., & Sizykh, L., Fandei, V. (2012). A Socio-constructivist approach to enhancing students' learning and participation in the "Global Understanding" Project. *EDULEARN12: 4th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies: Conference Proceedings* (pp. 5226-5229). Barcelona, Spain: International Association of Technology, Education and Development (IATED). ISBN 9788469534915.
- Polat, E. *Myetod proyektov* [Project-based method]. Retrieved from <http://distant.ioso.ru/project/meth%20project/metod%20pro.htm>
- Rudakova, D. (2006). Razvitiye kommunikativnoy kulturyi na osnovye ispol'zovaniya informatsionno-kommunikativnyh tyehnologiy [Development of the communicative culture on the basis of ICT]. In S. Gudylyna, K. Tikhomirova, & D. Rudakova (Eds.), *Obrazovatel'niye tyehnologii XXI vyeka* [Educational technologies of the 21st century] (pp. 111-118). Moscow: Izdatyel'stvo Institoota sodyerzhaniya i myetodov oboochyeniya RAO.
- Stephenson, J., & York, M. (1998). *Capability and quality in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

About the Authors

Alla L. Nazarenko, PhD, is full professor, Head of the Department of Linguistics and Information Technologies and serves as Vice-Dean at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University. She lectures in British History and Culture and Theory and Practice in Distance Education. Dr. Nazarenko is a Fulbright Alumnus and holder of "the MSU professor-online" grant of 2012. She has authored about 70 publications (including a monograph and textbooks) on linguistics, functional stylistics, ESP, Russian as a Foreign Language, Cross-Cultural Communication, Distance Education and E-learning.

Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/ffllingvit/about/staff/alnazarenko>

E-mail: anazarenkoster@gmail.com

Ludmila G. Syzikh is a senior teacher at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University. She is the teacher of the Global Understanding course at LMSU. Her areas of interests include intercultural communication, distance learning and EFL.

E-mail: lgsyzikh@gmail.com

Viktoriya A. Fandei is a PhD lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University. Her areas of interests include intercultural communication, EFL, blended learning and distance learning.

E-mail: insatiable_in@mail.ru

Elena A. Malashenko, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Head of the Foreign Languages Department at International Sakharov Ecological University in Minsk, Belarus. She lectured as an English teacher in Germany for three years and on return from Germany as an English teacher for twenty years in the various regions of the former USSR. Under the supervision of professor E.S. Polat, she wrote her thesis on 'Methodological basis of distance translator training in the system of further education'. The software for the project was provided by American charity organization "Project Harmony". Elena Malashenko is an author of about 40 publications (including a monograph and textbooks) on language teaching methods, ESP, Distance Education and E-learning.

E-mail: elena_malashenko@ymail.com

Svitlana L. Bobyr, PhD is an Assistant Professor and Head of the Pedagogy and FL Teaching Methodology Department at Chernihiv Taras Shevchenko National Pedagogical University, Ukraine. She lectures in Methodology of FL Teaching, Methodology of Research Work, EFL Teacher's Culture of Speech, and Introduction to Specialization. She is Vice-President of TESOL-Ukraine and the author of more than 100 publications. She is also the author of 3 optional courses – EFL Teacher's Culture of Speech, Logical Accentuation of the English Speech and Introduction into Specialization.

E-mail: sabobyr@ukr.net

Baktygul Zh. Kurmanova, PhD, Doctor of Pedagogy, Professor, Head of the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy, K.Zhubanov Aktobe State University, Kazakhstan. She lectures on Methodology of Kazakh Language Teaching, on Information Technologies in Teaching Languages and on Psychology and Pedagogy.

E-mail: baktigul_2001@mail.ru