Virtual Environment and Social Skills Development

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Abstract

The use of the videoconference technology has recently become a promising field in network-based language teaching (NBLT). In the foreign language context, the significance of this technology lies basically in providing students with the opportunity to engage in meaningful speech interactions and, therefore, creating a supporting learning environment that enables them to develop real-life cross-cultural conversations, particularly with native speakers. On this basis, the present paper seeks to assess the impact of implementing such technology on students' social skills development. More importantly, it makes use of the Global Understanding Project to show the extent to which virtual intercultural encounters can affect the development of tolerance, respect and understanding among students in a world driven by its complex multiculturality; a world within which successful communication means a great deal.

Introduction

Recently, language contact has been significantly facilitated via the introduction of new technological tools, affording EFL students the opportunity to engage in computer-mediated intercultural communication through approaches termed "telecollaborative". The present case study is one example of these telecollaborations. It is indeed a world-cultures course taught through virtual classroom. A virtual classroom is a "virtual place to meet" that connects teachers and students. It is a setting that allows students to engage in challenging discussions, test their knowledge, access multiple resources, and receive assignments and garner feedback from teachers. It is a truly engaging learning environment within which students can get remote assistance from teachers and education specialists.

In Global Understanding Project, the virtual classroom is a space wherein Internet is used to join partner countries from different corners of the world (Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas) and to have a direct personal experience through real-time videoconferencing, chat, and emails, i.e. synchronous and asynchronous communication. This paper is, therefore, an attempt to highlight the ways in which this project contributes to establishing an intercultural dialogue.

Interculturality

The Global Understanding Course provides a format for students from the 23 member institutions to communicate worldwide and exchange insights about their cultures via video-conferencing and instant chat technology. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this project is to create an intercultural learning environment and sustain a direct international experience among students from different educational institutions across the globe. The students (usually 16 in number) meet for 70 minutes for almost 16 weeks per semester. They are divided into two groups A and B, so that each class session includes discussion in both small groups for group A and one-to-one chat for group B. The discussions are usually centred on college life, family, the meaning of life, stereotypes, and prejudices.

The Global Understanding project aims at developing an atmosphere of trust and confidence that encourages the students to share knowledge, opinions, values, attitudes and emotions, and most importantly to develop effective collaborative skills. Through one-to-one collaboration, students become more reflective, and learn to identify themselves in comparison with others.

The Global Understanding Course generates and promotes an intercultural dialogue founded on respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups from different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Such dialogue is characteristically built on mutual understanding, openness and a genuine respect for and appreciation of diversity, equal human dignity and equal human rights. It strongly acknowledges a positive attitude towards diversity, considering the meeting between people with different beliefs and cultural profiles as enriching for collaborators. It also conceives that individual identity is subject to development, change and adaptation within a globalized world where multiculturality is prevailing. As such, intercultural dialogue is a crucial tool for achieving social cohesion within multicultural societies and for fostering a sense of inclusiveness in which individuals and groups cannot by no means be marginalized or characterized as being outsiders.

Intercultural Dialogue Requirements

Indisputably, respect and tolerance constitute the cornerstone of a successful intercultural dialogue. To illustrate this within the present research work, we will see in what follows instances from one of our classes that consisted of Algerian students and their American partners. The intention is therefore to spot the impact of cross-cultural interaction in consolidating and reinforcing mutual respect and tolerance.

Respect

Respect indicates a positive feeling of esteem and good opinion about someone or something. This feeling is then translated into specific actions and conduct representative of that esteem. Be it for a person or other entity (such as a nation or a religion), respect is identified by Jonathan Haidt as one of five fundamental moral values shared to a greater or lesser degree by different societies and individuals, and when someone fails to show respect towards someone else's belief and way of action, then there is no foundation for successful communication and achievement of their common objectives (see Haidt & Graham 2007).

In the following examples, we will demonstrate how respect is shown in our students' use of language during conversation. By following specific conventions, respect is manifested in curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend stereotypes about others' culture. Algerian students will be referred to as TUA (Tlemcen University of Algeria) and American students as ECU (East Carolina University)

1)-TUA: in fact I study all eh the whole of the days in the week except the Thursday and Friday ECU: wow!! that's a lot, that's good

2)-TUA: … (leo) I haven't received a message from you, I don't know why?
ECU: ok to answer your question, I tried to email you but, I might have received the wrong email address
TUA: yes
ECU: but I wrote you a very long email and I'm very sorry that you didn't receive it
TUA: yeah because I think it was a mistake in my email at first, I don't know if you received the second one, but I'm going to try to send you the new one … just to receive messages from you

3)-ECU: I study geology, …and geology is the study of rocks and minerals on the earth
TUA: yeah

4)-ECU: I'm in, I'm in a club that is called the NAACP and I can explain to you what that is if you'd like.
TUA: yeah sure

5)-TUA: that's what I wanted to know
ECU: ok I was glad that I explained it

6)-ECU: you got a question for me or you want me to start?
TUA: if you want to start it's a pleasure to listen to you

7)-ECU: that's sad, I cried too when I went to the elementary school
TUA: so good … I found somebody who is like me

8)-TUA: ok thank you
    ECU: you're welcome, thank you

9)-TUA: nice to meet you today
    ECU: you too …do you want to start or do you want me to start?

10)-TUA: ok, what do you suggest as a topic for today?
    ECU: it's an open discussion … we can talk about anything you would like to.

11)-TUA: what do you think about us?
    ECU: ah!!…for me it has been good … I learned a lot because I, before I actually knew nothing, so this has been a great experience, I like you all.

12)-TUA: how did you find the experience with us?
    ECU: the experience was very useful for all of us… I think we all learnt something new that we did not know before and it was a lot of fun getting to know people from the other side of the world…that was very interesting… how about you, what do you think about us?
    TUA: it was a useful experience with you.

From the above examples we can notice that most of the speech encompasses special formulas that indicate respect on the part of the speaker. At times, respect was manifested through creating a shared understanding about a topic, like in the case of geology. The important thing for everyone was that each one understands what the other wishes to say as fully as possible while being very nice whether in making or in answering statements. Everyone was trying to empathize with their partners, in such a way that no feeling of disrespect was ever felt in the conversations. On the contrary, positive attitudes were displayed, and a willingness to suspend one's values, beliefs and behaviours and see how they might look from an outsider's perspective.

Tolerance

According to Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, in their document *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*, the concept of 'tolerance' suggests "the need for people of different cultural backgrounds to develop the ability at least to endure the fact that others believe and live differently within a particular society, or in the wider world, although they might share some core values" (2009,p.10). But tolerance should not be confused with respect, since tolerance does not necessarily imply any positive feeling. It is "the practice of deliberately allowing or permitting a thing of which one disapproves. One can meaningfully speak of tolerating, i.e., of allowing or permitting, only if one is in a position to disallow" (Zagorin, 2003,p. 5). It may signify "no more than forbearance and the permission given by the adherents of

a dominant religion for other religions to exist, even though the latter are looked on with disapproval as inferior, mistaken or harmful" (Zagorin, 2003,p. 6).

In an intercultural setting, tolerance is even more important. It is the basis of intercultural competence since it controls the attitudes of the person interacting with people of another culture. A tolerant person is willing to suspend their own values, beliefs and behaviours, and not assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones. They are then able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours. In the following examples there are some instances of tolerance:

1)-ECU: do you drink alcohol?
   TUA: no, no it is forbidden in our religion
   ECU: ah ok
   ECU: hello it's Stacy number 14

2)-TUA: how do you consider the notion of family in the American society?
   ECU: yes my mum, my sister, me and my dog… my closest family
  TUA:=so where is your father?

3)- ECU: if someone was close to you, was secretive about being eh, homosexual
       … eh would that change your view about them?
     TUA: I will have pity of him of course
       … but I'm not going to change my behaviour with him
       … the relationship will stay as it is

4)-TUA: how do you consider the American Muslims and how do you accept them?
   ECU: yeah, I honestly don't think that there are many people who really
       … em for me personally seeing an American Muslim is just like seeing an American
      Jew or an American Christian … that's just their faith and so it doesn't even really
      come up as a problem.
   ECU: however , probably none of us think of anything when we see them
      … but there are still a lot of ignorant people … and I know that when a lot of people
      see American Muslims or Muslims in general the thought of a terrorist comes to their
      mind immediately…and it's just hard to, for people to realize that the general image that
      comes up when you think of terrorist is Muslim… and, and that's in general, but eh I
      mean eventually the majority of American people know that that's not true
      … but there are still ignorant people out there and that's a common misconception

5)-ECU: what is the general opinion or general feelings towards premarital sex?
   …does it happen, does it happen a lot or is just kept quiet? … and is it looked down
   upon? ... sex before marriage… is that looked down upon?
   TUA: hi… well in terms of having sex before marriage in our religion, the answer in
   religion, it's forbidden …in religion it's forbidden to have sex before marriage
   …but this doesn't mean that there is no practice of sex before marriage in all the

Arab societies … there are some exceptions of course… and they are increasing day by day… but in our religion it's forbidden

6)-ECU: are people, are women who get pregnant before marriage looked down upon them?
TUA: there are some parents who don't accept this, and punish of course the girls as well as the boys … but there are some other families who accept the fact

7)-TUA: what's your idea about the third world nations especially Algeria and if ever is this idea changed now?… have you changed your idea within the experience with us?… after this experience?
ECU: they are growing and they should be growing…I think there shouldn't be countries that are suffering so much that their citizens cannot live
… I think that's a good thing that you guys are trying to better yourself by going to college and hopefully you get a job… as a person you need to know who do you want to be and how you want to live and focus on that and not about other people.

From the above examples, we can notice that the communication was successful because students from both sides were able to accept ambiguity and lack of clarity from the other. In example 1, the ECU student did not discuss the TUA student abstinence from drinking alcohol. Likewise, TUA student, in example 2 did not discuss the fact that a dog can be a member of a family. Students' tolerance was even complemented by the skills of taking up another's perspective, of being able to grasp the ideas, feelings and intentions of the other. We can, clearly, see this in the remaining examples. Homosexuality, premarital sex, and premarital pregnancy are taboo topics in Algerian society, and in spite of this, TUA students were open-minded enough to discuss them. ECU students showed the same level of tolerance, for example when TUA student said she would feel pity for a homosexual friend. If these students did not have this tolerant attitude towards the way their partners act and what they believe, there would have been no communication and no achievement of joint objectives.

Tips to Develop Respect and Tolerance

In today's world of globalization, the world is certainly becoming smaller. People of various cultures and who have a set of beliefs that defines the code of conduct and values for their respective cultures are, nowadays, able to communicate freely. Though cultural differences distinguish societies from one another, they find different ways to express thoughts, ideas which can cross cultures through different forms of media like television, newspapers and the Internet. Many people believe that due to the advancements in science and technology, cultural differences tend to disappear through time.

However, in spite of all the good will in the world, miscommunication is likely to happen, especially when there are significant cultural differences between communicators. One important contributor, among many, to the cultural differences is the history of a particular region or country. The events of the past shape the moods and opinions of people living in that specific country and which are certainly different from another country, i.e. we make different meanings of the world, our place in it, and our relationships with others. This cultural difference may lead, in most cases, to miscommunication that may lead, on its turn, to conflict, or aggravate a conflict that already exists.

Unfortunately, most of the variables of cultural differences are much more complex than what we might think of them. Each of them affects the way people communicate, and can be responsible for conflict or the intensification of conflict when it leads to miscommunication or misunderstanding. For this reason, several different theories and models of cultural differences have been designed. These models are included in table A1 (see Appendix A)

To summarize, the main cultural differences that these models and others that have been discussed in other numerous theories, surveys, and investigations that focus on specific countries, regions, and organizations, we may group them in 5 variables:

1) *high context vs. low context,* where in a low context culture things are fully spelled out and are made explicit, and there is considerable dependence on what is actually said or written, whereas in a high context culture communicators assume a great deal of commonality of knowledge and views, so that less is spelled out explicitly and much more is implicit or communicated in indirect ways (Hall 1990).

2) *monochronic vs. polychronic,* where monochronic cultures like to do just one thing at a time and value a certain orderliness and sense of there being an appropriate time and place for everything, whereas polychronic cultures like to do multiple things at the same time (Lewis 1992).

3) *future vs. present vs. past orientation,* where future-oriented societies have a great deal of optimism about the future and think they understand it and can shape it through their actions, whereas past-oriented societies are concerned with traditional values and ways of doing things and tend to be conservative in management and slow to change those things that are tied to the past. Present-oriented societies, on the other hand, see the past as passed and the future as uncertain and prefer short-term benefits (Hofstede 1991).

4) *power distance,* where the extent to which people accept differences in power allows to shape many aspects of life, such as superior/subordinate

relationships. It can be **high** where individuals are deferential to people of authority and generally allow an unequal distribution of power, or **low** where individuals question authority and expect to participate in decisions that affect them (Hofstede 1991).

5)   *individualism vs. collectivism,* where in individualist cultures a person is all the more admirable if he/she is a "self-made man/woman" or "makes up his/her own mind" or shows initiative or works well independently. In collectivist cultures, on the other hand, people are expected to identify with and work well in groups which protect them in exchange for loyalty and compliance (Hofstede 1991).

In order to engage in a successful intercultural dialogue, respect and tolerance are required. They need to be explicitly taught and learned and then practiced and maintained throughout life. They can be encouraged through the development of course content that revolves around intercultural differences. Being aware of these cultural differences like those mentioned above will equip individuals with all that is required to engage actively with people from other ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds.

Conclusion

The major advancements in technology have drastically contributed to promoting educational standards within a globalized world. Within this course of thought, videoconferencing has become an opportunity for educational interactions, saving then time and resources. This allows students to bridge relationships with partners from different cultures and backgrounds. A "telecollaboration" like Global Understanding Project is not merely a space for meeting or exchanging knowledge and experiences with others, it is rather a space to put one's culture and identity at large under scrutiny. In so doing, students are very likely to develop a reflective stance by reinforcing similarities and understanding the sources of differences while interacting with others. They not only learn to accept and respect others' beliefs, values, and behaviours, but they also show empathy to people and develop interest in what others feel and how they perceive situations.

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Appendix A

There are several models that describe cultural patterns. The following table summarizes the major ones used by intercultural researchers and scholars.

Table A1: Models for Cultural Differences

Model	Year	Dimensions
Hall	1959	Space, Material Goods, Friendship, Time, Agreement
Hofstede	1991	Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation
Lessem & Neubauer	1994	Pragmatism, Rationalism, Idealism, Humanism
Lewis	1992	Time
Trompenaars	1993	Universalism, Collectivism, Emotional, Specific, Status, Sequential, Inner-Directed

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