

Non-Native Users and Global Classrooms As a Tool for Language Learning

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Abstract

The Global Understanding Program is an initiative of East Carolina University (ECU) in Greenville, North Carolina, USA. Universidad Del Pacifico (UDP) in Quito, Ecuador is one of the participants. Participants in the program utilized tools such as videoconference and real time chatting in order to help non-native students develop and express their ideas on cultural themes related to their native countries. Participants were motivated by this interactive experience, which allowed them to share ideas with students from different countries in a synchronized time. Themes of participant discussions included prejudice, stereotypes, college life, religion, traditions, among others. These discussions provided nonnative speakers from UDP the opportunity to orally communicate in English with their Global Classroom partners, and increase their fluency and written skills in English. The Global Partner program also allowed for redevelopment of the English language curriculum at UDP. Bilingual Spanish-English instructor in Universidad Del Pacifico were essential to successful mediation of the communicative events.

Global Partners

The Global Understanding Program offers students at partner universities the opportunity to learn about different cultures in face-to-face interactions. A main objective is to provide for periodical meetings where students from all over the world can get together; learn from each other experiences about the reality of their countries. These periodic meetings (or "links") are held various times during a semester between universities as diverse as Universidad Regiomontana in Mexico, University of Shimane in Japan, Istanbul University in Turkey, Hochschule Heilbronn in Germany, Covenant University in Nigeria, among others. According to class schedules and global time zones, universities partner with each other for approximately three or four weeks during the year.

Participants in Global Understanding use communication technologies (namely, videoconferencing and chat sessions) to interact with international partners in real time. Topics generally include themes such as college life, family, cultural traditions, religion, the meaning of life, and stereotypes and prejudices of their respective countries; participants are encouraged to share their views and opinions openly in order to facilitate communication and cross-cultural understanding. At the end of each link students collaborate with their peers from the partnering university on a project. (e.g., a song, a poem, a nursery rhyme/traditional children`s song) that reflects something they both value

in relation to one of the cultural themes. Students also choose two or three people from each culture (past or present) and describe their contributions to society, or interview their parents to define the major changes between their parents' generation and their own. These projects are a culmination of the research and session linking experiences between participants from both universities.

Each semester native Spanish-speaking students from Universidad del Pacifico (UDP) in Quito, Ecuador link with native English speaking students from East Carolina University (ECU) in Greenville, North Carolina, USA. Sessions between these institutions take place twice per semester, but each time with different groups of participants.

During all meetings with partnering universities in the Global Understanding Program, students at these institutions encounter authentic learning and personal growing experiences that they would not otherwise obtain. However, English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at UDP observed the greatest advancements in language acquisition through encounters with ECU, most likely because of the interactions with native English speakers. These sessions were successful because UDP English learners were interested in understanding their North American partners' culture more clearly as well as interested in expressing themselves fluently about their own culture in English.

In addition, these interactions provided the EFL teachers in Ecuador an opportunity to use the English native speaking participants at ECU as language models. The nonnative students at UDP demonstrated positive results in their English language acquisition and U.S. cultural understanding throughout their encounters with peers at ECU throughout meetings of the Global Partners program.

Link Session Preparation

Pre-linking preparation is essential for ensuring a successful and effective interaction. Participant preparation can include introductions, common practices of videoconferencing protocols, and pre-conferencing rehearsals (Comber, Lawson, Gage, Cullum-Hanshaw, & Allen, 2004), and, as may be necessary for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic encounters, some level of language and cultural training. The following section describes the main components of the preparation process, which included technological training, language training, and rehearsal.

Technology

Before students gain access to the communicative tools of the Global Classroom, teachers at UDP train participants on how to properly use videoconferencing, chatting and email, as these technologies require a different set of communicative skills than those found in traditional language classrooms (Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2013). Pre-conference preparation is intended to help students feel more confident in their communicative abilities—especially regarding English—and provide for more productive encounters. Participants communicated synchronously either through videoconferencing using the polycom videoconferencing tool or via real-time chatting using the MIBBIT WebChat tool.

Each group of participants uses either the chat forum or the videoconferencing forum for one hour. They then switch their conferencing tool for the second hour so that each group uses both videoconferencing and chat. All groups used email for asynchronous communication, which provided access to their international partners outside of class in order to interchange ideas or information on a regular basis. The students use e-mail in order to decide what to do for their collaborative project and to work together for the final presentation.

An advantage of videoconferencing is that it enables participants to utilize paralinguistic cues such as facial expressions and gestures in order to facilitate comprehension. However, since gestures may not be cross-culturally applicable (Galloway & Rose, 2015), participants need training to understand the meaning of these gestures. Students are trained to interpret facial expressions for meanings such as understanding, confusion, and approval. They are instructed to speak loudly and slowly when presenting their ideas, and they are even instructed on appropriate seating arrangements. In addition, teachers learn the technical steps to use the polycom as well as how to avoid TTT (Teacher Talking Time) while video-conferencing. Teachers learn to move around the classroom and help students understand their Global Partners' comments by paraphrasing some of the ideas.

On the other hand, an advantage of chatting is that it can occur outside of the time frames arranged by the participating institutions through resources such as Facebook, Google and others. Similar to face-to-face conversation, chatting occurs in a real-time environment in which users must negotiate meaning by modifying their written output (Shrum & Glisan, 2011). While chatting is limited in that it is more likely to improve written rather than spoken communicative abilities (Grgurovic, 2011), chat sessions have the advantage of being able to be downloaded, which EFL teachers may later reference in order to focus on the grammar, vocabulary and syntax inconsistencies with nonnative students.

Language and Preparation

The level of English proficiency for UDP participants ranged from beginner to advanced, or from A1 to B1 on the *Common European framework for reference for languages* (CEFR, n/d). These differences presented challenges for the EFL instructors at UDP who were monitoring the Global Understanding sessions. For instance, EFL teachers sometimes faced a lack of motivation, especially among participants who are not proficient enough to communicate fluently with their peers. Preparation of vocabulary and grammatical structures ahead of Global Understanding sessions helped nonnative speakers develop their abilities in formulating appropriate questions and questioning techniques. The preparation sessions also provided UDP participants with general knowledge about the cultural realities of their ECU partners. Appropriate content preparation seemed to increase UDP student motivation, especially after their interactions during the first inter-institutional conferencing.

The UDP Global Understanding coordinator is responsible for maintaining the schedule, assigning a teacher to each class, and organizing the meetings. At UDP classes are held

in Spanish rather than English, as most instructors at UDP do not speak English. However, the Global Understanding coordinator in UDP must be an EFL expert bilingual in both English and Spanish in order to prepare the students for the meetings. Groups are comprised of students with different proficiency levels of English, ranging from expanding to bridging. Bridging level students are more competent and their learning processes are more accelerated than expanding students, and problems with pronunciation and grammatical structures are less frequent and therefore easier to accommodate.

However, the majority of students at UDP are in the expanding level, who may be described as long term language learners with high oral skills and low in literacy. They are usually competent in most everyday social interactions, use colloquial and social expressions with ease, remain silent or reluctant to take risks or be talkative and 'sound good'. These students rely on support, visual cues, demonstrations and explicit language instruction on new content and have grammar, tense, word choice (Alberta Government K-12, 2013). Because they have more linguistic interference from their L1 Spanish, expanding level students require more tutoring before the link sessions. In some instances, it has occasionally been difficult to ensure a smooth and natural exchange of opinions because less-proficient nonnatives have had difficulties with expression despite their preparation for the sessions. At times, the nonnative UDP participants were observed creating English words to convey their point of view or relying on Spanish. EFL teachers at UDP need to be aware of the possibility of this linguistic interference in order to be able to address grammar and pronunciation issues prior to conferencing (Comber et al., 2004).

Nonnative speakers in the expanding level need more class hours to prepare them for the links, so outside tutoring is provided prior to the linking sessions. Tutoring sessions involve researching potential themes of conversation with each student on a one-on-one basis so that they can identify their main ideas. Students first put these ideas on paper and then identify grammatical errors through peer-to-peer consultations. They subsequently complete revisions and the teacher gives a short lecture on each identified error. After the revisions and lecture, students practice their oral skills by researching and presenting on one of the cultural themes from the link session.

Finally, it has been observed that a bilingual Spanish-English colleague at ECU can allow UDP participants to express themselves more easily as well as help ECU participants better understand the main ideas by being able to address misunderstandings. Also, nonnative participants seem to be less nervous, and less inhibited when a bilingual ECU teacher participates. Overall, bilingual teachers at both institutions help both native and nonnative students and facilitate a more cooperative and communicative environment.

UDP's coordinator—an EFL professional—assigns groups of students to participate in the conferencing, organizes the meetings, guides the students through the conferencing process, and oversees pre-conferencing tutoring. EFL students at UDP rehearse their presentations before each of the link sessions. This practice allows students to review their language structures and vocabulary as well as build participant confidence prior to

their exposition in front of their partners. When nonnative students are prepared, L1 language interference is less likely to disrupt fluency—that is, not hesitating when speaking, being able to express a point with appropriate grammar structures, understanding others when spoken to, and generally not slowing down the flow of a conversation (CEFR, n/d). The rehearsals enable nonnative participants to focus more intently on their message rather than the form during the videoconference sessions.

Successful Communication: A Shared Responsibility

Throughout the sessions it was noticeable how bilingual Spanish-English faculty could facilitate successful student-student interaction during the conferencing sessions. For instance, bilingual faculty in Ecuador were able to prompt UDP participants when they struggled to express themselves and could provide recasts to clarify potential areas of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Bilingual faculty in the USA seemed to help UDP students be less nervous and less inhibited. In addition, these faculty aided ECU participants in better understanding their conversation partners.

Yet while providing the nonnative participants preparatory language instruction benefitted interaction during the conferencing sessions, ensuring successful cross-cultural communication is not the sole responsibility of nonnative interlocutors. The success of an interaction depends on interlocutors' ability to adapt to immediate communicative demands (Firth, 1996), and in native/nonnative interactions it may frequently be necessary for native speakers to adapt to the communicative situation (Jenkins, 2011). Indeed, the communicative burden must be shared, and native participants must also prepare themselves both linguistically and culturally for the experience.

Based on Daft and Maric (2013), the following provides a list of ways native participants can prepare for cross-cultural communicative situations such as those of the Global Classroom:

1. Avoid culturally narrow expressions, idioms, colloquialisms, slang, or too much humor
2. Use simple words and, if possible and if known, use cognates
3. Be careful with non-verbal language. Do not, for instance, cover your mouth with your hand when speaking
4. Likewise, pay attention to facial expressions and body language
5. Speak slowly, carefully, and be sure to enunciate
6. Pause in between main ideas in order to allow the listener time to consider what has been said and also ask questions
7. Frequently check for comprehension and invite feedback; encourage interlocutors to re-cast what has been said
8. Be aware of cues of misunderstanding, such as in appropriate laughter, continual nodding, silence, and polite smiling

Conclusion

A central goal of the Global Understanding program is to create a communicative environment where students can participate and learn to respect cultural differences. This objective is realized through videoconferencing and webchat sessions. Yet the ability to successfully communicate through these technological forums needs to be developed and acquired with practice. UDP students have shown a willingness to prepare for meetings by participating in language tutoring sessions, mock rehearsals, and researching on their conversational partners' culture. It is essential for all participants in the Global Understanding program to understand that oral and written communication are essential to success of the program's objectives, and that instruction in cross-cultural communicative behaviors can facilitate the exchange of information during interactions. Participants must be willing to express themselves openly about the cultural themes of their country in order to develop a sense of friendship and community with their peers from the other universities. The supervising teachers are responsible for preparing participants for these interactions.

The EFL instructors at UDP use the conferencing data (e.g., chat transcripts) to guide their post-conferencing instruction, identifying sources of miscommunication and using these as starting points for classroom discussion or other pedagogical interventions. During sessions, however, it has been observed that bilingual Spanish-English teachers supervising the links at each institution can reduce misunderstandings, especially when native participants are involved. The bilingual experts can aid participants through recasts, paraphrasing, and providing cultural explanations.

Global Partner universities include institutions from all over the world, but English is the language of communication during the links. Although students from Universidad Del Pacifico (UDP) have met with other participants from universities around the world, some of the most challenging sessions were those with the native English speakers at ECU. This observation demonstrates how nativeness may actually impede some aspects of international communication and highlights the necessity of training all interactants—regardless of linguistic background—in international communication skills.

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