Intercultural Learning in Asynchronous Telecollaborative Exchanges: A Case Study

Abstract

Recent studies have shown the potential that telecollaborative exchanges entail for the development of intercultural competence in participants (Warschauer & Kern 2000; O'Dowd 2003; Liaw 2006; Ware, 2005; Belz 2003; 2007). However, trying to assess the development of such a competence is a highly complex process, especially of those components that go beyond knowledge such as attitudes. In this article I present the findings of an online intercultural exchange carried out between university language students (Spanish-English) during the academic year 2006-2007. Students collaborated electronically outside the classroom via email and wikis and data was gathered from a series of instruments, including email and wiki content, language learning diaries, critical incidents, essays and self-evaluation questionnaires. On the basis of Byram’s (1997; 2000) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) we attempted to assess qualitatively the development of the different components of ICC in telecollaborative intercultural exchanges. Our findings suggest that the instruments mentioned can help us to trace the development of intercultural competence with regard to a) interest in knowing other people’s way of life and introducing one’s own culture to others and c) knowledge about one’s own and others’ culture for intercultural communication (Byram 2000:4). However, we found little evidence of b) ability to change perspective and, therefore, further research needs to be carried out on how best to encourage students to centre and to exhibit ‘a willingness to suspend belief in one’s own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging’ (Byram 1997:34).

Keywords: Telecollaboration, asynchronous learning environments, intercultural communicative competence, online exchanges, wiki-spaces

1. Introduction

The importance of intercultural competence as a learning objective in the foreign language classroom has featured prominently since the 1990’s. Byram (1997:3) suggests that the success of communication does not depend only on the efficiency of an information exchange but rather on establishing and maintaining relationships. For this reason, intercultural competence or “the ability to understand and relate to people from other countries” (Byram 1997:5) has become an increasingly important objective in foreign language teaching. Given the difficulty of achieving this goal within a traditional classroom set-up, the advent of the Internet has provided us with highly efficient tools (e.g. email, chat, blogs, wikis, forums, etc) which may facilitate the development of such a competence in virtual environments. Therefore, it has become necessary to find ways of implementing distance intercultural exchanges whose main purpose is to engage students who are linguistically and culturally different in social interaction and telecollaboration outside the classroom. By telecollaboration we mean online interaction between language learners and native speakers who engage in collaborative project work, debate and intercultural exchange with a view to learning each other’s language and aspects of their culture. Over the years, many researchers have explored how different types of online projects may contribute to the development of intercultural competence in participants (Warschauer & Kern 2000; Reeder et al. 2004; Levy 2007; Vinagre 2008). However, the assessment of intercultural competence
is complex and research on this matter is still scarce. In this respect, our aim in this article is to describe aspects of the development of intercultural competence in a telecollaborative exchange between university language students (Spanish-English) during the academic year 2006-2007. The main objectives of this project were to encourage students to learn each other’s language and to compare and contrast two different cultures and two different ways of life as a basis towards understanding each other’s ‘languaculture’. We adopted Byram’s (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) for the assessment of intercultural competence in telecollaborative projects due to its wide acceptance by language teachers and researchers as a representative guideline (Belz 2003; O’Dowd 2003; Liaw 2006; Vogt 2006). Byram proposes a model of ICC which consists of five interdependent principles or savoirs: a) attitudes, b) knowledge, c) skills of discovery and interaction and d) skills of interpreting and relating. The interplay of these four principles should lead to the fifth, namely critical cultural awareness. This final component underlies all the others, since it focuses on comparison and evaluation, key abilities for any learner who is to become a truly intercultural communicator. In addition to this model, Byram (2000:4) offers some guidelines for the assessment of the intercultural experience. These will be presented briefly in Section 4 below.

2. Institutional context: setting up the exchange

We set up an exchange programme between eleven second-year students of applied languages at Nebrija University in Madrid and eleven second-year students of applied languages at Dublin City University during the academic year 2006-07. The academic profile of the learners from both universities was similar. Most of the students were between nineteen and twenty-one years of age, except for two students who were a few years older. Students at both universities were specialist learners of English and Spanish respectively, and their level of proficiency in the foreign language was between higher intermediate and advanced. Students worked collaboratively in an e-tandem learning exchange by email during the first semester and had to carry out two tasks in a wiki-space in the second. The online exchange and all the work (1) related to it were to be carried out outside the classroom and were worth 20% of the students’ final grade in their English and Spanish subjects.

The first step was to assign each of the students a partner, which we did on the basis of the students’ similarities in terms of their level of proficiency in the target language. Once paired, students had to exchange a minimum of two emails a week (2) which were to be written half in English and half in Spanish and discuss a series of topics such as personal information (age, family, pets, hobbies, free time, studies, work, the place where they live, the place where they are from, friends, etc.), customs and traditions, music, cinema and television programmes, the educational system, the use of idioms and colloquial expressions, stereotypes, food, festivals, sports, history and politics, etc. Students were encouraged to offer feedback to each other and were given specific guidelines with regard to error correction. In the second semester, the students were required to carry out two tasks in a wiki-space specially designed for the project (see content pages at http://nebrija-dcu.wikispaces.com). Each dyad had their own wiki-page in which they were to exchange information, discuss and prepare a topic for an end-of-term oral presentation based on one of the topics discussed with the partner via email and write a 250-word essay in their target language discussing some ‘rich points’ in both cultures. Rich points “are pieces of discourse that indicate that two languacultures or conceptual systems have come into contact” (Belz, 2007). Examples of rich points are bullfighting or fox hunting, understood by some as shows of bravery and courage, whilst others consider them to be cruel sports. Following Neuner (2003), we decided on an intercultural approach to foreign language teaching that focuses on the discussion of cross-cultural experiences, the discussion of stereotypes and negotiation of meaning.
3. Methodology

Data collection involved qualitative data gathered from a series of instruments, which included emails, wiki-space content, critical incidents that occurred during interaction, essays, language learning diaries and self-evaluation questionnaires. Data analysis was carried out by the author and a research student and discussions were held between the two raters until complete agreements were reached on the categorization of samples. The categories used for this study were those of Byram (2000: 4) (3) and these criteria and their descriptions are given below:

a) Interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others

- I am interested in other people's experience of daily life, particularly those things not usually presented to outsiders thorough the media.
- I am also interested in the daily experience of a variety of social groups within a society and not only the dominant culture.

b) Ability to change perspective

- I have realised that I can understand other cultures by seeing things from a different point of view and by looking at my culture from their perspective.

c) Knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication;

- I know some important facts about living in the other culture and about the country, state and people.
- I know how to engage in conversation with people of the other culture and maintain a conversation.

d) Knowledge about intercultural communication processes

- I know how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the view point of another culture.
- I know how to discover new information and new aspects of the other culture for myself.

4. Results and discussion

The data analysed revealed examples that fall within the four categories mentioned above. We provide examples (4) of this categorisation below and the data analysis results can be seen in Table 1:

a) Interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others

"It is interesting to learn about the language that people really use because it is different to that I have read in my books. I know that there are many different expressions in English used in DIFFERENT parts of the country. One example in Massachusetts is that everyone says "wicked" in order to say "very very", whilst in California they say "hella"; in New Jersey we say "mad", but personally I say "crazy" in order to express this idea”.

"Maybe we have something in common. I’m referring to that fact that the Irish were conquered by the English and you were conquered by the Moors, isn’t that so? [...]How has the invasion of the 'Moros' influenced life on your people? Have you adopted any of
their customs? Have you ever studied Arabic at school or visited your neighbouring country? Are you interested in their music? Do you appreciate their humour?”

b) Ability to change perspective (decentring)

“I've discovered that there are some preconceived ideas about the Irish that aren't true; although my partner does acknowledge that many Irish people drink, she actually doesn't”

“I've realised that the Irish are not English; before I thought both cultures were similar but now I've realised there are important differences between them”

“During this semester and the wiki I also found interesting to discover that although many of us have travelled and lived in other countries we still believe many stereotypes and make all kind of generalisations about other countries and cultures [...] To conclude I think I learned a lot and that if you have an open mind and are hungry for "knowledge" you'll always learn something new and interesting”

c) Knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication

“Spain and Ireland are both Catholic countries. The people in the six counties in the north (of Ireland) don't want to be called Irish. It is the same with the Catalans, isn't it? Most people in Northern Ireland want to be independent from the rest of the country. This was caused by an important event in the history of this country. [...]”

“Besides learning a new language you learn a new culture. Not only can you speak the second language but you also start to take on their customs ... like myself, for example, at three o'clock everyday I have a siesta ;)”

d) Knowledge about intercultural communication processes

“What do you think about these preconceived ideas? You can say what you think about spain, I am not going to get mad or anything like that [...] if you want you don't have to talk about your country (5) you can talk about Ireland, but I will prefer if you talk about yours because I could learn lots from your point of view...”

“[...] What is your impression of bullfighting-is it not such a cruel art?”

“[...] I can understand that you don't get the meaning of bullfighting. I'm Spanish and I can't see the point of it either. I don't understand how killing an animal can be fun, but it doesn't mean that to many people; it's something more intense, a tradition they have seen since they were children and it constitutes an intense experience for them. I hope that these comments are helpful to you, but, as I mentioned before, not all Spaniards, myself included, like bullfighting”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total number of examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a)</td>
<td>216</td>
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<td>b)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<td>c)</td>
<td>86</td>
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Table 1. Results of categorisation of examples.

Category a) Interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others
Most of the examples found (216) belong to category a) ‘interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others’. This interest can be inferred from the detailed questions that the partners posed to each other. We are referring here to questions that went beyond enquiring superficially about aspects such as their studies or hobbies. The high presence of instances in this category (more than half of all instances found) may be due to the fact that students were required to discuss a series of topics related to their culture, topics they were then asked to contrast and compare. In order to do so, they had to look for information (in documents, books, on the Internet) and exchange information with their partners. This process could explain the abundance of questions about the other's country and culture after a specific culture-related topic had been introduced. Most questions were duly answered and follow-up questions developing from a conversation were also indicative of a real interest in the partner's culture:

In response to your questions regarding whether or not I knew about the Spanish Armada, I do. It sank off the west coast of Ireland if I am not mistaken, in Sligo. [...] As to whether or not people in the area look Spanish, it's doubtful! They are typically pale skin, blue eyes and ‘Irish’ looking as I like to call them with strong western accents. You might find it difficult to understand them. Where in Spain is it easiest to understand the natives, not only because of their accents but due to dialogue and the way they use words?

Another linguistic aspect that showed this willingness to discover different perspectives of their partner's culture was the presence of questions such as “can you tell me what Spanish people are like, what is true in what people say and what is not?” and “what do you think about these preconceived ideas?”. In addition, remarks such as “I am very interested in exchange opinions with you”, “Quisiera saber mucho tus ideas” [I would very much like to hear your ideas] and “I'd like to know your opinion” also helped to encourage a response from the partner regarding their own or their partner's culture. Finally, students used terms such as 'curious' (5 times), 'curiosity' (2), 'curiosas' (1), and expressions such as ‘me intriga’ [I'm intrigued, 1] which reflect attitudes of “curiosity and openness”, preconditions for the success of intercultural communication and a clear manifestation of intercultural learning.

Category c) Knowledge about one's own culture and others' culture for intercultural communication

The second biggest category was c) ‘knowledge about one's own culture and others' culture for intercultural communication' (86 instances). Within this category we need to distinguish between the two types of knowledge, declarative and procedural, as mentioned above. Declarative knowledge, which is factual, refers to information about the other's country, state and people, whereas procedural knowledge refers to information about the process of interaction, that is to say, how to engage in conversation with people from other cultures.

There were many examples of declarative knowledge. Many students had visited their partner's country before the exchange started and some had spent time in the foreign country either on holiday or as part of their study programmes. Students also looked for information in books and on the Internet when they had to discuss certain topics (such as history and politics) and they felt they did not know much about these matters in either their own or their partner's country. This was important since students were asked to contrast and compare the way things were done in the two cultures. This type of factual juxtaposition and the learning that may derive from it requires extensive declarative knowledge of one's own culture as well as that of the other. In this respect, students were willing to learn about their own culture in order to provide their partner with information, as well as showing their partner how much they knew about the foreign culture. In one particular case, the student was happy to show how similar to the Spanish he was:
I love Spanish sports and music (ranging from Lolita to Alejandro Fernandez). I have lived in the Canary Islands, in Barcelona, Gerona [...] There are many things I like about Spain; for instance, the pace of life, the language, its extroverted people and the atmosphere in the bars ;) In addition to learning a language, you learn a culture [...] I think that you begin to get more involved in their habits, public holidays and customs. You start to notice when it's el dia de San Juan for example and things like that, no?

In this excerpt, the student expresses not only his knowledge of Spanish music and way of life in general, but having lived in various Spanish cities (two of them in Catalonia) he could actually write some words in Catalan (Barça -Barcelona's football team- and Girona –Catalan for Gerona, a city in Catalonia) and remember some feast days (el dia de San Juan).

**Critical incidents**

As regards procedural knowledge, we found that some instances in which the students showed their capacity to engage people in conversation were also connected to their knowledge about the intercultural communication process (i.e. how to resolve misunderstandings in social interaction, category (d) above). This became evident when analysing the only critical incident we found which occurred during interaction. According to Cushner and Brislin (1996), a critical incident involves a situation concerning cross-cultural misunderstanding. These incidents are particularly interesting in telecollaborative exchanges, since telecollaboration relies heavily on the social interaction that takes place among participants and misunderstandings may pose a threat to the success of such interaction. Below, we present an excerpt of a communicative exchange between two students in which a critical incident could have undermined their exchange completely had they not managed to become friendly throughout the exchange:

[Student 1]

The other day I asked a classmate if she could tell me something about the Irish. She said that you drink a lot, don't shower very often, rarely clean your houses and that Irish girls are very forward with boys. I don't know if this is true but I hope you don't get offended by it.

[Student 2]

Regarding what you heard from your friend about the Irish, of course it's not true, and your friend sounds a bit ignorant to be honest. Of course something like that would be offensive, it was just a list of insulting things. It is true that the Irish drink a lot, but of course we bathe regularly and clean our houses. I hope you can see the absurdity of your question. Also, you said "Creo que en Irlanda como en otros sitios de Inglaterra...". Just as a cultural note, never call the Irish English. England had oppressed the Irish for 800 years, and many Irish would take that as the biggest offence of all. I understand if you didn't know, which is why I have explained these things.

[Student 1]

I'm sorry much from the other day, what I said about Irish. I didn't think that I upset you. I asked my classmate because I wanted to know something about you, but I see that it wasn't a good idea. But I said you that you will tell me things about Irish and for this reason I asked. Excuse me.
[Student 2]

One thing that your classmate said and it's true is that Irish people drink a lot in general. However, as in many other places in the world, if you drink in moderation it's not a problem. I don't know if they drink much more than people in other countries. My friends and I drink at home before we go to the disco, but I don't like discos much. I rather have a good conversation over a nice drink-in English we say "over a nice quiet pint" [...]

There were a few mistakes in the email you sent me. You wrote "I'm sorry much from the other day", but you should say "I'm very sorry for the other day". (By the way, don't worry about it. It was just a misunderstanding I suppose. But negative things are hard not to be taken in a bad way, so I just wanted to make you aware that the things your classmate said were not true at all. Will we put it behind us?)

The highly offensive remark made by the Spanish student could have jeopardised this dyad's exchange, since the Irish student could have reacted by being offended and ending the interaction. However, the situation did not escalate because the Irish student realised there was no malice, only ignorance, in the Spaniard's comments, and that she was deeply sorry for them. In their communicative exchange, we can see that they had established a strong bond and it is likely that their previously good relationship was the reason why the offended party, after clarifying the situation, was willing to "put it [the misunderstanding] behind them" and forget about the whole incident.

Category b) ability to change perspective

Category b) 'ability to change perspective' recorded the lowest number of instances (38). A plausible explanation for this is that students were interested in providing information about their own culture and learning from the partner's culture, but this exchange of information did not necessarily involve a change in perspective. Similar to findings in O'Dowd (2003:124), there were some students who wanted to "correct misrepresentations" and "fight stereotypes" when they thought their culture was not properly perceived or represented abroad. However, we also came across students who were able to decentre and change perspective. This was reflected mostly in the language learning diaries, where reflection about their own culture and that of the partner was encouraged:

[My partner] asked me in her last email about "Los Sanfermines". I do not like bullfighting, so I did not know a lot about it, but I looked for information to be able to explain to her about this festivity. This way I also learnt a little bit about my own culture.

Today, [my partner] wrote me three emails...in the first one she explicated me her opinion about bullfighting, after my explanation about "Los Sanfermines". In short, she has the same opinion as I have. She does not understand why the animals has to suffer before they die. She qualifies it as cruelty this kind of 'art'.

Today I realize that there is a big rejection against bullfighting in foreign countries. I think it is normal because it is an act of cruelty with the animals. Here we live with it since we are babies, so it is more common. Although, as I said before, I do not like it and I do not understand it. Therefore, I totally understand that foreigners so not understand it neither.

(Three entries from a student's language learning diary.)

In other cases, some conclusions based on serious reflection were pointed out by the students:
I think there are many prejudices and preconceived ideas in this world. For instance, many people think that the Irish drink a lot of spirits when they are in a foreign country...this is quite true. However, there are many Irish people who travel to see different peoples, cultures and lifestyles. I think such judgements are unfair...but we must expect that this is where the world is at today and I feel it is only through such discussion similar to which we are under taking that progress and understanding will be achieved.

Category d) Knowledge about intercultural communication processes

The category 'knowledge about the intercultural communication process' (d) when defined as "I know how to discover new information and new aspects of the other culture for myself" was difficult to identify in isolation, since examples of this category tended to appear linked to the category 'interest in knowing other people's way of life' (category a), as shown above. In order to be able to show an interest in knowing other people's way of life, it is necessary to know how to discover new information about the other culture. In a similar way, "knowing how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the view point of another culture" (category d) also appeared to be linked to an ability to decentre, since this capacity to see things from a different point of view and to look at one's own culture from someone else's perspective clearly facilitated the solving of misunderstandings that arose in communicative interaction.

Other data

In addition to the data elicited from the email and wiki-space content and the language learning diaries we also gathered data from a self-evaluation questionnaire specially designed to determine the students' knowledge of the culture and people they were going to work with throughout the semester. They were given the choice of answering the questionnaire in the foreign language or in their mother tongue, thus enabling them to provide clearer and more elaborate answers. The questionnaire was presented to the students as a tool for stimulating serious reflection and raising learner awareness. It included open-ended and closed questions and was administered online so that the students could enjoy easy access to it and we could examine the results shortly afterwards. At the end of the exchange period, the participants were then asked to fill in a similar questionnaire and to write a composition in their mother tongue, commenting on their own experience of the project. The data gathered from the students' answers to the questionnaires allowed us to assess whether the project had been a positive and productive experience for the learners, not only from a linguistic point of view but also from a cultural perspective.

From the students' point of view, the exchange had been highly successful. Thus, on the Spanish side, 10 students (90.9%) regarded the exchange as highly positive and all of them (100%) considered that the project had helped them to develop their cultural knowledge. When asked to provide suggestions for improvement in future projects, 5 students (45.4%) suggested that some form of synchronous communication (whether through skype or chat) should be introduced, in order to exchange views and communicate more regularly with their partner.

In addition to the students' subjective assessments, we wanted to check whether their positive answers reflected, in any way, on their performance. In order to do so, we analysed the students' tasks qualitatively. Thus, the students' final oral presentations and essays had been carefully researched and prepared and their content went beyond a mere list of facts or a checklist of knowledge; they showed an awareness and understanding of some of the behaviours, beliefs and concepts of the other's culture and their own that had been enhanced through the discussion and negotiation with their partners. The length of the students' essays went beyond the stipulated 250 words with an average of 814 words per essay, and their wiki-pages had been edited an average of 28.4 times. These pages included images and links and had been corrected according to
their partner’s feedback, which, in most cases, also provided further information about the topic.

Finally, we include some of the Spanish students' commentaries regarding their experience below:

- I did not know any Americans (6) before this exchange, so the only points of reference I had were films and series. Now I understand many of their forms of behaviour. Even so, I think I still need to learn more about them in order to understand them better.
- A teacher at school once told me that ‘if you generalise you are always wrong’, and that is what I have discovered with tandem. I have found that many of the stereotypes and preconceived ideas I had about the Irish are not true. There is more to their food than fish and chips and hamburgers, as I thought.
- After I visited Galway one the summer I came back with the idea that Irish people were red-haired, had very white skin, drank Guinness and didn't like English people much. Obviously, you can’t generalise since I've had a great Irish partner who’s made me realise that Irish people are not all the same; some of them are nice and others aren't as it happens with people everywhere.
- I’ve realised that, although Irish people are also Europeans, we are quite different. They see things differently and this has helped me to look at things from a different point of view and to learn to value someone else's perspectives & ideas.

In the first three excerpts, the students show an increased awareness of the inaccuracies of stereotyping, whereas the comments in the last example refer to key aspects of intercultural learning. While this may not be the “third place” aimed for in intercultural communication, these comments do show some progress in the development of the students’ cultural awareness.

Finally, the findings of this project also demonstrate the benefits of using virtual environments and new technologies for intercultural learning as many researchers have suggested previously. However, special emphasis should be placed on the integration of online activities into the contact classes in order to offer students additional opportunities to discuss and reflect on the cultural issues being discussed.

6. Conclusion

One of the purposes of this project was to foster the development of the participants' intercultural competence in online exchanges. In this learning environment, students searched for information, exchanged information with their partners and discussed a series of topics relating to their partners' culture and their own. This environment provided participants with a unique opportunity to contrast and compare theirs and other speakers' cultural practices and products and to reflect about both cultures in order to be able to hold meaningful discussions with the speakers of the target language.

The students were also able to communicate fluently and collaborate efficiently, and this was reflected not only in their successful completion of the tasks, but also in their positive answers to the questionnaires and comments about the exchange. Although the findings of the project show some of the benefits of using online exchanges for intercultural learning and the tools used helped us to find some evidence that the students had exercised intercultural competence in some categories (i.e. interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others and knowledge about one's own and other's culture for intercultural communication), this was not the case with others (i.e. ability to change perspective). Thus, most students showed a genuine interest in the other's culture and were happy to provide information
about their own culture. However, the majority of them failed to decentre, which prevented them from taking intercultural communication a step further.

With regard to this matter, it may be worth carrying out further research to discover whether Liaw’s (2006:60) suggestion is correct and this type of learning environment is "conducive to the development of knowledge and attitudes of intercultural competence but not necessarily to the development of empathy and (meta) intercultural skills". Although the connection between this imbalance and the mediated nature of the learning environment is clear, it is imperative to discover how best to encourage students to exhibit 'a readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours' and a 'willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging' (Byram 1997:34) in order to ascertain whether the development of empathy and (meta) intercultural skills can be equally facilitated by telecollaboration.

References


(1) Students had to write a language learning diary on their online experience, prepare an end-of-year oral presentation on one of the topics discussed with the partner and write an essay discussing different aspects of both cultures. These last two tasks were completed in the wiki-space.

(2) A copy of all messages was also sent to their instructors.

(3) Byram's (2000) guidelines also include a fifth criterion, namely "ability to cope with living in a different culture", which we have omitted here since it was not applicable to this study.

(4) Examples and excerpts have been left as they were written. Where the original is in Spanish I have translated the information without the students' errors.

(5) The student is from Poland, but she is living and studying in Dublin.

(6) The partner was American and studied in Dublin.

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