

Intercultural Communicative Competence Development

In

Teletandem Learning Context

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Abstract

It has become undeniable fact that technology has a dramatic influence on all fields of life and language learning is not excluded from such a process. For Kern (2006), the real impact of technology could be recognised from the relative absence of “‘BALL’ (book-assisted language learning), “‘PALL” (pen-assisted language learning), and “‘LALL” (library-assisted language learning)” due to the relatively high use of ‘CALL’, computer assisted language learning. With that in mind, teletandem as a form of telecollaboration through which online intercultural interaction between or among learners from different countries of different cultures and languages is considered important to enhance learners’ mutual intercultural understanding, see Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘ZPD’. Such a learning context is based on a sociocultural approach that defines learning through societal interaction and collaboration in the online social contexts such as, email, web-based message boards, video conferencing, etc. In view of that, the present study aims at tackling the significance of using teletandem as an autonomous telecollaborative learning context that develops learners’ intercultural communicative competence with some relevant references to Solyia’s, jointly with the MIT’s Saxelabl Social Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory (SSCNL)for measuring the impact of this program, ‘2.0 Exchange’ or ‘Connect Program’. To achieve that, the study falls in five sections: the first discusses the impact of telecollaboration as a source of multiliteracy on learners’ intercultural communicative competence and how it is related to interlocutors’ identity, the second deals with the pedagogical implications of being involved in teletandem learning context, the third is to discuss learning autonomy in relation to teletandem’, the fourth is to show the teacher-learner roles in such an e-communicative learning context, and the conclusion finally sums up the findings of the paper.

1. L2 Intercultural Competence and Telecollaborative Multiliteracy

L2 competence has been traditionally investigated and defined within the scope of linguistic mastery. This nevertheless does not impede some scholars to gradually move away and delimit this idea to include the sense of being able to discuss and express new issues related to cultural issues. For Pollak (2010:5-6), this type of competence could be acquired only in situations of variable and creative domains. As a dynamic process of transforming knowledge into action, L2 learners’ intercultural competence requires both knowledge and internalisation of cultural values. In view of the internet literacy, telecollaborative activities which involve two or more international classrooms could be seen as a source of knowing other’s linguistic and cultural systems. This might help them to be familiar within the already established

system, 'socialisation' (Nieke, 2000:44; cited in Pollak, *ibid*: 8)¹. In other words, this kind of online communal familiarity paves the way for establishing cultural and linguistic awareness in the process of intercultural competence formation. Accordingly, interculturally-based projects are potentially significant to enhance learners' cultural information and understanding of others' cultural views in a particular context (Kern, 2006:197-8). Furthermore, with the aim of developing language skills and intercultural communicative competence, telecollaborative learners "[...] become intercultural speakers or mediators who possess the linguistic skills and intercultural awareness necessary to allow them to interact effectively in a foreign language with people from cultures that are different from their own" (Guth and Helm, 2012:43). To make a shift in the 21st century world of education, Soliya, working with the MIT's Saxelab Social Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory (SSCNL), has presented a combination of practices for learners to resolve and discuss their cultural differences via the use of novel media technologies. For Soliya and MIT's SSCNL, it is vital for students to have a rich cross-cultural experience to be an educational part within their curricula. This could be addressed and achieved through Soliya's 'exchange 2.0', 'Connect Program' that is founded in 2011 by iEARN, Global Nomads Group & Soliya.

Failing to do that, it could be attributed to the participant's inability to understand cultural interdependency between 'Self' and 'Other' throughout interaction, as in (Bolten, 2001: 25; cited in Pollak, 2010:13). This, of course, represents a shift to the traditional belief in the foreign language learning which used to rely on the dominance of the target speakers' linguistic system, 'nativism' (see, Byram and Zarate 1998: 10). Such a change could implicitly mean that modifying computer culture no longer lies in the hard or software processes but rather it is basically connected to the increasing number of users of different languages and cultural backgrounds. In other words, being different from face to face contexts (Ellis, 2010), online communication and cooperation essentially need electronically multi-literate learners (see Guth and Helm, 2012).

Being aware of the linguistic and cultural varieties in the community and as an expansion to the language-based view of literacy, 'multiliteracy', according to (New London Group, 1996) has become necessary to consider. The increasing development of the World Wide Web has become the source for a new trend to "[. . .] extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies; to account for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate [. . .] and to account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (New London Group 2000: 9). With the 'Social Web' activities in mind, learners could be provided with the chance to contact each other all over the world. This could consequently assist them to achieve 'multi-cultural contact' (Guth and Helm, 2012:43). What is necessary for this on-line interculturally-based interaction is critical awareness. This means that telecollaborative to be critically aware of discriminating what is real from what is technologically portrayed. In addition to the necessity of adapting the sense of change in communication with the world, such a process of questioning the authenticity, accuracy, and reliability of what they face expresses the learners' need "[...] to become discerning and critically literate in relation to the media and the internet [...]" (Pollak, 2010:3). In view of that, Soliya's participants could be provided with the required skills to collaboratively address the expected challenges. In other words, Soliya generation is prepared to be 'future leaders' of critical thinking, cross-cultural communication and collaboration skills to achieve the sense of communal globality as since 2003 Soliya's 'Connect Program'

1. Most of the references which are referred to as cited in Pollak (2010) throughout the present study are written in languages other than English.

has been implemented in over 100 universities in 27 countries across the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Europe and North America.

2. The Pedagogical Implications of Intercultural Communication

Being a dynamic process as a result of the inevitable interculturally transmitted attitudes, information and norms, culture could not be identical to language (Bolten, 2001: 38-39; cited in Pollak, 2010:12). This implies the idea that acquiring a language does not mean acquiring the culture of its society (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005: 328). This of course does not negate the fact that both language and culture could be seen as integrative parts of the individual's identity. Considered as learnt 'software of the mind' or 'mental program', culture is furthermore used to be parallelised with the notion of 'nation' through the use of 'ethnocentrism' (Ibid: 2-5). The effect of evaluating people according to the criteria of 'nation' related values to form social group's membership might additionally lead to the rejection of others'. This sometimes expresses the individual's difficulty in avoiding his position or standpoint (Ibid).

However, in view of the 'cultural relativism' perspective, this is untrue as 'self-idealisation' in the sense that cultural difference does not indicate the lack of the same value, or being evaluated through one's familiarity judgement. This means that experiencing such a heterogeneously dynamic culture reflects the sense of being in a 'Navigation system' (Földes, 2007: 29; cited in Pollak, 2010:7). Accordingly, the intercultural learner is seen as a mediator who might clarify cultural differences through this kind of lexical or textual negotiation. This mediator is, for Byram and Morgan et al. (1994: 157), able "to relativize and understand himself and his own culture and to negotiate on the basis of this understanding". Such a communicative capacity could be attributed to the constant confrontation of numerous cultural variables as people are not confined to one speech community or interactional fields. Besides, the inevitability of this cultural variety might be mediated through newspaper articles, fiction, or any other spoken or written discourse of interaction, which could be used as a widely public means of intercultural transmission of information (Nieke, 2000:193; cited in Pollak, 2010:8).

Linguistically speaking, learners' meaning negotiation might represent the possible means for them to be interculturally familiar with the communicative difference(s), e.g., greeting negotiation that takes different forms, cheek kissing or handshaking, etc. (Pollak, 2010:15-6). This might come to some extent with the idea that "[language] plays a crucial role not only in the construction of culture, but in the emergence of cultural change" (Kramsch, 1996: 3). Such a continual scheme of change involves the integration or replacement of new values with the previously adapted ones in the individual's cognitive space for the sake of 'self-identity' (Libben and Lindner, 1996: 13). Nonetheless, learners' understanding of the sociocultural meanings of the target language does not always suggest changing their first identity to be an exact copy of the natives', but it simply indicates the interaction of both to avoid the cultural gap (Pollak, 2010:36). Learners' telecollaborative intercultural communication as a product of cognitive, attitudinal and communicative process might hence be 'non-reflective' in terms of knowledge gathering and language practice, or 'reflective' for the imbalance evaluation, or 'mature' as a conscious shifting of views for future planning (Stickler and Emke, 2011).

Pedagogically speaking, according to Mao's (2009:145) view, the main aim of considering culture in the L2 learning process is to 'nurture' learners' intercultural competence as a communicative function of language. It is also stated that "[l]anguage learning helps learners

to avoid stereotyping individuals, to develop curiosity and openness to otherness and to discover other cultures” (Council of Europe, 2008:29). As shown earlier, this means that participants could negotiate meaning of each other’s world in cross-cultural communication. This implicitly indicates the idea that culture in both interculturality and cross-cultural communication is not embedded in either of the two participants’ culture but related to each other (Reuter, 2004:252; cited in Pollak, 2010:16).

As findings of three qualitative studies concerned with EFL classes in a German university using different technological communicative tools as email, web-based message boards, etc., to interact with their partners in Ireland and the USA, O’Dowd (2007:146) has additionally reported that telecollaborative activities potentially enhance the process of improving students’ intercultural communicative competence where they could provide those learners with various sources of knowledge that traditionally culture-related materials could not. To promote intercultural understanding, it is accordingly necessary for the learner to be aware of other’s identity and deeply understand that to avoid the illusion of one’s universal culture. This of course positively influences learners’ insights and thinking of both cultures. In line with that, Soliya’s ‘Connect Program’ teletandem participants discuss some issues related to identity, religion, culture, and other social-political ones. This encourages those members to freely share their culturally based views. Therefore, such a process expresses the inability to exclude learners’ culture from language learning or teaching process, see (Pollak, 2010:48).

Moa (2009:147) likewise stresses the importance of keeping the learner active for revealing and assessing cultural similar or different norms, which achieves Byram’s (1999) ‘skill of discovery and interaction’. With the use of intercultural telecollaboration, learners could be provided with a sort of intercommunicative activities, which suggests the idea of encountering ‘interculturality’. If supportive, this kind of interaction might enhance interactants’ intercultural competence. As a result, online multilingual and cultural class activities could be useful for learners to enrich their experience. As mentioned earlier, such a rich leaning environment is a space for learners to be culturally mediated to develop their intercultural competence (Pollak, 2010:38).

3. Autonomous Learning in Teletandem Context

Without being controlled by the teacher, learners are seen as social agents who could apply what is acquired independently in various situations. This autonomous learning is ideally basic to Byram’s (1999) ‘savoir-apprendre’. To transform experience for learning, Byram (1997:69) further confirms that “[...] learners must become autonomous in their capacity for refining and increasing their knowledge, skills and attitudes”. This means that intercultural exchange by itself does not necessarily fulfil mutual cultural understanding of others, see (Kramsch and Thorne, 2002) and (Belz, 2003), due to the variability of communicative genres, medium, and linguistic style (O’Dowd:2007).

Learning autonomy is therefore necessary in the sense that it “[...] is [a]part of a wider development in education that aims at preparing young people for lifelong learning through the ability to organise and direct their own learning inside and outside the school context (Camilleri, 1999: 5). Brookfield (1980; cited in Palfreyman, 2006) hence states that how people learn outside a formal educational setting does not simply reflect the idea of individualism in learning, but rather it significantly shows networks of some other people acting as models for those learners, feedback and scaffolding sources, see Vygotsky’s (1978: 86-7) ‘ZPD’ below, which necessitates the role of the community as a base of knowledge. This could entail that learners’ ‘willingness’ to vary his communicative strategy to keep pace

with variety of the intercultural discourse community might be the key factor in creating and developing learners' cultural communicative competence (Hanna and de Nooy , 2003; cited in Kern, 2006:198). Such a discourse membership could be achieved through learners' participation in teletandem learning' as a sort of telecollaborative context, see O'Rourke (2007:43-4). It however depends on learner's determination, which is of great value in developing learners' intercultural communicative competence through making learner's different views and ideas open to discussion and reflection. Making one's and other's identity explicit for investigation and feedback is also important for reflection and stimulating learners' emotional aspect in intercultural learning (Pollak, 2010:53).

To be of more educational benefit, teletandem could connect learners from all over the world to share knowledge that helps them to see things from different perspectives, 'interpersonal networks' (ibid: 98). It is a virtual environment that allows learners to transform, challenge, and mediate their cultural views about 'epistemic understanding'; moving from the black to the white viewpoints of things (Wilson and Ryder 1998). As a base for cultural mediation, its original form is a face-to-face learning that aims at improving learners' linguistic competence; 'one-to-one arrangement' (O'Rourke, 2007:43-4), which would be generally considered 'a promising complement to the foreign language learning' (Pollak, 2010:67). With the possibility of using their native language or a lingua franca, grouping learners of different L1 and C1 in the same context, and encountering the same difficulty in interaction, teletandem plan could facilitate intercultural learning. This kind of leaning environment is expected to be a practice of 'reciprocal' scaffolding between learners in terms of the possible involvement of the native (O'Rourke 2007: 43) to be the 'trusted' source facilitator, see for example (Stickler and Emke, 2011).

As far as the importance of the language used in such a kind of intercultural interactive reflection is concerned, it is hard to separate language from one's life for certain psychological perspectives. As stated earlier, it is not necessary to rely on 'nativism' i.e., teletandem interaction could be established via 'plurilingual' or second language speakers (Byram and Zarate, 1998:10). This means that learners might sometimes recourse to the L1 because of the inevitable challenge faced in translating experiences of the native language settings (Risager, 2006: 157). Moreover, a particular type of structure or content of the interaction is sometimes out such a learning context due to its reliance of the learner's 'self-awareness' and autonomy (O'Rourke 2007: 46-9). Thus, learners in e-tandem context have to "[...] monitor and evaluate both objectives and means [...] in the light of experience" (ibid: 46). This also explains the significance of 'reciprocity' in arranging such intercultural learning environment. Participants should support each other to enact as both: learners and experts. Nevertheless, to avoid transmitting a blurred view of the home cultural facts, critical cultural awareness is required. Generally speaking, tandem participants should not be considered the representatives of the foreign culture (Pollak, 2010: 96). This indicates the idea that it is crucial to avoid the essentialist view in this diverse and autonomous intercultural learning. Moreover, learners might differ in their aims and motivation, which could be the clue for failure to intercultural miscommunication (Woodin, 2001:48). It basically suggests the high predictability of the cultural inequality which might cause difficulties in participants' 'asymmetrical communication' and vice versa. Such intercultural challenges could be attributed to any of Auernheimer's (2008: 57; cited in Pollak, 2010: 13-16) four categories: 'power imbalances', 'different cultural scripts', 'common historical experience', and 'stereotypes and prejudices'. Taking the question further, (Knapp, 2008: 85-6; Pollak, ibid:16) highpoints the impact of language proficiency in affecting communicative progression or understanding where cross-cultural interaction is usually featured of the

unbalanced language level due to the interactants' possible use of a foreign language or a lingua franca.

Accordingly, for Byram (1999:19), the intercultural communicator should be characterised by three skills: 'savoir-comprendre', i.e. to be skilful in interpreting texts, its relation to oneself, 'savoir-apprendre', that means the effective detection of previously unfamiliar attitudes; information and scripts, and 'savoir faire', which is the real course of an intercultural communication. Moreover, he (ibid:370) states that education is basically implied in the individual's 'critical cultural awareness' which means the "ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries". This indicates that interlocutors' competence relies on behaviour, attitudes and knowledge. Additionally, to develop that kind of competence, less capable individuals could cover the gap in their knowledge through interculturally telecollaborative communication with more competent peer. Individuals could construct knowledge in such cultural mediated collaboration with foreign partners. As 'bud' or flowers' not the 'fruits' of the mental development, this is referred to as 'the zone of proximal development', 'ZPD', by (Vygotsky 1978: 86-7).

4. Teacher/Learner Roles in Teletandem Learning Context

As an international telecollaborative context, teletandem is viewed as a potential source for improving learners' target language, intercultural awareness, and computer literacy (Belz & Thorne, 2006). For some scholars, among others (Teles, 2000 and Canagarajah, 1997; cited in Basharina, et al., 2008:277), the instructor's role in such a learning activity is a useful guide for assisting learner autonomy, supporting learners' perception of the online environment that eases teachers' workload. This change is characterised by moving away from the 'traditional IRE', teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation, which means learners are able to interact according to their personal styles. In other words, in (in)formal online contact, for instance, participants might have the role of facilitators or experts depending on their information of the discussed topic though in some studies have generally approved the instructor presence is required, particularly in international telecollaboration (Ware and Kramsch, 2005) and (Basharina, et al., 2008:278). For Belz (2003:92), the instructor should be involved especially in "discerning, identifying, explaining, and modelling culturally-contingent patterns of interaction in the absence of paralinguistic meaning signals". Therefore, teachers' authority could be required depending on the source availability to learners in such a sociocultural learning context (Thorne, 2003). Based on a social network theory, it is additionally important for the teacher to be aware of the fact that teletandem intercultural exchange aims at achieving 'long term objectives'. This could have its impact on establishing certain relationships between interlocutors of various contents in terms of topic, focus, quantity, quality, and direction. It could gradually lead to knowledge accumulation between individuals through modelling language use or learning support and encouragement. Being related to community, identity-related data and its development have become important to investigate and see its influence on learners' intercultural communicative competence (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). Consequently, there are other aspects that might affect this process. Some could be ascribed to the class, family, or other social matters (Roberts and Kleiner, 1999; cited in Palfreyman, 2006: 353).

Accordingly, it is important for teachers to be careful about selecting the communication tool that is appropriate to the aim and content of that teletandem class interaction. They "need to be critically aware of the connections among technology, culture, ideology, and specifically about the ways in which technology amplifies and constrains aspects of language

learning and research” (Chapelle, 2003: 9; cited in Kern, 2006: 201). In addition, they should recognise the fact that technology enables learners to familiarise what is unfamiliar, to reconceptualise sociocultural-based issues, which enhances learners’ intercultural communicative competence (Kern, *ibid*). This therefore implies the idea that teachers are seen as facilitators or problem solvers in such a learning context. This necessitates the notion that they have to be well trained on this kind of technologically-based learning; how to question and describe one’s home culture to be models for their learners (O’Dowd, 2007).

With that in mind, Soliya’s ‘Connect Program’ is held by well-trained facilitators. Those facilitators have undergone minimally 20 hours training period guided by skilful trainers. The training program includes skill-building related activities such as listening, summarising, directing good questions, observing and addressing group dynamics, and working with online apparatuses. Some other activities related to trainers’ ‘self-awareness’ to be able to discuss the faced challenges, relevance of the chosen academic materials and so on. This could be of significance for those who work in such technologically-enabled intercultural communication for the necessity of having some sort of experience on actual problems concerned with intercultural misunderstanding, see for instance (Guth and Helm, 2012). As teletandem instructors, they could also face some difficulties related to ‘implementation stage’, such as “project structure and assessment, research versus pedagogical agenda, ambiguity about instructor participation, and securing the participation of ‘have-nots.’” (Basharina, et al., 2008: 298-9). It is therefore suggested that opposing ideas of this scheme should be made clear to participants by the instructor in addition to scrutinising the structure of the activity, learners’ assessment, internet access, time commitment, facilitation styles, etc. Such challenges show the intricate nature of teletandem in which instructors of culturally diverted institutional contexts involved (*ibid*).

Tackling the teacher role could be highly connected to that of the learner. In the learning process, context and learners define each other (Lave and Wenger, 1991); i.e., “[...] the learner is embedded in society shaped by both innovative technology and cultural diversity [...]” (Pollak, 2010:1). Consequently, information exchange, comparison, analysis, collaboration and product creation are, according to (O’Dowd and Ware, 2009), considered as major sets for telecollaborative learners to do in the e-collaborative context. For Guth and Helm (2012:47), this e-cooperation on product creation could be considered a highly difficult task because of the learners’ need to the necessary intercultural competence and collaborative skills to be engaged in the teamwork in addition to online related information. To achieve that, Soliya’s ‘Connect Program’ aims to provide learners with the chance to establish a deeper understanding of the others’ views around the world on important matters and why they do, as in the students’ access to the video project to reflect on editorial decision-making and the media impact on cross-cultural relations, see students’ video portraying the 2008 conflict in Gaza as provided from APTN and Al Jazeera on Soliya’s website. It could be seen as an opportunity for learners to have political discussion. As a result, this kind of program could achieve the ‘operational’, ‘cultural’, and ‘critical’ dimensions as ‘new literacies’ (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006; cited in Guth and Helm, *ibid*: 43).

However, this does not of course mean such an online interaction aims at finding a way to reach the world consensus about a particular issue. Instead, it might provide learners with the chance to see the world from others’ perspectives. If this does not occur naturally, it is then teachers’ responsibility to assist them to do that. This could generally express the intricate relationship between the teacher /learner role in teletandem as one of many other learning contexts. This complexity lies in the fact that it is difficult for the teacher to prepare learners for every situation they might encounter due to the unpredictability of that. Self-dependent

learners could hence be seen as mastering unpredictable cultural and linguistic situations (Zarate, 1999: 11). In view of the learner-centred approach, the teacher is no longer seen as the answer provider for previously analysed information, but rather he has become mainly the supplier of the source of information which depends on the learner's decision of its importance (Planet and Byram 2000: 90; in Pollak, 2010). This could be recognised in Soliya Jordanian female student's feedback for joining Soliya's 'Connect Program' saying "Soliya allowed me to open the box that I was living in for a long time and see the world around me...".

5. Conclusion

Regardless of the difficulties that might be faced, it could be concluded that teletandem learning, as represented in Soliya's 'Connect Program', usually provides learners with the opportunity to be linguistically and culturally aware of the differences in the world. It might be defined as a learning environment that introduces learners with different multi-sources of knowledge. This potentially assists autonomous learners to improve their L2 intercultural communicative competence via supporting each other to overcome any interactional failure or misunderstanding. However, it should not be expected that participating in teletandem by itself could develop learners' intercultural communicative competence regardless other related supporting factors like collaboratively well-trained teachers to choose the right topic, participants and the possible means of such on-line interactions to achieve that aim.

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