2010

Close Encounters of a New Kind: The Use of Skype and Wiki in Telecollaboration

Sarah Guth
Nicoletta Marini-Maio
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications

Part of the Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons, Italian Language and Literature Commons, and the Online and Distance Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
Close Encounters of a New Kind: The Use of Skype and Wiki in Telecollaboration

SARAH GUTH AND NICOLETTA MARINI-MAIO

This case study describes the second iteration of an intercontinental telecollaboration project between Italian students of English at the University of Padova, Italy, and American students of Italian at Dickinson College, USA. Students use Skype for weekly synchronous conversations on pre-determined topics and a wiki for both organizational matters (calendars, Skype names, etc.) as well as for a bilingual collaborative writing project. The overall aims of the project are for students to use these Web 2.0 tools to perfect their communication skills in the language they are studying (L2) and to develop their intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997).

Context

The second iteration of the Padova-Dickinson exchange involved 28 American students with different majors taking the third portion (comparable to a B1 level) Italian course, of a three-semester foreign language required cycle, 9 Engineering students taking a B1 level General English course at the University of Padova and 22 students

1 The first iteration was carried out in the Spring semester 2008 and based on a careful analysis of the data (e.g. end-of-course questionnaires, informal interviews, teacher emails, etc.) the second iteration, described here, was designed. The third iteration took place in the Fall semester 2009.
in International Communications Studies at the Faculty of Languages at the same Italian University attending a B2 level English course.

There was a slight difference in mean age as the American students were younger, with a mean age of 18, and the Italian students older, with a mean age of 23. Neither group of students had previous experience editing a wiki whereas the majority were familiar with Skype and used it in their personal lives. Both the American and Italian students were regular users of the Internet. The Skype sessions were held in the respective language laboratories once a week for a period of 10 weeks. Students were then expected to work on their courses’ tasks and assignments, and edit the wiki in their free time.

Objectives

Common goals were established for the exchange, in compliance with the C’s established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1999): Communication, Cultures, Comparisons, Connections, and Communities.

- **Communication**: the emphasis on synchronous and asynchronous discussion aimed at improving students’ ability to interact in both the target foreign language (L2) with native speakers in guided activities as well as in their native language (L1) with non-native speakers in spontaneous conversations and debates.

- **Culture/s**: practice of the foreign language was content-based, according to the syllabus of the American students as well as current international events, e.g. political elections, in order for students to learn language and content in tandem.

- **Comparisons**: the exchanges were designed with the goal to solicit comparisons between students’ own culture and the foreign culture, promote the use of a variety of strategies when interacting with native speakers, develop the ability to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstandings and to understand the roots of cultural stereotypes.
Connections: through guided activities, students were expected to reflect on how what they learned in the foreign language ‘classroom’ might apply to their other fields of study.

Communities: the collaborative learning experience gained through the exchanges aimed at developing a sense of community with the foreign peers through discussions of cultural and contemporary topics culminating in the design, research, and development of collaborative projects.

Project Phases and Telecollaboration Task Types

Given the fact that the American students overall had a lower level of linguistic competence, the tasks were organized around their syllabus so that they would have the necessary vocabulary to engage in meaningful conversations on Skype. Similarly, given this disparity in level, the topic chosen for the collaborative writing assignment was B1 level in nature and dealt with college/university life for foreign students at the respective institutions. The types of tasks students were required to do fall into the three types of telecollaborative tasks proposed by O’Dowd and Ware (2009): Information Exchange, Comparison and Analysis, and Collaboration and Product Creation. An integral activity that took place throughout the project both in the respective classrooms and online is Reflective Practice. As McAllister and Whiteford (2008) write:

Reflective thinking leading to reflective judgement appears to be an important aspect of cultural competence; in fact, it may be more critical than some other aspects, like possessing specific knowledge or having a particular kind of attitude towards specific groups of people. (p. 362)
The tasks in the first three weeks of the course were dedicated to familiarizing students with the technologies they were to use for the exchange (Skype and the wiki) and with one another. Task 1 involved writing personal introductions in L2 on the wiki; students were asked to add urls to their personal blogs, names on Facebook if they had an account, etc. so that students could ‘find out’ more about one another through each other’s existing online identities. Task 2 was the first Skype exchange and the topic was student life.

It is important to point out that as a pre-task before each Skype session students prepared questions in L2 regarding the topic on the wiki. There are four reasons for this pre-task:

1. to allow students to think about the types of questions they want to ask before having to ‘perform’ in real time;
2. to give both classes the opportunity to prepare the vocabulary they will need to carry out the conversations in both L1 and L2;
3. to give students questions to ‘fall back on’ during the uncomfortable silent moments that occur during a Skype conversation, especially during the first few sessions;
4. to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on how their peers’ use of L2 (i.e. their L1) reveals underlying syntax and lexical items from their L1 (e.g. American students’ use of *rottura*, which means *break* in the physical sense to express *break* in English meaning *vacation* or *time off*).

Task 3 was a continuation of Task 2 from another perspective, i.e. what it would be like to be an international student at the respective institutions. During their Skype session on this topic, students were encouraged to exchange the urls of online resources using the Skype text function. This conversation was the starting point for the collaborative writing assignment, which involved groups of 4 students (2 from each class) developing a bilingual wiki page providing information for foreign students interested in studying at their respective university/college. We aimed to maintain the same peers throughout
the exchange; however, due to student absences this was not always possible.

Comparison and Analysis

As has already been said, the topics for the Skype sessions were based on the American students’ curriculum. Nonetheless, the teachers, through many email messages, agreed on topics that would allow students to effectively compare and contrast the two cultures and through this process, construct new knowledge. Indeed weeks 4–9 were dedicated to comparing and contrasting various cultural aspects from politics, given the focus in the American curriculum on Italian politics and Berlusconi (the Italian prime minister at the time) and the US presidential elections in 2008 (weeks 4–5) to representations of the two cultures through cinema (weeks 7–9). The last topic (representation of the mafia in American and Italian cinema) was the basis for the final Skype meeting which, unlike the previous ones, was class to class using video so that students could see one another.

Development and Collaboration and Product Creation

Starting in the third week of the exchange, students had to begin the collaborative writing assignment, as mentioned above. The ultimate aim of this project was that it be a sort of role-reversal in which each student had to step into their peers’ shoes and imagine what it would be like to be a foreign student at the other institution. The Italian students had to provide information about Dickinson in English based on their conversations and the links and resources their peers shared with them, and vice versa the American students had to write about Padova in Italian. The linguistic aim of this assignment was

3 For more on the importance of teacher relationships in telecollaboration see O’Dowd and Eberbach 2004; Dooly 2008; O’Dowd and Ware 2009).
twofold: first to give students the opportunity to write in L2 and receive linguistic feedback from native speakers; second to require students to ‘rely on’ their peers as a source of information, be it sources on the Web or personal experience. The collaborative writing assignment was divided into an initial phase of collective authoring, involving contributing text and visuals (photographs from online photo sharing sites, personal photos, and YouTube videos) and a final stage in which students provided peer feedback. On the wiki pages there was a section where students could provide comments on one another’s work, offering suggestions for improvement without intervening on the text. Students were required to make changes based on their peers’ comments and then they were asked to correct their peers’ work by directly editing the wiki page. Then, by using the history and compare function of the wiki, students were able to see what changes their peers had made.

Difficulties in receiving and offering peer feedback provided opportunities for learning about the respective cultures. The Italian students expressed frustration about the fact that their American peers were not providing feedback that was clear, specific and to the point. At the same time, the American students were offended by the directness and lack of hedging in the feedback provided by their Italian peers. In order to avoid each group wanting the other to simply adapt to their preferred style of giving feedback, the two teachers had a 15-minute conversation in Skype in which they discussed their experiences with how feedback is given in the two countries. This conversation was recorded and then posted to the wiki and led to in-class conversation. Subsequently many modified, even if slightly, their style in providing feedback to their peers.

It is important to add that students, of their own accord, established alternative ways of communicating in order to carry out the collaborative writing assignment. This is particularly important since students only had one hour a week for their Skype sessions and, from Week 4 on, the topics discussed were not related to the assignment. For some students the preferred method was email, for others Facebook, and others yet Skype and IM. In other words, each group
found the method of communication that best suited their own group members’ needs and constraints (e.g. presence or lack of broadband outside of class).

**Reflective Practice**

In order to fully benefit from telecollaboration, it is important for students to engage in reflective practice regarding both language and culture and this involves analyzing one’s own language and culture as much as it does analyzing ‘the other’. As Brookfield (1990 in McAllister et al. 2006) notes, “the critical reflective thinker can: (1) identify the assumptions that underlie their thoughts and actions; (2) evaluate the accuracy and validity of these assumptions; and, as necessary, (3) reconstitute these assumptions” (p. 370). It is just as important for students to step back and reflect on what they are learning and saying about their own culture as it is to have synchronous conversations with peers about the ‘other’ culture. Reflective practice took place through guided classroom discussions and, for the Italian students, learner diaries on the wiki. Since the synchronous Skype conversations were bilingual, students were also asked to reflect on what they were learning both by using L2 to converse with native speakers as well as by having to use their L1 to converse with non-native speakers. To this end, several Skype sessions were recorded and students asked to listen to both their own recordings as well as those of other groups in the project and reflect on:

1. misunderstandings, i.e. if and when they occurred, how were they clarified?
2. how their peers used L2, e.g. sounds or words that were not ‘typical’ of their native language;
3. how they used L1;
4. what cultural meanings came out of the conversations through words learned, slang, cultural concepts, etc.
The American students carried out this task in class while the Italian students did it online on the wiki. Indeed, one significant difference between the two groups is that the American students met with their teacher every day, 5 days a week, whereas the Italian students only met with their teacher once a week during the Skype sessions and for an hour of discussion before or after the session. Therefore, whereas the American students had opportunities to do reflective practice in the classroom in the form of discussion, the Italian students did so online.

Assessment

As far as assessment is concerned, it is important to point out that this telecollaboration project was one of the many activities in the American course whereas it was the sole activity of the Italian course. Therefore, the weight the project carried in the two groups was significantly different. The one aspect the two groups of students had in common was assessment of their collaborative writing assignments. In addition to the assessment on the part of the teachers (who used different criteria given the different levels of linguistic ability), students were also asked to peer and self-assess using an online form; this assessment was considered when assigning the final grade.

Project Evaluation

The telecollaboration project was evaluated through both qualitative data, i.e. open questions from the end-of-course questionnaire, informal interviews with students and students’ written work on the blog, and quantitative data from the end-of-course questionnaire. We

4 All the students completed the questionnaires in English.
hereby illustrate the main results, starting with the qualitative data analysis.

Overall students felt that they had improved their language skills. Students pointed out that the Skype sessions, rather than help them become more accurate in their speaking, helped them overcome insecurity when speaking in L2:

I feel more confident and I’m faster in finding the right words! (Italian student).

Simply just having someone to use Italian with was the most helpful, just talking about anything was the best part to boost confidence and become more fluid when speaking. (American student)

They also felt they had improved their listening skills and overall conversation skills:

During the skype conversation I was forced to understand what my peer was saying. I understood how to be patient and how to ask information if I don't understand something. (Italian student)

The most useful thing in the exchange is the exercise in conversing. In a 1on1 environment, failure does not seem as embarrassing as in a classroom, and the atmosphere is more relaxed. Learning to hold a conversation in another language is probably the most useful thing that could be taught. (American student)

Although students were asked to speak in Italian for half of the time and then in English, they were often engaged in codeswitching (see Hughes in this volume) in order to overcome difficulties: “It is difficult to speak 25 minutes in Italian and other 25 in English though...We always made a mix!” Many students expressed frustration editing the wiki: “At the beginning I had problems also with the wiki because I do not have a fast internet connection and I was not able to do what I wanted.” Nonetheless, in the end they also felt it had helped improve their writing skills:

I really appreciated also the use of the Wiki in order to improve my writing skills. (Italian student)
I found correcting our partner’s work and taking and using comments that they provided on our own work very helpful. This would only have been possible with a wiki and it was a very helpful tool in my personal learning experience. (American student)

Students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to work on improving their language skills while at the same time learning about culture:

The thing that I found most useful during the course were the Skype sessions, absolutely. Because I think it was an extraordinary opportunity to both improve my language skill and to get in touch with a different culture. (Italian student)

I found the Skype sessions most useful because they really gave us an insight into how these Italian students thought and how they acted. (American student)

The Italian students also indicated that keeping a learner diary was useful for both language and cultural learning:

I believe that keeping a record of what we did week by week helped me in my learning and gave me the opportunity to collect all the new words I learned in the Skype exchange. Moreover, the learner diary helped me to reflect on the topics we dealt with.

Probably the most cited improvement that could be made according to the students was to increase the number of Skype exchanges. Many had wished they had had more time to get to know their peers better and to discuss issues that went beyond the assigned topics. This would seem to indicate that the students were developing a personal relationship in addition to their academic one. Indeed, many indicated that they were regularly in touch with their peers outside of classroom time, as this Italian student commented:

I think that we should have conversations at least twice a week and use webcams, too. It was nice the idea to give topics in order to have always something to say but I wanted to know more informations about my peer’s life, too, and sometimes we couldn't do it because time was over. Anyway, now we
write each other almost everyday in facebook. I think it’s very nice that we have become friends and our relation is not only for school.

And one American student even suggested the peer feedback be carried out directly in Facebook: “In the future, I feel that the method of correcting each other’s wiki essays could have been a lot more efficient if we just discussed it through facebook.” Indeed, this comment, which is representative of many students’ opinions on both sides of the Atlantic, opens up an entirely new discussion about how the new Web 2.0 tools that students are using in their personal lives could potentially be exploited to improve the quality of telecollaboration exchanges.

The end-of-course questionnaire also investigated students’ new online literacies using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to strongly Disagree. A total of forty-four students (N = 44), 22 Italians and 22 Americans, completed the questionnaire. At the end of the course, all the students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I think it’s important to communicate in a variety of modes (spoken, written, asynchronous, synchronous)” (average rating 4.72). All the students strongly agreed or agreed with the effectiveness of Skype for communicating and 94.4% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “Text chat in Skype sometimes helped us understand each other.” Furthermore, all students strongly agreed or agreed with the statements “I used online resources (e.g. dictionaries) when Skyping to facilitate my own comprehension and production” and “I can choose the most appropriate communication tool for different situations/needs.” These responses would seem to indicate students had developed skills to exploit the Web-based online learning environment they were using. However, in response to the statement “It’s difficult to speak, read, write and listen all at the same time” 12 strongly agreed and 16 agreed, 9 were neutral and only 7 disagreed (average rating 3.75). It appears, therefore, that nearly half the students would benefit from more training in the type of online multi-tasking that is required of them when engaging in these synchronous Skype sessions. Nonetheless, one Italian student’s final conclusion was:
Using technologies was the best way to learn and improve your knowledges about a foreign language. We always use a computer but we probably do not know how to use it effectively. This experience was useful to know more about the tools we have.

Conclusions

The two iterations of the Padova-Dickinson exchange have proved to be successful. Since students at both institutions have few if any opportunities to communicate with native or fluent speakers of the language they are studying, the opportunity to do so using Skype is very much appreciated by students on both sides of the Atlantic. Many of the American students are preparing for a year of study abroad in Italy and as such the Skype sessions give them an opportunity to become more familiar with both the language and the culture of the country where they will be living. On the contrary, many of the Italian students have already spent time abroad studying through the Erasmus program in Europe and have, therefore, had contact with either native speakers from Britain or the UK or non-native speakers in English-speaking contexts in countries such as Denmark and Germany. For these students, the Skype sessions are seen as an opportunity to become more familiar with American pronunciation as well as American culture. The opportunity of this telecollaboration project was even more significant for the Italian students who had not studied abroad. As one Italian student said in an email to her teacher:

Visto soprattutto il poco tempo che di solito si dedica alla parte orale della lingua, questo scambio è stata la prima occasione in cinque anni che ha permesso agli studenti di esprimere, [...] con una conversazione simultanea, le loro capacità comunicative. Questo scambio è stato anche un'ottima opportunità per confrontare le culture tra i paesi dello scambio. [Given the little amount of time that is usually dedicated to the oral aspect of languages, this exchange was the first time in five years that has allowed students to their communicative abilities [...] in a simultaneous conversation. The ex-
change was also an excellent opportunity to compare the cultures of the countries involved in the exchange.]

The use of these tools in telecollaboration is still in their infancy, but they have certainly offered the authors and their students opportunities that were not available even 5 years ago. The fact that the tools are freely available also means that even after the exchange is over, students can continue to access and use the wiki Skype with their ‘new friends’.

References


