

Intercultural Telecollaboration between Master Students: A Focus on the LMS

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Abstract

Studying abroad implies a good opportunity to learn not only the language of the country where the academic institution is located, but primarily to acquire knowledge and other searching and teaching methodologies. Therefore, in our universities, it can be easy to find courses with multicultural students. These students must adapt to the new culture and to the new academic context. The Learning Management System (LMS) or learning platforms are part of this scenario, as they are essential in the universities' life. The present work describes a task driven at a master's degree course with a multicultural attendance, which focused on telecollaborative interaction in order to better know the differences and similarities between universities and their learning tools.

Keywords: *languages; telecollaboration; videoconference; LMS; tandem learning*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyse the development and implementation of a collaborative technique in the "Active methodologies, approaches and techniques" course, which is part of the "Computer-assisted Language Learning" module. The collaborative technique in this context was a tandem exchange between German students studying at a university in Germany and multicultural students studying at a university in Spain.

The course is a compulsory subject of the "Languages and Technology" master's degree program. This master's degree, developed entirely at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), has a two-pronged professional and research approach that caters to the needs of students in both the didactic and the pure research aspects. On the one hand, it uses innovative methods to address ways of developing a professional career, making use of available technological resources. On the

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other hand, it prepares students for a research career in the field of Applied Linguistics, incorporating advances in computational linguistics. Hence, the knowledge of digital tools is both a tool and an aim.

Furthermore, at the UPV, there are 13 generic student outcomes, the professional or transversal skills. They can be developed throughout the entire duration of one's studies, not only during a bachelor's degree, but also during the master's degree. One of them, "Specific tools", is to be developed in this master's "Active methodologies, approaches and techniques" course ; which means that the student will be capable to "Appropriately select and apply the tools, technologies and, in general, the instruments available to any operations related to design and projects in the student's professional field.". As previously stated, the subject matter is CALL (Computer-assisted Language Learning) and one possible professional field of our students might be to teach languages. LMS are today present at all kinds of academic levels, but especially in Higher Education.

It is a fact that in recent decades Intercultural Higher Education institutions have been reviewing their eco-systems (European University Association, 2016) by adopting two main strategies: infrastructure focused on information technologies, lifelong learning experts, research workers and lectures employment and internationalisation (Teresevičienė, Volungevičienė, & Daukšienė, 2011). Quoting Ferreira-Lopes et al. (2018), "As one of the results of such efforts, we see the rise of virtual mobility as a tool that has been adopted by universities to combine both approaches in order to develop important 21st-century skills like Digital Literacy, Collaboration and Intercultural Competence." (Ferreira-Lopes et al., 2018: 2). This could be the main reason for developing and designing interactive telecollaborative communicative tasks, but especially in the context of such a master's program, it seems almost a necessity to put it into practice in order to complete the goals of the master's program itself.

Our experience in applying the tandem method (Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Gil-Salom, Pomino & Pozo-Vicente, 2018) in teaching Academic and Professional German to undergraduate students inspired the design of a telecollaborative task in the context of the master's degree course.

2. Methodology

In order to explain our experience, we will describe the aims, the participants, the procedure, as well as the instruments and tools needed to complete the process. Although the task described was conducted during only one session, it sought several aims and different skills were developed.

2.1. Aims

One of the general objectives of the Master's Degree in Languages and Technology is to train specialists that will be able to transfer research results to teaching practice and other professional environments, such as technical communication, linguistic consulting, translation, processing and analysis of teaching materials for computer-assisted language learning. Consequently, we decided to put this philosophy into practice and designed an interactive and intercultural online activity, that could contribute to enhancing communication with digital tools in our international context.

The experience was designed with two main purposes: (1) to know all the possibilities of the LMS as teaching and learning tools and (2) to compare platforms of other universities in different countries. On the one hand, we wanted to analyse our learning platform plus at least a different one in order to better understand all the possibilities they can offer. On the other hand, we were looking for a chance to interact with other universities from different countries and cultures. Intercultural communication is a priority for learning foreign languages and therefore for knowing what scenarios might arise for future foreign language teachers. Both purposes should be carried out in an active way, the students should learn LMS not only from theory, but also by working with them and thinking about different versions and contexts. This proposal followed the approach and philosophy of the course, to learn through active tasks in order to get experimental knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The University of Trier in Germany accepted the challenge, so that four students from different master's degrees interacted with four students in Valencia studying at the UPV.

In addition, three of the students had some knowledge of German, so for them the telecollaboration had not only a content focus, but also a

foreign language practice one, as they could carry out an authentic tandem exchange (Brammerts & Kepplin, 2010): they used their mother tongue, in this case Spanish and the target language, namely German, to interact, practising and collaborating with the objective of finding differences and similarities between their respective university learning platforms.

As future language teachers, the idea of working in a telecollaborative way with students from another country can be highly motivating, the roles are bidirectional, from the learner's point of view as learners themselves and from the professional one, because they were LMS experts while performing the task.

2.2. Participants

The group that took part in the experience at the UPV was comprised of 28 students attending their "Active methodologies, approaches and techniques" master's course in Valencia, Spain. The activity was compulsory, and they received an individual mark for it. It was carried out in class, as part of the "Learning platforms assisted Teaching" (*Plataformas educativas como apoyo a la docencia* in Spanish) Unit.

The students in Germany were students in the master's program in Romance Languages at the University of Trier (UT), which means they had learned Spanish as a Foreign Language in advance. Only four students took part in the activity in Germany, the experience was voluntary at the UT and it took place outside the academic schedule.

Due to the small group of students who could participate in the online collaboration, the rest of the group at the UPV were asked to compare PoliformaT with another academic LMS.

2.3. Procedure

In the previous session at the UPV, since they were already very familiar with the PoliformaT platform, the students discovered the different tools and possible uses of each one. They had conducted an analysis with a professor, looking at all the possibilities the different tools offer: *guía docente* (academic guide), *recursos* (materials), *espacio compartido* (dropbox), *tareas* (tasks), *exámenes* (tests), *calificaciones* (marks), chat, forum, wiki, etc.

For this session, the idea was to compare this tool with others at other universities with the purpose of getting new information, new contexts and being able to evaluate different LMS in the future. This capability is necessary for a good professional in any teaching environment. The task took place in a space close to the classroom and the students used their own devices, in this case, their laptops and smartphones.

2.4. Instruments and tools

As an instrument to assess the acquisition of the curriculum's contents, the following task was given: "Compare two online learning platforms. For example, you can compare PoliformaT to that at your university. You can also compare PoliformaT to another different platform from a different university." So, the students were told to point out the differences and similarities between both platforms and, if possible, to make a critical description of them, highlighting the most significant characteristics from the point of view of the students and the teachers.

Most of the students made the comparison using the LMS from their prior university, but five of them dared to communicate online and live with the students in Germany in order to better understand the platform German students use, which is StudIP. The students who chose to work live, that is via teleconference, in a synchronic way, used the videoconference tool Skype, in order to communicate and share images and characteristics. They had the opportunity to talk and to exchange information in a significant way, by commenting on other aspects that were also important to them, as they were arising during the conversation, not because they were a task given by the professor.

As we can see in Table 1, most of the students made the comparison with foreign learning platforms: four of them with the LMS StudIP of the Universität Trier and four more students fulfilled the task using the LMS from their own universities abroad or other foreign universities. However, four students preferred to work with different Spanish universities. At last, two comparisons were made with open LMS that do not belong to any university, since they are open-access LMS.

Table 1. LMS compared

Stu- dent	LMS I	LMS II
A	PoliformaT UPV	StudIP
B	PoliformaT UPV	StudIP
C	PoliformaT UPV	StudIP
D	PoliformaT UPV	StudIP
E	PoliformaT UPV	TYMC de la URAP
F	PoliformaT UPV	Universidad Pedagógica de Bolivia
G	PoliformaT UPV	Universidad de Lenguas Extranjeras de Jilin
H	PoliformaT UPV	Minerva Universidad de Leeds
I	PoliformaT UPV	Universidad de Málaga
J	PoliformaT UPV	UACloud Universidad de Alicante
K	PoliformaT UPV	Aula Virtual UV
L	PoliformaT UPV	Aula Virtual UV
M	PoliformaT UPV	Chamilo
N	Moodle	Schoology

Four students compared the Spanish UPV LMS, called PoliformaT, with that of the German university UT, called StudiIP. The communication was carried out with Skype as a teleconference tool.

The rest of the students could not interact online because of the few German participants in the tandem activity. For this reason, they fulfilled the task without interaction and worked alone. A comparison with other foreign universities from Russia, Bolivia, China and Great Britain was made. Four learning platforms of different Spanish universities were chosen to be compared with UPV. Finally, PoliformaT was compared with one open-access platform and one student compared Moodle with an open-access platform.

3. Results

Having seen all these elements, the results of the activity are displayed, including the outcomes of the interaction, that is the comparison and perceptions of the students who took part in the teleconferences. Additionally, some brief comments by the teachers are also included. This kind of complementary support (Greene et al., 1089) provides more data for the task evaluation.

3.1. Comparison

Regarding the outcomes of the task itself, we include those of the four students who spoke with the students in Germany:

3.1.2. Student A

After having described the layout and different tools of both platforms, student A points out their main advantages and disadvantages, which can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2. Student A comparison²

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Polifor- maT	1. Many necessary tools 2. It helps a lot in classes due to its functions	1. Complex process 2. Not clean design
STUD.IP	1. Very clean and simple design 2. Direct and simple process	1. Fewer tools

The student thinks that it is easier to navigate the German platform, but it has fewer tools than the Spanish one.

3.1.3. Student B

In Student B's opinion of, the SudiIP platform is more friendly and easier to navigate, that is, it has a better usability. The German student agreed and commented that, in fact, it was the opinion of most of the students at the UT:

Con X, un estudiante de la misma universidad, coincidimos en que a la mayoría de los alumnos les gusta y les parece fácil de usar. Esto es algo que suele suceder, aunque no tan a menudo, con la plataforma de la Universitat Politècnica, si bien es cierto que podría mejorar su interfaz y cambiar algunos aspectos de su funcionalidad para que fuera más fácil de usar y, por tanto, accesible. Desde mi punto de vista, la navegación es mucho más fácil y amigable con la plataforma StudIP, pero ambas plataformas cuentan con funcionalidades muy similares.

² Author's translation

As we can read in the report, student B agrees with the German student as to the better usability and layout of the German platform, although both LMS offer basically the same functions and tools.

3.1.4. Student C

Student C, just like the other two students, mentioned the better usability of StudIP and added that it allows searching any kind of file all over the University Platform, not only in the subject site, like a normal Google search or a local search in one's computer:

Sin embargo, la comparación de las plataformas educativas nos hizo poder apreciar en la Universidad de Trier una plataforma más intuitiva, más accesible y con algunos recursos más de los cuales destaco el Buscador, pues permite la búsqueda de cualquier archivo (de cualquier asignatura) dentro de la universidad como si se tratara de una búsqueda realizada en el ordenador personal de cualquier persona o incluso tipo Google (los estudiantes podían acceder a través del buscador al título de cualquier tema de cualquier asignatura solamente con teclear el nombre del archivo deseado). Esto es simplemente genial si lo pensamos desde la practicidad y la rapidez de acceso.

Furthermore, student C outlines that this search tool is actually useful and runs fast.

3.1.5. Student D

For student D, the German platform has a rather old-fashioned interface, similar to that of Facebook in its early stages. However, there are similarities regarding the email, course schedule and announcements options:

Por otra parte, la plataforma Studip, que se usa en varias universidades en Alemania, como en la de Colonia o en la de Gotinga, tenemos una interfaz que resulta más anticuada, muy parecida a la de Facebook en sus comienzos. Además, el menú con las diferentes opciones no se encuentra desplegado a la izquierda, sino que aparece en la cabecera de la plataforma a modo de pestañas de un explorador de internet. Este tipo de disposición la encuentro más clara, ya que tenemos todo el tiempo una referencia arriba de lo que estamos haciendo y nos recuerda a los exploradores. Las herramientas en este menú son diferentes a las de PoliformaT

pero hay varias similitudes, como la opción de E-Mail, calendario o tablón de anuncios.

3.2. Intercultural communication

Apart from the specific content of the task, the usability of both platforms, we would like to include those comments regarding communication, that is, those aspects beyond the pure academic details.

3.2.1. Students' perceptions

One student's perception was that it had been a rewarding learning activity, because of the information about studying in other parts of the world. Student C underlines that having learned how people study abroad allows for the opening of their mind to their personal and professional future:

[...] haré referencias al aprendizaje enriquecedor respecto a cómo se estudia en otras partes del mundo. [...] Además, esto de ver cómo estudian otros estudiantes del mundo es una manera de hacernos abrir nuestras mentes hacia cualquier escenario posible dentro de nuestro futuro personal y laboral.

In Student D's opinion, PoliformaT is quite limited, as it does not encourage "academic culture" as StudIP does, offering more attractive, more friendly and more diverse uses:

Sin embargo, fuera del ámbito de las asignaturas, PoliformaT es una plataforma más bien limitada y no ofrece todo lo que sí ofrece Studip, ya que esta parece fomentar mucho más la cultura universitaria a través de una plataforma menos atractiva, pero más intuitiva y con mayor diversidad de uso.

3.2.2. Professors' perceptions

As O'Dowd & Waire (2009) claimed, it is important to contrast not only the perceptions of the learners, but also those of the teachers, as they play a very important role. It is essential to take into consideration that the collaboration is not only that between the students or learners, but also that between the teachers. They are those who may conduct and supervise the task, at every step, from the starting point to the final product.

In a further chat session, the teacher in Trier (Teacher 1)³ summarized the perception of the students at this university⁴ in a chat session with her colleague in Valencia. The conversation is presented with translation in Table 3, as follows:

Table 3. Perceptions Teacher 1

- <i>¡Pues ha funcionado fenomenal!</i>	- <i>It has worked fantastic!</i>
- <i>Mis cuatro estudiantes piensan que vuestra plataforma es mucho más moderna que la nuestra! lo que es verdad</i>	- <i>My four students think that your platform is much modern than ours! Which is true.</i>
- <i>Los profesores españoles utilizan más las aplicaciones que ofrece vuestra plataforma para hacer trabajos colaborativos que nuestros profesores en la uni trier!</i>	- <i>The Spanish teachers use the tools offered by your platform in order to work more collaboratively than our teachers.</i>
- <i>Muy enriquecedor</i>	- <i>Very rewarding</i>

She pointed out that the LMS of the UPV is much modern and that it could be seen that the teachers in this university used the tool in a more collaborative way, compared to those from the German University. The opinions of the students in Valencia were also summed up by their teacher (Teacher 2) in the chat session with her colleague in Germany:

Table 4. Perceptions Teacher 2

- <i>Mis estudiantes han dicho que la experiencia ha sido muy buena</i>	- <i>My students said that it has been a very good experience.</i>
- <i>Que vuestra plataforma es más intuitiva y cómoda</i>	- <i>That your platform is more intuitive and user-friendly.</i>
- <i>Tenéis herramientas diferentes que son muy interesantes</i>	- <i>You have different tools, which are very interesting.</i>
- <i>Ha funcionado! Genial!!</i>	- <i>It has worked! Great!</i>

In the comments we can clearly perceive the motivation of both teachers. Their happiness shows the satisfaction of having interacted. The teacher in Germany (Teacher 2) highlights the excitement during the preparation phase and mentions how important this prior preparation is,

³ Our acknowledgement to our colleague Ana María Schmitt from Universität Trier for her collaboration.

⁴ Author's translation.

e.g.: bringing Skype installed on the computer. Nevertheless, it is considered an experience to learn from:

I really liked the experience of doing the teleconference! I had never done it before. I prepared everything with great enthusiasm, the room, the microphone, the Skype connection, etc. Even though I told them to have the Skype installed on the computer, they did not, but it serves as an experience.

On the contrary, it should be mentioned that it is desirable to conduct this kind of projects or tasks with the whole group, because the rest of the students in Valencia were disappointed and would have been happy to participate. They carried out the task and were able to tell that there were differences and similarities between the LMS at different universities, depending on what each university wants to focus on.

Conclusions

There is a need in Higher Education to implement telecollaborative activities in order to encourage internationalism. Projects or isolated tasks like the present work can help and are good opportunities to enhance intercultural skills through digital tools such as Skype. Teleconferences, communication over the Internet, telecommunication applications are now of daily use, so they should be present in our classrooms and labs, to connect students, to connect teachers, and to connect education.

One of the methods which is possible thanks to the tools mentioned is the tandem method, which allows a reciprocal learning. This process must be conducted by teachers to better profit from the experience, as they design and focus the interaction depending on the context and the individual needs of the course.

To conclude, quoting a student who highlighted the online tandem:

Despite the connection difficulties and the inconvenience of not being able to navigate this platform ourselves, we believe that the learning results are excellent and very motivating. In addition, some of our German colleagues have found partners for the linguistic and conversational exchange, which in the long term translates into a significant learning of the target language, among others (they can end up creating a great friendship, visiting, knowing the target language and culture first-hand, etc.).

As in real life, international collaboration in professional contexts can foster new personal relationships and vice versa.

Future work

For the next academic year, we will try to connect two groups of students. We hope our work can stimulate similar experiences, which, although desirable, are not always feasible.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to the students of the Master in Languages and Technology for their enthusiasm and participation in all the tasks of the course. We would like to also thank Mrs Ana María Schmitt for her collaboration and invaluable help.

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