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Collaborative learning and communication technologies in teaching business English

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Abstract

Collaborative learning has acquired a new dimension with the widespread use of information and communication technologies (McCafferty, Jacobs and Dasilva Iddings, 2006). The main advantages of using technology for language learning are a greater exposure to *authentic* language, access to a wide range of sources of information and to different varieties of language, opportunities for interaction and communication and more intensive learner participation (Carrió Pastor, 2009a, 2009b). The practical case presented in this study shows the collaborative learning experience in two English for business subjects, taught at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The activity was intended to simulate a real-life situation, in which members of business organizations are required to collaborate on projects in geographically distant locations. It has provided many opportunities for written interaction through a chat, in which students had to refine their communicative skills in English in order to collaborate successfully in the assignment set. The survey conducted after the assignment revealed that students felt more motivated and found the online collaboration an enriching context in learning business English.

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1. Introduction

Collaborative learning has been used by many researchers that promote new ways of teaching a second language (Kirschner 2001; Storch 2005; Strijbos and Fischer 2007; Weinberger and Fischer 2007; Liaw, Chen and Huang 2008; Kollar and Fischer 2010; Hafner and Miller 2011; Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs 2012; Fernández Dobao 2012; Sun and Chang 2012; Keser and Özdamlı 2012; Humphris 2013). Some of them have also referred to technology as a way to facilitate the practice of collaborative learning (Liaw, Chen and Huang 2008; Schoor and Bannert 2011; Hafner and Miller 2011; Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs 2012; Sun and Chang 2012).

In general, students enrolled in language subjects at university level prefer to be involved in real life activities and to use technology in their daily activities (Carrió-Pastor 2007). In this sense, several researchers (Taylor & Hitsaki 2004; McCafferty, Jacobs and Dasilva Iddings 2006) point out that technology represents an important tool for language teaching. As Hafner and Miller (2011: 68) explain: “Recent advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including the development of various Web 2.0 platforms [...], have contributed to the emergence of new literacy practices in online contexts”. These advances include the use of videos, platforms and the Internet to motivate students and to provide learners with updated material. Teachers have changed their role, from knowledge transmitters to information managers. In this technological context, learners should also be proficient in new skills given the amount of information available in digital format. Furthermore, learners should be able to choose the right technical tools to obtain reliable feedback.

In a teaching environment, collaborative activities are designed to implement new strategies (Carrió Pastor 2009a, 2009b) that benefit second language learning and teaching. Some researchers (Storch 2005; Humphris 2010) explain that collaborative activities make students more responsible in collaborative writing tasks, especially because they have joint responsibility. Storch (2005: 154) points out that “This may promote a sense of co-ownership and hence encourage students to contribute to the decision making on all aspects of writing: content, structure, and language”. Teachers should encourage interactions among students that lead to effective learning (Huber and Huber 2008) or the acquisition process may be interrupted if some members of the collaborative activity do not receive feedback. Other researchers have also pointed out the wide variation that may be detected in collaboration activities (Kiili, Laurinen & Leu (2012) that entail collaborative activities and information processing. We believe that some aspects should be taken into account when preparing activities based on collaborative learning:

- a. to group students taking into consideration language level,
- b. to give clear and simple instructions to the groups,
- c. to encourage interaction among the members of the collaborative activity,
- d. to restrict the information to be retrieved by students,
- e. to encourage work in close cooperation (to discuss, to plan, to assume responsibilities, etc.)

In this sense, collaborative learning offers many possibilities to language teachers, as fluent communication is one of the challenges of collaborative activities. As Kirschner (2001: 4) explains: “Collaborative learning supports the use of effective discursive learning methods (make explicit, discuss, reason, and reflect, convince) while allowing for the acquisition of essential social and communication skills”. This learning process entails concepts such as collective learning, information acquisition, technological skills and processes of meaning negotiation. This is the reason why collaborative activities should take advantage of technology, as it facilitates collaborative activities. As Jones and Issroff (2005: 398) explain: “In the context of learning technologies, freedom for the learner to negotiate their own path through the material may be attractive and motivating”. More specifically, Schoor and Bannert (2011: 561) detail the research on motivation that enhances computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), they state: “Studies covering collaborative learning and individual learning with and without computers also indicate that motivation might be of importance for learning activities and learning outcome.” Soldato (1996) enumerates six features of collaborative activities important for motivation (Jones and Issroff 2005: 399): social affinity between partners, cognitive ability, feedback, distribution of control, nature of tasks and time. In this paper we took into account the aspects we have described till now, collaborative learning, technology and motivation.

In the study described in this paper, we analysed the role of technology in the communicative acts among students involved in collaborative activities. Then our main aim was to analyse if the interaction between collaborative learning and technology increases motivation and language acquisition in specific English.

2. Collaborative learning class activity

The activity involving collaborative learning and communication technologies was designed for a subject of English for business purposes at the undergraduate level, taught in the 4th year of Grade in Business Management. Later it was adopted for English for business purposes at the postgraduate level in two master's courses: Master in Financial Management and Master in Company, Product and Service Management, both subjects taught at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. The subjects mentioned aimed at developing students' business communication skills as well as the acquisition of specific vocabulary. Within this context, the collaborative learning activity perfectly suited the objectives stated. Students involved in this activity had varying levels of proficiency in English: from A2 to B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The activity had the duration of four class hours within the 40-hour course taking place over one term in an academic year in a group of approximately 30 students. The students could gain the maximum of 1.5 points out of 10 total points assigned for all of the subject assignments.

The main reason for introducing this activity was the need to create conditions similar to real-life situations in which members of managerial teams working in geographically distant locations are involved in joint projects and have to communicate with each other to report progress made and to take decisions. In this sense, the activity provided opportunities for exchanging information, negotiating and decision-making. The specific objective of this activity was to develop the following skills: searching and analyzing information; communicating in writing; and making oral presentations. The communication technologies used were the chat of the Poliformat, the teaching and learning platform of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, and the Google docs tool. The following aspects, already mention in the Introduction section, were taken into account to design the activity: to group students taking into consideration language level, to give clear and simple instructions to the groups, to encourage interaction among the members of the collaborative activity, to restrict the information to be retrieved by students and to encourage work in close cooperation (to discuss, to plan, to assume responsibilities, etc.).

The students were divided into groups of three by inviting them to join those who they rarely worked with in this subject. This criterion for group creation was essential to reproduce the above-mentioned type of real-life context and to make the students use their collaborative capacities and skills with greater intensity and awareness. After groups were formed, the students were asked to negotiate the topic of their presentation using the Poliformat chat. As the activity was taking place in a computer lab room, the students were required to sit far away from the other group members, so that the criterion of physical distance was fulfilled, and they had to communicate in writing. They were given five broad topics (foreign exchange, accounting, stock markets, financial institutions, banking), and had to choose one and specify a sub-topic of their interest. The teacher had access to the different chats throughout the whole activity and could monitor the conversations taking place. This part of the activity was especially useful as the students had to be very clear in their exchanges in order to communicate successfully and reach a final decision on the topic (see example 1).

(1)

S1 *So, do you have any ideas what topic about the stock market could be interesting to present?*

S1 *IIIIII inviiiiiiiiite youuuuuuuuuuu to tell me your suggestions!*

S1 *how about that? <http://www.bargaineering.com/articles/50-fun-facts-about-the-stock-market.html>*

S2 *we can search about the IPO of a company*

S3 *We can talk about the difference between primary market and secondary market*

S3 *And the differents markets where stocks are exchanged*

S3 *Yes also Tony it is a goooooood idea*

S1 *For me both topics are good!*

S3 *and the link you send kathy it seems original*

Once the topic was selected and determined, the students had to start searching for the related information in the Internet and start creating a presentation file in Google docs. This tool allows group members to share a file and work on it simultaneously by group members. Its use requires a prior organization of work and of the information

gathered in order to ensure a correct use of a shared document. Working collaboratively implies distributing tasks, but also correctly managing time, as example 2 shows.

(2)

S1 *if we all put information may be a bit caotic*

S1 *what do you think?*

S2 *ok*

S3 *yes, we should start with the main parts. but actually we should put some strating things or maybe the table of contetnts on the presentation, because we have a better overview in the file than in the chat*

S1 *ok so do you preffer the first, the second document or what?*

S1 *its 16.30 and the class finish in 20 minutes :S*

S3 *we can workm with the first, because you said its better, right?*

S3 *maybe each one of us talks about one of the three risks*

S3 *1 devaluation or depreciation risk, 2 convertibility risk, and 3 transfer risk*

Some examples of the topics for oral presentations were ‘Banking crisis worldwide and in Spain’, ‘The European Central Bank: Its role in the financial crisis’, ‘Accounting frauds’, ‘Initial public offer’ or ‘Stock markets’. The students were advised to prepare approximately 20 slides for a 10-minute presentation.

Here some examples are shown in Figure 1 and 2:

S1 (26-nov-2014 15:52 CET) how divide the work?
 S1 (26-nov-2014 15:52 CET) how do we divide the work?
 S2 (26-nov-2014 15:52 CET) first, we could describe our agenda
 S3 (26-nov-2014 15:53 CET) good topic
 S2 (26-nov-2014 16:04 CET) Ok. So the tittle will be "Spanish Banking Sector"
 S2 (26-nov-2014 16:05 CET) Now, we need to know the topics about we are going to talk about
 S3 (26-nov-2014 16:49 CET)
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmtreasy/416/416.pdf> Aquí hay mucha información
 S2 (03-dic-2014 15:11 CET) Good afternoon
 S1 (03-dic-2014 15:12 CET) Hello
 S3 (10-dic-2014 15:24 CET) we should write the conclusion no?

Figure 1. Example of interaction in the collaborative activity.

S1 (26-nov-2014 15:30 CET) Foreign exchange, Stock markets, Financing international trade, Banking, Accounting
 S2 (26-nov-2014 15:30 CET) Katia, you suggest all the topics?)
 S1 (26-nov-2014 15:30 CET) I don't like any of them ahahaha XD, but maybe accounting is easier
 S3 (26-nov-2014 15:31 CET) Yes accounting sounds nice =)
 S3 (26-nov-2014 15:31 CET) some suggestions for a useful topic inside this broad area?
 S2 (26-nov-2014 15:35 CET) <http://www.journalofaccountancy.com/News/>
 S2 (26-nov-2014 15:35 CET) we can choose any news or topic?
 S2 (26-nov-2014 15:36 CET) <http://www.journalofaccountancy.com/BrowseTopics/>

Fig. 2. Identification of the structure of the presentation and the topic.

After the activity was completed, the students filled in an opinion questionnaire. Over the past five years, approximately 120 students evaluated the activity. Most of them (about 80%) viewed as positive and motivating the fact that they had to communicate in an online chat. More specifically, they stated that the use of the chat helped them to interact in English more time than if they had to speak about the activity in class (where they tend to switch

to Spanish) or out of the class (where they would constantly use Spanish to conduct the activity). They also valued highly the fact that they needed to write with certain care and accuracy for the activity management. A very few students had used Google docs tool before, so they also considered that opportunity to learn how to share a document as valuable. Finally, they agreed that what they did in class was highly useful for their future jobs.

3. Conclusions

In this paper, we described the results of the implementation of collaborative activities and technology for language learning as a way to increase motivation in undergraduate students enrolled in a specific subject. We observed, after the analysis of the results obtained in the activities and in the questionnaire, that even though collaborative learning has been in use for long time at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the combination with the communication technologies, such as the online chat and shared file creation through the Internet, has turned out to be especially motivating and useful in student preparation for real-life job tasks. The findings of the study showed how it was possible to motivate students through real-life activities. Learners were engaged in the meaningful collaborative activities and tasks that required the use of technological tools and in which students were able to communicate with their peers in an interactive and specific context.

In this vein, motivation is an important part of successful collaborative learning and it may be derived from the specific tasks designed. In this study, students were enrolled in real-life job tasks and this seemed to be the reason why students expressed interest in the activities and why 80% of them confirmed that they had felt highly motivated. However, we also agree with Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs (2012: 106) in that “It is also important to reflect upon the relationship between the evolution of the use of these tools, the tools themselves, and the related pedagogy in order to identify approaches to encouraging flexible pedagogical practices”.

The interaction among learners was also taken into account in this study, as shown in examples (1) and (2). Learners focused on communication and on performing their tasks, and as a consequence, they did not use long sentences or complex vocabulary. They even used expressions more common in oral communication and they spelled words incorrectly, as their main intention was to communicate quickly and effectively with partners. As suggested by Liaw, Chen and Huang (2008), one of the most important aspects of learning with peers is team performance, which in turn increases the quality of the team product.

Thus, the activities proposed in this study entailed collaborative activities among students; teachers supervised the tasks, but the interaction of the activities was under the control of the learners. The findings of this study suggest that language teachers may draw upon the use of such collaborative tools as Google docs to design opportunities for specific language learning. Nevertheless, we are conscious of the limitations of this work. It solely provides a basis for further studies that will help us to examine the effectiveness of a combined use of collaborative activities and technology.

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