ONLINE COLLABORATIVE CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

Albina Ramilevna Kayumova, Kazan Federal University
Gulnara Vasilevna Sadykova, Kazan Federal University

ABSTRACT

This article describes and analyzes students' perspective on the process of integrating online collaborative cross-cultural modules in the traditional (full-time) courses. Twenty-five US, Lithuanian and Russian students participated in a 6-week online international project The Power of Media. After the course, students completed the questionnaire that explored their learning experiences. The study showed a positive attitude of the students toward international online collaboration and illustrated beneficial impact of such cross-cultural projects on the development of linguistic and intercultural competences of learners. However, results revealed that while students learn from differences in peers' cultural and educational backgrounds, dissimilar communication and learning strategies, as well as varied ways of student-to-content and student-to-student interaction, may hinder successful learning experiences in collaborative online international learning (COIL) environments. The results speak for the need for similar cross-cultural projects to carefully plan content and activities, set clear deadlines, and use a range of online communication tools including synchronous.

Key words Internationalization, online collaborative cross-cultural learning, students’ feedback, eLearning, intercultural communication, language education

INTRODUCTION

Recently we have witnessed a wave of interest in online collaborative learning, which reflects current trends in globalized and highly networked and interconnected world. Numerous research studies provide insights into how to structure and teach collaborative groups online as well as how to research and analyze these online processes (see, for example, Koschmann, 2002; Garrison, 2011; Shear et al., 2010). As schools and universities embrace the concept of internationalization, the questions of cross-cultural online learning and intercultural online communication also attract much scholarly attention (Sadykova, 2014; Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008).

This exploratory case study examines students' learning experiences in collaborative online intercultural (cross-cultural) learning (COIL). Particularly, the research focuses on the students' perspectives on the value of such international projects that involve groups of students from different learning programs and different cultures. While some studies agree that collaborative online learning enables active student-to-student interaction that positively affects learning outcomes (McInerney & Roberts, 2009), little is still known how students themselves assess their learning experiences and what they see as COIL advantages and shortcomings.

Collaborative learning is generally defined as a model of learning which “takes place in situations where emphasis is placed on student-to-student interaction in the learning process, and the instructor’s role becomes that of a facilitator (a “guide-on-the-side”)” (McInerney & Roberts, 2009: 326). Online collaborative learning, also referred to as computer-supported collaborative learning, online cooperative learning and online group work, has also been
demonstrated as conducive of active peer-to-peer interaction that may result in co-construction of knowledge (Hiltz & Goldman, 2005). When such learning environment is infused with the concept of internationalization, one deals with collaborative online international (or cross-cultural) learning.

METHODS

The research was designed as an exploratory case study that involved students engaged into an online collaborative project named The Power of Media. This COIL project united instructors and students from a large state university in the USA, a small private university in Lithuania and a large federal university in Russia. A 6-week online module, developed specifically for this project, was integrated into students’ regular curricular (an online graduate course for US students majoring in education, a face-to-face undergraduate course for Lithuanian students majoring in media, and a face-to-face graduate course for Russian students majoring in English). While the online collaborative module engaged 49 students, only 25 students (10 – USA, 9 – Lithuania, 6 – Russia) agreed to participate in the study and completed a survey (51% response rate). Participants had English language proficiency levels from upper-intermediate students to native speakers and all activities were done in English.

The module The Power of Media was integrated into a fully online course developed in a Blackboard platform and hosted by the US university. It included three major activities:

1. an introductory discussion “Media & I” where students discussed their media habits and contemplated about how they understand their individual culture;
2. three asynchronous discussions based on video materials related to the power of media (Media & Reality, Media & Gender Issues, Media & Violence);
3. TV advertisement critiques where students selected and analyzed a TV advertisement of their choice.

At the end of the course twenty-five participants completed a questionnaire consisting of 4 close-ended and 1 open-ended questions. One of the Russian students was further interviewed by a researcher.

The data collected was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Students' responses were visualized in graphs and compared by groups (USA, Lithuania and Russia). Responses for an open-ended question were analyzed to define themes and elicit trends.

RESULTS

Students’ responses have not demonstrated unanimity, nor were they radically different when three cohorts of students – US, Lithuanian and Russian – were compared.

In Question 1 the students were asked if they think the involvement of students from other countries helped them gain knowledge that they would not have been able to gain without their involvement (Figure 1).
Overall, the majority of students felt that there was a positive influence of cross-cultural collaboration on their knowledge acquisition. The most favourable response to the question was given by Russian students: 50% of students selected “Yes, absolutely” while only 20% of US and 22% of Lithuanian students selected the same answer. Still, over 67% of Lithuanian, 40% of US students selected “Yes, probably”. On the other hand, 1 US student (10%) replied that the involvement of students from other countries was ineffective in knowledge building.

Question 2 asked the students if they would like to have similar cross-cultural collaboration in the future (Figure 2).

Again, most students' responses demonstrated that they saw the benefits of such a project and would participate in a similar collaboration if given a chance: 78% of Lithuanian, 83% of Russian and 60% of US students selected either “Yes, absolutely” or “Yes, probably”. Close to 20% of the participants in each group demonstrated their hesitation and selected “Maybe”. Still, one student from the USA would not want to participate in a similar project, while one of her/his peers selected “I don't know”. Question 3 asked participants to describe the cross-cultural collaborative project they undertook (Picture 3).
As seen in Picture 3, the majority of students found the course interesting, useful, thought provoking and (to a lesser degree) engaging. The most favourable feedback was given by students from Russia; the least favourable by students from the USA. One of US students (11%) found the project to be a waste of time, while 16.7% of Russian students described the projects as boring.

In Question 4 the students were asked how the cross-cultural collaboration enriched their knowledge and skills (Picture 4). The students could select all that apply to them from a list of 10 options.

The results showed that all the students (except one student from the USA – 10%) gained knowledge from and about international classmates. The vast majority of the respondents (more than 70%) gained some understanding of how people think in other countries. A large number of American respondents (80%) gained some understanding of how people live in other countries in comparison to fewer Russian (16.7%) and Lithuanian students (33.3%). Even so, only a third of Lithuanian, 20% of American and 16.7% of Russian respondents found the collaborative course helpful in terms of breaking stereotypes about people in other countries.

More than half of non-US students (66.7% of Russian students and 55.6% of Lithuanian students) enriched their English language vocabulary.

In addition, almost half of non-US students learnt about education in other countries in comparison to 20% of American students.
Figure 3
RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION ‘HOW DID THE CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION ENRICH YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Lithuania</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I did not learn anything from and about my international classmates</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learnt some new words and phrases</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learnt that people in other countries might interpret advertisement in a way that I had not expected before</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The collaboration helped me break some stereotypes about people in other countries that I had before the collaboration</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learnt more about roles media play in other countries</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learnt more about roles media play in my life and country</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I gained some understanding of how people live in other countries</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I gained some understanding of how people think in other countries</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learnt more about education in other countries</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learnt more about some cultural phenomena in other countries</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learnt more about my culture</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 5 was an open-ended question that asked the students what they would change in this cross-cultural project to make it more useful and interesting. The fifth question was of primary importance as using open questions allows respondents “to develop their responses in ways which the interviewer might not have foreseen” (Campbell, McNamara & Gilroy, 2004: 99).
The analysis of the narrative given by students identified four points of improvement. First of all, some students recommended modifying or adding some content material:

\[
\text{Maybe I would add some educational, scientific or academic text in order to provide students with useful information for making assignment in proper way.}
\]
\[
\text{I would like more chances to hear about the different media used in other countries. I got to learn a little bit about their different social media tools, but I would've liked to learn more.}
\]
\[
\text{Some tasks should be reconsidered.}
\]

Secondly, some participants demonstrated concerns related to deadlines. One US student was dissatisfied with peers not being prompt when replying on others’ posts, which seems to have undermined the benefits of international collaborative project:

\[
\text{Students ... need to post responses in a timely manner so that you can learn the most out of the discussion with them. Also, if they can check their posts and respond back to any questions that we might have about their culture}
\]

One of Lithuanian students had difficulties meeting deadlines, while one Russian student seemed to be confused with the project's schedule:

\[
\text{I were poorly informed about deadlines and work.}
\]
\[
\text{I would like this course to be more organized (from moderators side).}
\]

Russian and Lithuanian students suggested that the use of synchronous communication tools such as Skype might have benefited the collaboration:

\[
\text{Probably, it will be great to make some group tasks ... with a help of Skype conference, for example.}
\]
\[
\text{I'd like to have some opportunity to see my peers, to talk with them through Skype or directly through the web-resource we were studying on. We could share our experience, discuss about the courses thread and so on in real time. So I'm pretty sure that I'd help to make the course more alive and memorable!}
\]

One of US students also recommended instructors [to have] smaller groups of interaction [to] get to know each other better and... reveal even more about our cultures and habits.

To get a more in-depth understanding of the students' learning experiences, a female Russian student was interviewed by one of the researchers. In a 30-minute face-to-face interview she was asked to explain her survey answers and further reflect on her experience as a COIL course participant.

Her answers revealed that she overall enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity. She found this project useful for cross-improving her English language proficiency skills (predominantly via communication with native speakers), and for learning new information about cultures and international peers' media preferences.

On the other hand, she complained about heavy workload that the project involved and the lack of time to complete tasks. As some other survey respondents, she suggested to make use of video conferencing tools and recommended to set up small group online synchronous activities to get acquainted with and learn more about her peers.

**DISCUSSION**

A majority of the students in this study appreciated cross-cultural collaboration as a means of knowledge acquisition and expressed a desire to participate in a similar project...
again if given a chance. Most participants found the COIL project to be interesting, useful, and thought provoking. Moreover, it enabled them to gain intercultural competence they might not have been able to obtain without online collaborative activities integrated into their traditional curriculum. Data suggests that non-US students benefited more as besides learning the content they also acquired an insider's look onto a US online course (tasks, requirements, class dynamics, interaction) and they had a chance to practice English with native speakers. These findings correspond to Gemmel et al. (2015) research study, in which the authors found that the majority of students irrespectively of their residence feel that learning alongside students from other countries has a positive influence. In this case study that involved seventy-three graduate students majoring in public health the participants reported to benefit from studying together with international students by learning about other countries’ health systems and practices, acquiring other perspectives, and reflecting on their own attitudes.

The current study also confirmed previous research that emphasized the importance of thoughtful choice of learning material and activities. As Villar-Onrubia and Rajpal (2016) suggest, online international learning is successful when activities are carefully designed in alignment with precise internationalized learning outcomes. In the case described in this study, there seemed to be no common learning outcomes, nor there were identical learning goals. This might have affected how students interacted with the content and peers and how they perceived the course workload and dynamics. However, findings demonstrate that even though students from three countries shared little in common before meeting online, all three cohorts of online learners were able to benefit from collaborative activities they conducted online.

The current study also added to the body of research that underscores the significant role of electronic learning tools for promoting active online collaboration. In the case under discussion, the instructors used only asynchronous forums to maintain communications between learners. Students' feedback, however, speaks for the need to make use of more interactive communication tools such as wikis, blogs, chats, web conferencing, social media sites, etc. that have been shown to encourage collaboration, promote intercultural awareness through online activities and benefit language development (Fakhrutdinova, Yarmak & Fakhrutdinova, 2014; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). As Gemmel et al. points out, the 'strategic use of a wide range of learning tools and technologies' can increase collaborative working and enhance the benefits of internationalization (Gemmel et al., 2015: 145).

CONCLUSION

The study findings align with previous works (Guth, 2013; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009) that suggest that while students learn from differences in peers’ cultural and educational backgrounds, dissimilar communication and learning strategies, as well as varied ways of student-to-content and student-to-student interaction, may hinder successful learning experiences in COIL environments. However, in spite of all logistical, intercultural or technological difficulties that are involved in the development and implementation of online international courses, collaborative cross-cultural activities carry high potential to have positive impact on students from different cultures. While results of this case study is limited in generalizability, it may inform practitioners and administrators who consider integrating COIL projects into their courses and programs. The online format of peer-to-peer learning has both its benefits and drawbacks but this is indeed one of the most inexpensive and logistically easy to implement learning formats that
generally requires much enthusiasm on behalf of the instructors, some assistance (or at least lack of barriers) on behalf of the administrators but little to no financial investments. Further research on instructors' views on designing and teaching online collaborative cross-cultural courses would be beneficial for triangulating study findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

REFERENCES


Sadykova, G. (2014). Mediating knowledge through peer-to-peer interaction in a multicultural online learning environment: A case of international students in the US. The International review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 15(3), 24-49.


