SUPPORTING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN E-LEARNING

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Annotation
The aim of the paper is to present the pedagogical factors that support intercultural communication in e-learning. The conducted research determined that, in addition to the effective student support systems and a meaningful and comprehensive learning environment for students described in previous researches, the students prioritise teacher's competencies.
Key words: intercultural communication, e-learning, pedagogical factors.

Introduction

Wächter and Kemp (2010, 50-52) call the internationalization of higher education a contemporary trend. According to them, the internationalization of institutions of higher education supports knowledge based economy, helps to cover the country's expenses on higher education, increases competitiveness and is a part of image building. One of the main goals of institutions of higher education in internationalization is enabling curricula in foreign languages and curricula that are internationally attractive.

To reach new target groups, institutions of higher education offer more flexible learning. The rapid development of information- and communication technology (ICT) has greatly improved the possibilities of e-learning.

According to the results of the research conducted, Morse (2003) claims that education systems are culture-specific. Bentley, Tinney and Chia (2005) say that the teachers expect their students to adapt to their way of teaching. According to Macfadyen, Chase, Reeder and Roche (2003), the understanding of efficient communication differs from culture to culture. Via ICT, international communication becomes an even bigger challenge.

The experiences of the students are an important basis to make communication in international e-learning more efficient. The aim of present research was to ascertain the key factors for successful intercultural communication in e-learning. The unit of analysis of this research was intercultural communication and I examined it in the context of e-learning. The research determined that pedagogical, personal, cultural and technological factors all have an impact on intercultural communication. The paper concentrates only on the pedagogical factors. The literature review showed that in addition to effective support systems and meaningful and comprehensive learning environment for students (both of which have been dealt with in previous researches) the students value teacher's competences.

Methodology

When conducting the research, I followed the constructivist paradigm. I share Gray's (2004, p. 17) understanding by which social reality is constructed by the people partaking in communication and leans on their subjective experiences. There is no one reality, the realities are constructed during the communication and the meanings are influenced also by cultural norms. The constructivist approach helped in understanding the reasons for the student's views and their relation to the cultural background.

The conducted research was qualitative. Qualitative research helped in understanding the views and experiences of the participants more thoroughly.

I chose case study for the research strategy because it supports determining the relations between the research object and context. According to Yin (2009, p. 18), multiple sources are used in case study.

In my research, I used semi-structured e-interviews and document analysis as the data collecting methods in order to analyse the student's views and opinions in their culture context more diversely. Document analysis as the literature review was used to find gaps in existing data. The literature review is based on 76 empirical papers that were published between1996-2014. The papers contain the analysis of the learning process of international e-courses. E-interviews were conducted with Digital Library Learning (DILL) and Master in International Information Sciences (MIIS) students using real time communication tool Trillian and e-mail as an additional tool. DILL curriculum has been created as a co-operation between Italy, Norway and Estonia. MIIS curriculum has been created as a co-operation of Italy and Great Britain. The learning process of both curricula was conducted using blended learning. I interviewed all 18 DILL students and additionally 18 MIIS students.

Document and content analysis were used for analysing data. When analysing the data, I used literature review as a way for obtaining additional data about conducting the learning process and explaining the results of the research. Content analysis was used for analysing subjective opinions and determining connections and influences. In the analysing process, I created categories based on interviews, phrased the factors and determined the connections between them.

The results of the conducted research have been compared to the results of previous researches. To confirm the results of this research, citations from the e-interviews have been added.

Findings and discussion

The category of pedagogical factors prevailed most dominantly. Of all the named factors, the important role of the teacher became evident both in preparing for and conducting international e-learning. For successful intercultural communication in e-learning, the students valued the following pedagogical factors:

- effective student support systems,
- meaningful and comprehensive learning environment for students,
- teacher's competencies.

The two first factors were also evident in the previous researches; the third was derived from this research.

Effective student support systems

Effective student support systems were thought to be the most important pedagogical factor by the students; more than three out of four students emphasized it. The students mainly need support in order to not feel excluded and to receive explanations and feedback if needed. The factor includes following aspects.

The opinion of respondent number 4 was confirmed by more than half of the students, by which the role of the teacher is to support the students in adapting to international e-environment:

I would think that maybe the teachers should be moderators in the online learning environment and support the learners in adapting to the various intercultural online communications...

Respondent number 33 valued the teacher's ability to delve into the learning style the student is accustomed to and an interest towards achieving a good result:

... maybe when I communicated with one of my tutor in Northumbria. She was very interested in understanding my way of thinking and she was interested in my master dissertation. So, I explained how my students' learning was and we had a good way to compare Italian and English ways of teaching.

The next example illustrates the opinion of almost half of the students about the importance of positive relationship. Respondent number 13 thought the relations between the students were decisive when it came to evaluating the effectiveness of communication. In the respondent's opinion, positive relationship between the students could be encouraged by a group work that ascertains the similarities between the students. The student thought a group work like this should be carried out during face-to-face meeting to make following communication in an e-environment easier:

Some kind of get-to-know-you session, (icebreakers such as, finding things they have in common with a few students, and then presenting those things to the group – not sure how to do this online, but I am sure there must be a way!) to foster good feelings amongst participants? I think that relationship that develops between participants is crucial. And I guess I feel that it could be more easily achieved face-to-face, unless adequate steps are taken to cause participants to care about each other…

Teacher's role as an exemplar and taking into account the differences between the students was mentioned by many of the interviewees. Fox example, respondent number 7 refers to the problem that some cultures do not motivate the students to actively partake in the learning process – nevertheless, they should not be considered less prepared or lazy due to that:

Some cultures do not motivate students to talk, typical example if my country (even if I do not have a problem being exposed to many countries now) ...some students do not like to talk at all... but they know many things. The teachers/tutors then should not consider these students as less prepared, less read, and lazy or something... because I came to know that there are smart but silent students.

Respondent number 8 thought it was more important for the teacher to not take things for granted but rather to ascertain how they are really understood. This might call for taking more

time to solve a problem. It is important for the teacher to encourage the students to draw attention to misunderstandings or things that are not understood:

I think the most important thing is not taking things for granted. For example, that a specific instruction was clear for everyone. Teachers should make sure the question was understood by all and students should ask if they did not understand as there is nobody sitting next to them in class to ask. This can of course mean that sometimes things take a bit longer to sort out and time frames for that should be built in... I also think that students should be encouraged to explain what it was they didn't understand as that will alert the teacher to what might be an intercultural communication gap.

Many previous researches also confirm that encouragement and involving are important in intercultural e-learning. The importance of encouragement and involving was also discussed by students enrolled in DILL curriculum in the interviews carried out by Sirje Virkus and that was published in the paper „Veni, vidi, vici" (2008). According to the interviewees, students can be helped by taking into account their cultural peculiarities (also Chambers, 2003; Cogburn, Levinson, 2003; Tapanes, Smith, White, 2009; Igel, 2010; Lee, 2011), helping them when problems occur (also Kim, Bonk, 2002; Solem et al., 2003; Ware, Kramsch, 2005; Cortez, Sandusky, Aristeguieta-Trillos, 2008; Igel, 2010), avoiding their problems (also Shih, Cifuentes, 2000), by being a role model for students (also Commander, Zhao, Gallagher, You, 2012) and involving them into the learning process (also Walker, Jeurissen, 2003; Igel, 2010; Bradley, 2013; Lee, Markey, 2014). Some researchers, for example Van Ryssen and Hayes Godar (2000), and Fuchs (2007) shared a different opinion by which the teachers should not intervene too much and let the students solve their own problems, interfering only when the students ask them to. The researchers explain their opinion by saying that the students have to reach the solutions themselves. The common opinion expressed in the interviews coincided with the opinion of Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003) by which in e-learning the teacher has a bigger role than in face-to-face (due to the medium): the teacher consciously guides the learning process, and act as an exemplar in the learning process.

Shulman (2001), Kim and Bonk (2002), Sarker and Sahay (2004), Warden, Chen and Caskey (2005), O'Dowd (2005), Starke-Meyerring and Andrews (2006), Karpova, Correia and Baran (2009), and Popov, Biemans, Brinkman, Kuznetsov and Mulder (2013) saw a need to introduce the students to each other and help them start communicating to each other. This opinion was also shared by the students from DILL and MIIS curricula because getting to know each other gave confidence for participating in communication. According to O'Dowd (2005) and Teng (2007), as well by the students that partook in present research, getting to know the daily life of the other students played an important role in getting accustomed to the new culture and developing relations. Both the students partaking in present research as well as the students in the research of Townley, Geng and Zhang (2003) thought that learning how to communicate to students from different cultures and learning from others was as important as subject knowledge acquisition in the field of studies.

Chen (1998), Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003), Townley, Geng and Zhang (2003), Zhu, Gareis, O'Keefe Bazzoni and Rolland (2005), Ziegahn (2005), Crossman (2011), and Commander, Zhao, Gallagher and You (2012) emphasized the importance of self-reflection exercises carried out in international e-courses. Self-reflection also supported the students of present research as well as the DILL curriculum students partaking in the research carried out by Igel (2010). When conforming, the students monitored the way the teacher behaved and reflected it. Self-reflection helped in getting to know and understanding themselves and other students.

Meaningful and comprehensive learning environment for students

The next factor that became prevalent was *meaningful and comprehensive learning environment for students.* It was mentioned by almost two thirds of the students. The students also wanted to learn from other students which means that when planning international e-learning, the teacher should focus not only on teaching the subject matter but also on sharing experiences, using examples that are meaningful to the students and developing skills and knowledge that are needed in an e-environment. The previous was mentioned by over a half of the students.

Respondent number 12 thought that the most important for the self-confidence of the student were training on information literacy, creating a glossary of terms, and training on co-operation in an e-environment and discussions on managing information:

The information literacy skill training as a first step. The use of glossaries for people to share the meaning of things... Training in virtual teams management and work. Some discussions about the implications of the changes in the digital order: how we manage

information… Some coherence in the ideas...: for example, we are studying a master in digital libraries, but everybody likes to print... etc.

Respondent number 30 valued incorporating knowledge about cultures and critical analyse into the learning process that would help in coping with working in an interdisciplinary and international environment:

I suppose to integrate cross-cultural education initiatives into the classes... Create methodological tools for understanding different languages and communications. Develop independent, critical analysis, and original thinking to manage inter-disciplinary and multi-national context.

More than a third of the students shared the opinion that the teachers should use different tools in the learning process that enable to express emotions, show a picture of the person speaking/writing, use e-mails and forums – i.e. tools that create a feeling of face-to-face communication. Respondent number 2:

Also the online environment tools should be very dynamic e.g. emotion tools, picture display of the person talking, writing the email, writing in the forums etc. This will enable some simulation of physical interactions between learners.

Respondent number 22 advised to use experts as teachers for conducting international e-learning that would create an interactive e-learning environment:

Find experts, mix tools, appealing and cutting edge technological solutions and 100% interactive.

One third of the students thought it is important and useful to talk about cultural differences. Respondent number 6 proposed that before the beginning of the learning process, all of the students should introduce the culture of their country to give basis for further discussion:

One practical thing could be where each participant can make a cultural presentation about his or her country before the course starts, what are the important activities, what kind of background they are coming from. Give the participants a guideline as to how to do it. This could be a nice icebreaker. This can lead to discussion afterwards. Another thing is to also look at the common issues within different cultures and show how we are not that much different at all.

Respondent number 32 thought an e-course should have a place (for example, a forum) where the students could share opinions and experiences or questions and answers about cultures and cultural differences to get to know the other students:

Maybe it could be interesting to create virtual spaces where students can exchange opinions on this topic... Maybe this could be a start. Also, it could be interesting to ask students to express their curiosity and to formulate open questions about other cultures or possible differences, and let other students answer to questions in a sort of forum, with the aim of deepening the knowledge of each other.

Similarly to respondent number 10, many students thought that due to cultural differences, a problem free e-environment is not possible. Respondent number 10 alluded to language related problems and wished for more learning materials on the English language in e-courses. The respondent also thought it necessary to establish minimum language requirements for the participants:

… perhaps some language support for the language that it is being taught in. For example, if I was being taught in English, perhaps an online English language tutorial or help pages (grammar, spelling, thesaurus) could be offered. I would assume that there would still be a requirement to meet minimum English language levels (for DILL in particular), so this may not be so useful.

Respondent number 34 wanted to feel more presence of the teacher in e-environment and wished for more information about organizational aspects:

I think we all need more training and perhaps some "procedure chart" before starting any kind of online communication. For example it would be very useful for me to know that I could receive an answer in 15 or 20 days maximum or if I had some specific "urgent channel" for certain situations that avoided me to go along. I think we need to make the virtual world less virtual and more "Humanlike".

A learning environment that is meaningful and comprehensive for the students was also under discussion in the results of previous researches. According to Wang (2001), Solem et al. (2003), Walker and Jeurissen (2003), Teng (2007), Elenurm (2008), Tapanes, Smith and White (2009), Bradley (2013), Popov, Biemans, Brinkman, Kuznetsov and Mulder (2013), and on the opinion of the students enrolled in DILL and MIIS, the clear instructions and expectations of the teacher should be given to the students – especially for those students whose culture significantly differs from the teacher's.

Similarly to the results of the researches of Chen (1998), Bates (2002), Warden, Chen and Caskey (2005) as well as Igel (2010) the method of debating do not suit all the students because it calls for expressing their own opinion. The same opinion was also expressed by many of the participants of this research.

Similarly to the results of the researches of Townley, Geng and Zhang (2003), Karpova, Correia and Baran (2009), and Lee and Markey (2014) the interviewees thought (also Veni, vidi, vici, 2008) that the communication tools should be diverse. It is advisable to use both synchronous and asynchronous tools to support students with different language skills. Some interviewees thought that the student should also get to choose the communication tool to avoid problems stemming from a tool that is inappropriate due to the personality or culture of the students (or a restricted access to ICT tools) – the same was concluded by the research of Ramsoomair (1997). Stephens and Hennefer (2012) concluded that in addition to synchronous tools, an asynchronous tool should be used in the beginning of the e-learning in order to guarantee everyone's participation. To eliminate technological problems, the participants of this research advised to use alternative tools so that if problems with one tool occur, the other can be used. The participants wanted to definitely use synchronous tools because they valued additional information that is obtained by seeing and hearing. The same was said in the interviews conducted by Igel (2010) by DILL students. It is reasonable to take into account the warning by Beer, Slack and Armitt (2005), and Starke-Meyerring and Andrews (2006) to not use too many tools at once because it may lead to not being able to select the right tool. Although some students admitted the need to get to know new tools and said they liked the new tools they used, Fuchs'(2006) conclusion that the students prefer familiar tools was confirmed. At the same time, the interviewees thought that the communication tool depends on the goal of communication (as confirmed by Ziegahn (2005)). Cortez, Sandusky and Aristeguieta-Trillos (2008) and interviewees said that instructions of the communication tools conducted in the beginning of the studies helped the students.

The teacher plans the communication tools according to the tasks and learning goals but at the same time, the teacher's choices might not coincide with the preferences of the students. The preferences stem from previous experiences (also Fuchs, 2006) but also from possibilities for use (also Cronjé, 2011). The different recommendations on the tools (for example Ware and Kramsch, 2005; Fuchs, 2006; Ser e et al. 2011; Stephens and Hennefer, 2012) come mainly from technological possibilities: synchronous tools can call for a faster internet connection. On the other hand, these technologies offer the students additional information due to being able to see and hear the communication partner and get fast feedback. Asynchronous tools support students with lesser language and computer skills because they enable to spend more time to interpret and think through the message.

According to Weinschenk (2011, p. 149) synchronous activities increase willingness to co-operate and to make personal sacrifices for the group because group activities strengthen the feeling of group cohesiveness. According to Townley, Geng and Zhang (2003), visual real-time contacts promoted co-operation. Problems that surround using synchronous tools (such as weaker language and computer skills, not being able to use the Internet at all times) can be avoided to some extent. The students that partook in present research advised to impose minimal requirements both to the technology used by the participant as well as to the participant's computer and language skills and use technological support for quickly solving problems.

Teacher's competences

Non-compliantly to the results of the previous researches the students of present research saw the competences of the teacher important for supporting intercultural communication in e-learning (see also: Veni, vidi, vici, 2008). The students understood that international e-learning calls for specific competences from the teacher.

The students believe the teacher has a key role to play in intercultural communication. A bit less than three fourths of the interviewees saw the competences of the teacher important, for example knowledge about the educational system and culture of their students, good pedagogical and language skills. The students thought communication was made easier if the teacher had previous experiences on conducting international e-courses.

Respondent number 10 thought it was easy to communicate to the teachers because they were more used to communicating in English than the students:

I think the academic staff feels a little more comfortable using English, as they have probably used it for a number of years.

Respondent number 22 thought the reasons for communication problems might lie in the teacher's or tutor's inability to teach in an e-environment:

When I attended the MSc online I was not quite aware of British system of coping with issues etc. Then I moved to Britain and I became quite aware many problems on communication did rise because the tutors were not quite skilled or used to e-learning teaching... Well the international online course I took in the past went very bad as the lecturer was not very used to this way of building a relationship. But, then I went on and I found more a qualified lecturer who also used more modern tools for creating an on-line learning environment.

Respondent number 31 emphasized that the teachers should know the cultural context of the students in order to understand the backgrounds of their views and skills. The e-environment makes understanding even more difficult:

First of all I think that tutors should know well the educational system of the country where their students come from. Otherwise, how can they understand their original context and how this can influence their skills and views? ... It is true that one of the reasons that convinced me to enrol was precisely the possibility of experiencing this difference, but in my opinion foreign teachers are not prepared to cope with these problems which are made much more intricate and maybe unsolvable by the online environment.

Competences were also important in the category of personal, cultural and technological factors. The students found the skill of co-operation most important out of all the general competences. The most important cultural competence was language skills and out of technological, computer skills. The most important knowledge was considered the knowledge of cultures. It is important to emphasize the novel aspect of present research – teacher's competences have not been emerged from the previous researches.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results of the research concluded that pedagogical factors influence intercultural communication in e-learning the most. Pedagogical factors are effective student support systems, meaningful and comprehensive learning environment for students and teacher's competences.

The students think that an effective support system should contain support for conforming and feedback. The students liked being involved and encouraged, the presence of the teacher, motivating and taking into account the student's needs, supporting self-reflection. The teacher was a role model for the students and their actions supported the feeling of trust and activity of group communication, as well as face-to-face meetings. If the teacher valued their students, it encouraged them to participate actively.

In order to make the learning environment meaningful and comprehensive, the students thought it was necessary to impose participation requirements, introduce the expectations on learning, add language materials to the learning environment, introduce the learning environment and use synchronous tools. A meaningful and comprehensive e-learning environment motivates and helps the students to lessen misunderstandings and different interpretations.

The students expect good pedagogical and language skills, and knowing the culture and educational system of their students from the teacher to better understand them.

Based on the results of the research, following recommendations can be given to make intercultural communication in e-learning more efficient.

• The teacher has to be especially active in the beginning of the studies, giving out information, supporting the participants and holding up the discussion in order to engage all the students and make them feel secure.

• The required level of computer and language skills needs to be specified.

• A glossary of terms should be added to the learning environment or a special forum for discussing different meanings to avoid miscommunication on terminology.

• Explain accepting learning behaviour (for example respecting deadlines, participation activity), the goal of the learning tasks and the way they should be solved so that culturally different students would know what is expected of them.

• In the case of an e-curriculum – to lessen the insecurity of the students, face-to-face meetings should be arranged (even if only in the beginning).

• Video-based synchronous tools should be used in the learning process to support communication between the students, co-operation and creating a learning community. In order to guarantee the participation of all students, achieve active participation; develop knowledge and skills on using different tools and diverse media formats should be used in the learning process.

• Enable one-on-one communication with the teacher.

• During the learning process, cultural discussions should be used for personal growth, developing cultural skills and strengthening relationships.

• Promote student's self-reflection to help the students tin understanding new culture-related skills and knowledge, quickly ascertain the student's problems and monitor the student's development. Reflection is supported by discussions in forum where the students can express themselves and directly ask from the representatives of other cultures advice for understanding their culture.

The results of the research can be used for preparing and conducting international e-learning to support the communication between students from different cultures.

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