

English Language Learning Beyond the Borders: Constructing E-Collaborative Learning between Students of Different Regions

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Received January 22, 2020; Revised April 1, 2020; Accepted April 21, 2020

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Abstract The continuous claim about the unsatisfactory performance of Malaysian graduates during interviews and at workplace in relation to their communication skills in English is alarming. This raises questions about the extent to which future workforce is prepared for this globalised world which requires them to interact and collaborate with individuals not only from their own country but also from other countries. At higher learning institutions, many English language educators face challenges in creating language learning environment that supports intercultural communication. In preparing future workforce for international communication, English language teaching and learning needs to go beyond the four walls of a classroom, over to other regions. An alternative to provide such language learning environment is by designing e-collaborative learning that provides opportunities for language learners to learn the language with students from other countries in a meaningful way. This paper showcases the impacts of e-collaborative English language learning conducted between engineering students of one technical university in Malaysia and one higher learning institution in Bordeaux, France for about one semester. At the end of the semester, the students from both countries wrote a reflection of their experience. The data from the reflective writing were analysed using thematic analysis to highlight the impacts of the e-collaborative learning on students' intercultural communicative competence. This study highlights key considerations to structure e-collaborative language teaching and learning among students of different regions.

Keywords Collaborative Learning, Intercultural Communication, Peer Learning, E-Collaboration

1. Introduction

Higher learning institutions hold the responsibility of preparing future graduates who are competent and able to function effectively at workplace. In this millennium, there is a demand for professionals to correspond with individuals from various regions. In terms of the correspondence, English is likely the language preferred as it is a commonly accepted language to be used as lingua franca. This demand requires the English language educators to develop students' communication skills in English which would enable them to communicate with people around the world. This raises the issue of the extent to which English language teaching in higher education institutions in Malaysia provides the platform, not only for the development of English language abilities, but also for intercultural communication skills of their students.

This paper showcases the implementation of e-collaborative teaching and learning to enhance English language learning and promote the development of intercultural communication skills. The key issues highlighted in this study can be used to develop a framework to structure e-collaborative teaching and learning. It is hoped that this framework should be able to encourage English language educators in higher education in Malaysia to conduct e-collaborative teaching and learning with educators from around the world.

2. Literature Review

Electronic collaboration or e-collaboration refers to collaboration among individuals which involves the use of technologies such as computers or phones to complete a task [1]. In English language teaching and learning,

e-collaboration has high potential in engaging students in their learning and provides language learning beyond the language classrooms. There are a number of studies that have been carried out to examine the impacts of e-collaborative learning among native speakers of different universities [2], among diverse English language learners of the same university [3,4], between native and non-native speakers [5,6].

Chang and Hannafin [3] explored the effectiveness of peer collaborative distance learning. A total of 305 undergraduates, divided into 74 small groups were involved in group activities using technologies as the means to perform the activities. All the participants were from the same institution, ranging from high to low performers in terms of content knowledge and higher order thinking. While the high performers' learning achievements improved, the low performers did not benefit from this approach. Nevertheless, both groups of students raised several issues in relation to online collaborative learning. Firstly, the participants found it difficult to understand what was expected of them as there was lack of face-to-face interactions. Secondly, the activities were not graded and therefore, the participants did not understand the purpose of the online activities. Thirdly, the participants were more concerned about the completion of the tasks given rather than engaging in their learning. Fourthly, the collaboration was not benefitting participants who were high achievers as they were expected to play the role as the facilitator to the low achievers.

The first and second issues highlighted in Chang and Hannafin's [3] study, suggest that there is a need for instructors to provide clear instructions and objectives of the collaboration. This is because students depend mostly on what was provided online as face-to-face interactions were not available. In the context of e-collaborative teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language, the role as the facilitator is generally assumed by native speakers. Generally, these non-native speakers are expected to facilitate their non-native speakers of English in their language learning. This could be observed in a study conducted by Angelova and Zhao [5]. In their study, the researchers examined collaborative learning between native and non-native English language learners of two regions, America and China. A total of twenty-three American students from an ESL teaching programme facilitated the language learning of twenty-six Chinese first-year English-majors in terms of their grammar structures. They communicated through a discussion board, email and Skype. The results showed that the Chinese students gained more benefit in terms of language learning compared to the American students. In this study, the American students were the knowledge provider while the Chinese students were the recipients of the knowledge about the language. This raises questions related to designing e-collaborative teaching and learning that could benefit both partners.

In another study, Bokhari [4] explored the use of online board discussion to enhance graduate students' academic writing skills. The participants, who were of four different regions, were enrolled in the same university and went through a fully online course. The findings showed that this approach provided opportunities for the participants to improve their intercultural competence where they were able to increase their knowledge about each other's culture. In this study, although the students were non-native speakers from different countries, they were situated within an environment familiar to each other as they were in the same university. In addition, the interactions analysed were on written entries on the discussion board. There is a need to observe the impacts of online collaborative learning on students who are situated in different regions, involving face-to-face online communication where the interactions would be live and spontaneous.

E-collaboration may become unsuccessful when not monitored thoroughly. Muuro, Wagacha, Oboko and Kihoro [7] investigated the factors that may lead to unsuccessful e-collaboration. A total of 183 students from two public universities and two private universities in Kenya were recruited for this study. The results showed that the biggest challenge in e-collaboration is to get the students to participate in the activities set up online. Apart from that, lack of time to participate and lack of feedback from peers were also identified as the main challenge that could lead to unsuccessful e-collaboration. This raises questions about how e-collaborative teaching and learning needs to be designed thoroughly to ensure participation from the students involved. One interesting finding reported in this study is that the difference in knowledge or skills level among the students is not perceived as a big issue. This finding is different from the finding in Chang and Hannafin's [3] study where the participants with high level of knowledge or skills felt that they did not benefit from the e-collaboration as they needed to facilitate those with low level of knowledge and skills. This issue requires further investigation.

Apart from providing a platform for English language learners to improve their English language abilities, e-collaborative learning also provides a platform for learners to experience intercultural communication. O'Dowd [8] argues that online intercultural exchange provides opportunities for learners to learn about culture in ways that could not be found in textbooks. In her study, Helm [2] conducted a survey to explore the current practices and attitudes towards online intercultural exchanges. The participants included 131 students from universities across European countries. The study highlighted uncertainty regarding issues that students need to discuss during their interactions. This finding shows that it is crucial for the students to have a clear understanding of the intended learning outcome and for the instructors to select appropriate type of tasks in relation to intercultural communication.

In achieving the intended outcomes, the instructors need to consider the type of activities designed for this purpose. When the activities require a student to facilitate his or her partner, the exchanges between the two students may focus largely on students' metalinguistics awareness instead of developing intercultural competence [9]. When the task requires the students to produce multimedia product such as video, both students in the partnership need to give full participation or the project may fail [10]. As such, there is a need to design tasks which not only develop students' metalinguistics awareness, but also their intercultural communication skills, as well as trigger their interests to participate in the activities of discussions.

The literature review has raised some questions related to e-collaborative learning that leads to one main issue, which is, how e-collaborative learning should be structured in order to improve students' English language abilities and develop intercultural communication skills.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Participants

This study investigated the impacts of e-collaboration on engineering students' English language learning and intercultural communication skills. Based on the key issues highlighted, the study would propose a guideline to structure e-collaborative teaching and learning. To achieve this purpose, qualitative approach to data collection was employed as it provided a platform to explore students' experience in communicating with their partners who were on the other side of the world [11].

The participants recruited for this study were 30 students from one technical university in Malaysia and 30 students from one learning institution in France. Both groups of students were non-native speakers of English. The Malaysian students were in their first year, attending an English course while the French students were in their second year. Each Malaysian student was paired up with a French partner and a total of 30 pairs were formed. Their mean of communication was mainly online and the platforms used for online communication were WhatsApp, Skype and Google document. There was a time difference of seven hours with Malaysia being ahead of France.

3.2. The Project Design

The two instructors who conducted this project, one from Malaysia and the other from France met and discussed the design of the collaboration through Skype. Each instructor chose one English course offered at their institutions and designed four tasks that could fit the syllabus of these two courses. In the first task, the participants were required to produce a three-minute video introducing themselves to their partners. This video served

as an ice-breaking for the students to get to know their partners. This activity provided them with the opportunity to understand who their partners were.

The second task was about describing words and pictures associated with their country. Two Google documents were set up for the word and picture association task respectively. The participants were required to post a question on any word or picture related to the other country on the Google document. In other words, the Malaysian students would post questions on words or pictures related to France while the French students would post questions on words or pictures related to Malaysia. This task was open to all the participants where they did not only respond to their partners' entries or questions but also to other participants'.

For the third task, the participants were divided into groups of four which consisted of two Malaysian students and two French students. Each group was required to produce a video. The video would contain information about their partners' country based on the themes listed. Google documents were set up for the participants to write their discussions and structure the storyline of their video. The purpose of this Google document was to monitor the participants' progress and ensure that there was no overlapping of titles. The video production was uploaded to YouTube and the link was shared with the students in Malaysia as well as in France. Upon completion of the video project, the participants viewed each video, wrote feedbacks about the videos and their reflections on the video production project. The feedbacks were written on a Google document set up for this purpose.

Throughout the implementation of this project, the participants were required to have at least three face-to-face interactions with their partners.

3.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

At the end of the project, the participants were required to write an individual reflection of their experience on a Google document. In their writing, they were expected to write about their strategies when communicating with their partners, and when working with their partners to complete the given tasks. In addition, they were also required to write about the challenges that they faced when communicating with their partners and completing the tasks. The data from the reflective writing were analysed using thematic analysis.

4. Findings and Discussions

This paper is part of a larger study that examines the impact of e-collaborative learning between 30 Malaysian students from one public technical university and 30 French students from one public higher institution. This paper showcases the findings from eleven French students'

reflective writing with some instances from one Malaysian students' reflective writing to highlight contradictory views on this project.

4.1. Increasing Motivation in Language Learning

The analysis of reflective writing of the French students showed that the collaboration was viewed largely as a platform to have intercultural exchanges. In other words, their main objective was to improve their intercultural competence. The Malaysian students, however, had a different view.

"It is a very good experience for me to practise speaking in English with people from another country. Although they are not native speaker of English, for me, it's a very good opportunity. I don't have much chance to speak in English because we use more Malay in our communication." [P1M1]

In this excerpt, it could be observed that the participant viewed this collaboration as an opportunity to practise communicating in English in real life. This suggests that both members of the partnership may have different learning outcomes. The findings in Chang and Hannafin's [3] study discussed in the literature have highlighted the need to have a clear purpose when conducting an e-collaboration as the communication is totally online. Having different aims in a partnership may affect the effectiveness of the collaboration.

On the part of the French students, the responses related to English language learning were mainly on managing their confidence in meeting a person they had never met before and communicating in English.

"I need to overcome my shyness to make the first contact." [P1E]

In this instance, the participant seemed keen to make the first contact. She may have her own goal in language learning that has encouraged her to overcome her shyness. Gardner [12] argues that having the desire to achieve language learning goals and positive attitudes towards language learning increases learners motivation in learning the target language.

"I am able to talk with my partner, not as a student, but as a friend." [P2E]

In this excerpt, positioning his partner as a friend may suggest that the participant is keen in socialising with his partner. Language learners' motivation may increase when they position themselves as the one who wants to socialise with people who speak the target language [13]. In addition, positioning a partner as a friend may also make a learner relaxed, creating enjoyment in using English as a medium of interaction and thus, increasing motivation in language learning [14].

"It was challenging to talk to someone you have never met. I was afraid of my language and my accent (my

partner might not understand me). But in the end, I succeeded." [P3E]

According to Gardner and Lambert [15], learners who think of themselves as competent and have experienced more success than failure are more likely to be motivated in their learning. The participant above thought of himself as incompetent in the English language, increasing his language anxiety level. Such pre-conception may hinder the participant from having effective communication with his partner. However, the participant was able to manage his language anxiety and complete the tasks given.

Similarly, the Malaysian student also felt that his speaking skills were not good.

"...we will feel like our speaking skills are not good but they are also learning English as a foreign language. So, it is a very good opportunity for us to speak up and not hesitate to speak because we don't feel inferior if we communicate with them." [P1M2]

According to this excerpt, although the participant perceived that he was not competent in the language, he viewed the collaboration as an opportunity to use the language. He positioned his partner as equal, that is, as a non-native English speaker who was also learning the language. This position has raised his confidence.

Studies such as that by Melchor-Cuoto [16] has found that online communication is able to increase self-confidence and decrease nervousness, hence reducing language anxiety. This suggests that the implementation of e-collaborative teaching and learning can help students with language anxiety issues in their learning. Nevertheless, instructors need to consider designing some preliminary activities prior to the implementation to prepare the students for the e-collaboration.

4.2. Understanding Own Identity

In this study, the majority of the participants had not had any experience communicating with people from outside of the European region. The findings showed that the e-collaboration raised students' awareness of their own culture and identity.

"I didn't realise how French I was in my thinking. I am surprised with myself." [P4E]

Through the interaction process with a person from another cultural background, participant P4E started to realise his own cultural identity.

"I didn't realise how culture matters." [P5E]

The response above suggests that the participant may have taken his culture for granted until he has to explain about his culture to a person who is not familiar with his culture.

The two instances above show that the e-collaborative learning not only provides opportunities for language

learners to discover the culture of people from other regions but also rediscover their own cultural identity and recognise its significance.

“I now understand how culture can affect the way we speak. It is important to know the implicit meaning when communicating with people of different culture.” [P6E]

From the project, the participants understood the relationship between culture and communication. Thus, they need to know how to communicate with people from different cultural background.

“It is funny and interesting to see another point of view about things that French people take for granted.” [P7E]

“It is surprising that when we (French students) think of something as very normal, it can be offensive to them (Malaysian students).” [P8E]

In the excerpt above, the participants realised that people of different cultural background may view their culture with different perspectives. The interaction with their partners also made them appreciate their culture.

Understanding own and others' culture is the key to effective intercultural communication. The e-collaborative learning has provided the platform for the participants, not only to know about the culture of their partners, but also to rediscover their own culture that they have taken for granted. In discovering (or rediscovering) the culture of both partners, it is inevitable to find ways to manage the differences between these cultures. The next section discusses how these differences are negotiated.

4.3. Negotiating Cultural Differences

When communicating with people of different cultural background, interlocutors need to be aware of the differences between the cultures. The way they perceive these differences could affect the way they communicate with people of different cultural background [17].

“We need to make acceptable choice for the topic and, at the same time, be neutral and respectful.” [P9E]

In this instance, there are two stages of negotiation. First, the participant and her partner need to make a decision on a topic. Second, the participant and her partner needed to negotiate the cultural differences when making a decision without offending each other's culture.

“We need to be flexible when dealing with 2 different points of view.” [P10E]

Dealing with two different points of view is challenging. This finding highlights the need to be flexible in order for the communication to be successful.

“Trying not to make judgements when my partner told me that she was “too busy” to Skype.” [P11E]

Based on the excerpt above, the negotiation involved

setting the time to meet and dealing with the partner's behaviour.

The ability to negotiate cultural differences is crucial in communication between people of different cultures and regions. The success of such communication depends on the interlocutors' ability to be flexible and demonstrate behavioural adaptation [18]. These are the aspects of intercultural communication that need to be emphasised.

The discussions in this section have raised several key considerations when structuring e-collaborative teaching and learning. These key considerations are discussed in the next section.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the impacts of e-collaboration between students of different regions on their English language learning. The findings highlighted two key considerations to structure e-collaborative learning between students of various cultural backgrounds. These key considerations include the concept of peer learning and preparing the students prior to the e-collaboration.

In the literature, the researchers have discussed that when conducting a collaboration involving native and non-native speakers of English, or high and low achievers, the non-native speakers and the low achievers may benefit more. As such, students who perform well in English and who are high achievers may be reluctant to join this collaboration. The study has reported that when a partnership is between two students who are both non-native speakers, the students perceive themselves as equal. Apart from that, the study has also reported that when the students perceive their partners as a friend, the interactions would be interesting and meaningful. This not only motivates the students to participate, but also raises students' confidence and reduces language anxiety. Thus, when structuring e-collaborative teaching and learning, instructors need to establish a clear purpose of the collaboration and lay out the benefits that students of both institutions perceive the relevance of the collaboration. In addition, instructors would need to carefully match the students with suitable partners.

Interactions between students of different region require the students to understand and negotiate cultural differences. In this study, the participants demonstrated anxiety prior to meeting their partners whose culture they were not familiar with. In addition, they lacked awareness of their own culture. Since the majority of them had not had any experience communicating with people from outside their region, they did not expect that there would be cultural differences. In addressing this issue, there should be some preliminary activities where they could rediscover their own cultural identity and understand that the communication would involve negotiation of cultural differences. This would require adaptation of behaviours

and flexibility which are crucial elements in intercultural communication. Such preparation could reduce language anxiety and avoid culture shock.

Structuring English language learning beyond the borders creates meaningful learning as it provides opportunities for language learners to use the language in context. In addition, it also provides opportunities for students to develop their intercultural communicative competence as they need to deal with people of different cultural background. It is hoped that this study could contribute to the literature on e-collaborative learning. It is suggested that further research be conducted to measure students' English language abilities and intercultural communicative competence at the end of an e-collaborative teaching and learning session.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by TIER 1 Grant [H092] awarded by Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Research Management Centre, UTHM for this opportunity. The authors would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Mrs Emilie Paillard of Enseirb-Matmeca, Bordeaux INP, France for her great contribution on this project.

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