

Integrating culture into a Business English course: Students' perspective on a collaborative online writing project

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Abstract. *In the context of academic and economic internationalization, Web 2.0 technology provides the platform to support educational activities for promoting intercultural competence. The pilot study described in this paper focuses on the students' perception of collaborative writing activities implemented in two undergraduate Business English courses to improve critical reading/writing skills and sensitize learners to dimensions of business cultures defined in literature on intercultural business communication. In the empirical part of our pilot study the students' evaluation of several aspects of the use of Web 2.0 tools (wiki, Google Docs) for collaborative online writing activities aimed at raising intercultural awareness is presented.*

Keywords. intercultural competence, intercultural awareness, language skills, Web 2.0, collaborative writing, pilot study

1 Introduction

1.1 Second/foreign language skills and intercultural competence

In the context of academic and economic internationalization, there is an increasing tendency towards the integration of activities aimed to foster intercultural awareness in conjunction with teaching language skills. This trend is paralleled by the development of technological affordances, most notably, Web 2.0, which facilitate the co-construction and sharing of linguistic content to promote intercultural communication (IC). There are numerous fields of human endeavour in which communication is determined by culturally specific norms (see: [1]; [2]). It must be noted that a study conducted within the ELAN [3] project points to negative effects that a shortage of language skills has upon enterprises. Also, in its recent communication on multilingualism, the European Commission included, among others, the following strands central to the EU's multilingualism policy [4]:

- underlining the major role that languages and multilingualism play in the European economy, and finding ways to develop this further, and

- encouraging all citizens to learn and speak more languages, in order to improve mutual understanding and communication.

Spitzberg and Changnon [5] provide an overview of models of intercultural competence and a methodology for their analysis. According to Kupka [6, 16; in 5] intercultural communication competence allows individuals who belong to different cultural systems to:

- be aware of their cultural identity and cultural differences,

- interact effectively and appropriately with each other in diverse contexts, and

- agree on the meaning of diverse symbol systems with the result of mutually satisfying relationships.

An influential model in the joint domain of second language (L2) instruction and intercultural training was developed by Byram [7]. The intercultural competence in Byram's model comprises the following three dimensions: *cognitive* (knowledge), *behavioural* (interpreting/discovery skills) and *socioaffective* (attitudes), the resultant of which is critical cultural awareness, i.e. 'an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries' [7, 53].

Culture as a concept has witnessed a shift toward a dynamic, developmental approach to IC based on relations among individuals and cultures [8], whereby the 'fix the problem' paradigm that sees IC merely as a tool for overcoming cultural differences as obstacles to communication is abandoned. The fact that intercultural encounters occur in communicative interactions has brought to attention the multiple roles of language both as a vehicle of expressing one's own cultural identity in dialogue with the sociocultural context and of negotiating one's own cultural identity in interacting with persons outside our own cultural space [9]. In her recent work, Kramsch [10] uses the term 'symbolic competence' to refer to the ability to

interpret discursive practices between people who speak different languages.

1.2 Role of L2 instruction in developing ICC

Among key developments that have led to reshaping of the intercultural approach in second/foreign language (L2) instruction is the extension of the construct of communicative competence to include IC and the rise of the non-native speaker as a dominant L2 language user, which calls for inclusion of universal interpretative skills into L2 syllabi. In CEFR – *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* [11], intercultural awareness is included among sociocultural competences which form general competences that users and learners draw upon ‘to carry out the tasks and activities required to deal with the communicative situations’, with ‘knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’ defined as constituents of intercultural awareness [11, 103]. Similarly, in his course for international learners of business English, Dingen [12] states that understanding of one’s own and target culture, flexibility in communication and developing an international style of communication are crucial for successful communication across cultures.

Lundgren [13] points to pedagogical concerns regarding alternative ways of learning that need to be devised for L2 instruction that goes beyond the transmission of cognitive skills and aims to ‘provide the student with the tools to interpret a foreign culture and teach him or her to put them into action’. In this respect, the ability to both *recognize* cultural differences and similarities and *reflect about them* can prove to be particularly demanding, as suggested by Ingulsrud et al. [14] in their report on assessing cross-cultural awareness through critical text analysis.

1.3 Intercultural approach in L2 instruction: examples of online projects

Considering that communication is both the means and the outcome of L2 instruction, ICT can vastly improve the opportunities for learners to engage in L2 production and knowledge construction. Web 2.0 tools and services (wikis, blogs, podcasts, social networking tools etc.), which enable learners to generate their own cultural content and share it with other users [15], are a convenient means of developing both language and intercultural skills. This equally applies to tasks that imply *virtual communication* with speakers from other cultures and *intragroup tasks* aimed at sensitizing non-native speakers for such interactions. Moreover, computer-

mediated communication provides the participants with a ‘third space’ in which they can question and modify their awareness of their own cultural identity, including the re-imagining of the teacher-student relationship [16].

Integrating intercultural approach and L2 writing with the aid of online communication technology was associated with *telecollaborative projects* based on asynchronous interaction between participants (via email or forum) over an extended period (e.g.: [17]; [18]; [19]). Also, in the project described by Bray [20], students from 5 countries communicated by video mail. A more complex combination of tools including email and wiki content, language learning diaries and critical incidents was used in a Spanish-English online project [21]. Finally, a recent project [22] between Polish and Spanish students of L2 English over the LMS Moodle was aimed at establishing partnership between learners and fostering autonomy.

Measuring the effectiveness of such projects in terms of L2 and gains presents a challenge. Vinagre [21] points to complexity of assessing the development of components that go beyond knowledge (e.g. attitudes). In exploring the effects of online interaction between students in L2 instruction, Byram's [23] IC model was used for qualitative analysis of the development of different components of IC. For example, in her qualitative assessment of IC, [19] adapted the Byram’s model to include the following categories: interest in knowing other people’s way of life and introducing one’s own culture to others, ability to change perspective, knowledge about one’s own and others’ culture for intercultural communication, and knowledge about intercultural communication processes. On the other hand, in their evaluation of a multimedia learning tool for cultural awareness training, Klinge, Rohmann and Piontkowski [24] used an integrated methodological approach: students self-assessed various aspects of the course, the learning process and learning success using intercultural awareness, appreciation of cultural diversity and interest in intercultural communication as evaluation criteria. In addition, for measuring the ability to adopt an intercultural perspective the authors used the critical incidents method.

1.4 Collaborative writing in L2

Collaborative writing is the process in which at least two people work together with an objective to produce a document. It encompasses several different activities including creating, modifying, and sharing the document as well as making discussions on author’s standpoints and doubts regarding the document’s topic. The main advantages of collaborative writing include the ability to give or receive immediate feedback and reduce both errors in text and document completion time (see: [25]; [26]).

Research conducted in L2 settings revealed that during the process of co-authoring learners are focused on discourse, grammatical accuracy, and lexis (e.g.: [27]; [28]; [29]). In addition, Donato [30] coined the term ‘collective scaffolding’ which indicates that depending on the type of co-authoring dynamics, collaborative writing can stimulate pooling the knowledge about language.

With the emergence of Web 2.0 applications, the attention to collaborative writing in the L2 context has been renewed. The idea behind Web 2.0 is to encourage users to actively contribute to the creation of a knowledge repository through interaction and collaboration [31]. There are two types of Web 2.0 applications that are most commonly used for conducting educational collaborative writing activities: wikis and cloud based office applications [32]. Wikis are collaboratively authored sets of interconnected and searchable pages. Through asynchronous interaction among users, the content in a wiki is enhanced with each entry.

From the pedagogical perspective, a wiki presents a repository for integrating different types of educational artifacts. Literature offers a number of studies on the use of wikis in the L2 learning context (e.g.: [33]; [34]). However, none of them show substantial evidence on the effectiveness and efficiency of wiki use in L2 knowledge advancement and skill development. Google Docs and Zoho Docs are widely used cloud based alternatives for word processing. Their features enable multiple users to work synchronously on the same document, which makes them a powerful tool for collaborative writing. Nevertheless, studies on their use in the L2 collaborative writing settings are rather scarce. A recent research [35] on collaborative writing among L2 learners revealed that when using Google Docs, students are more focused on meaning than form and that their grammatical changes are in general more accurate.

2 Project description

2.1 Project goals

With an integrated approach to language, IC and ICT skills as the overarching aim, project activities in our pilot study were planned with three goals in mind: (1) developing reading-to-write and writing skills (paraphrasing and summarizing) as well as promoting students' interest in writing, (2) broadening students' topical knowledge of particular business cultures and their *metacultural* awareness (i.e. awareness that most behaviour is culturally conditioned, and (3) contributing to L2 pedagogy by assessing students' perception of the appropriateness of collaborative writing tools for conducting intercultural activities in L2 instruction. The discussion of the first goal is

beyond the scope of this paper, which is mainly focused on the second and third goal.

2.2 Implementation of the collaborative online writing project

Students of two analogous upper intermediate Business English courses in two study programmes of economics and informatics at a Croatian academic institution were involved in online collaborative writing activities aimed at cross-cultural comparison following the criteria and descriptions of cultures proposed by Lewis [36]. In a series of interlocking tasks students gradually expanded their articles by comparing and contrasting values, concepts, communication patterns and ways of empathizing with persons from given countries. The level of engagement, interaction and written task complexity was gradually increased in the 6-week project. Students were introduced to the schedule and task types at the beginning of the project.

Through previous course assignments students had received training for particular language skills required for the project: intensive reading, note taking, summarizing, paraphrasing and synthesizing. Preparatory activities were also conducted to familiarize students with generating shared online content in a wiki and Google Docs.

In the first stage of the project, students working in small teams were expected to respond to an original description of a specific culture (according to Lewis [36]) by creating their cultural digest in the wiki of the Business English course. Besides summarizing and paraphrasing, taking a neutral (objective) stance was set as a prerequisite in the wiki task. The subjective interpretation of the original description was reserved for the final paragraph ('Our view'), where the students were free to agree or disagree with the author. The generative process was visible to all the participants. In the course enrolled by students of economics, for whom the full teaching schedule was run, two subsequent descriptions were assigned, while the students of informatics, for whom the instruction was carried out through tutorials, were assigned only one country per team. In total, 9 countries were covered, including Russia, Canada, Argentina, Israel and Thailand.

At the same time, each team also created and shared two documents in Google Docs accessible only to team members and the teacher. One of them was used as the interface for students' reflection on developing their wiki article and the other for a parallel description of Croatia along parameters (dimensions) proposed by Lewis [36]. Figure 1 shows a Google Docs page in which students used the K-W-L (What we know-What we want to learn-What we learnt) pattern to plan their description of Argentina.



Figure 1. Team reflection on the country-description task (Google Docs)

The final two stages in the project were dedicated to reporting on task results by means of a short team presentation and a group interview about the students' experience of the task. A survey was also administered upon the completion of the project. The presentation provided students with a possibility to reflect on the content of the original reading, collate the cultural information and viewpoints with other teams. In the interview, which served as a follow-up task, students discussed challenges they faced during task execution for which critical reading/writing and technological skills were just as important as the ability to work in a team.

2.3 Task design rationale

Merging intercultural communication with foreign language instruction is advocated by Kramsch [37, 1], who claims that culture permeates language learning from the very beginning and does not represent 'an expendable fifth skill'. Moreover, in the project described in this paper the treatment of culture goes beyond the knowledge (*savoir*), encouraging students to activate the 'awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other' (CEFR - *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, [11, 103], i.e. embrace interpreting/relating skills and critical cultural awareness.

The pedagogical approach we used for integration of IC into language learning is reminiscent of the task-based design proposed by Norris [38] that comprises (1) task input, (2) pedagogic task, (3) target task, and (4) task follow-up, with 'target task' as the key stage. Sequenced task phases allow for attention to be 'given to the generation of ideas and meaning, to the recursive processes through which meaning and form are discovered in tandem' [39]. Web 2.0 tools, which in our case were used for *intragroup collaboration* in the process of communication and negotiation of meaning, enable language learners to generate and share intercultural content [15]. Muller-Hartmann [40] suggests that the key issue in evaluating intercultural tasks in electronic learning

networks is to determine how they support the constituents of intercultural learning – knowledge, skills, attitude, and critical reflection, as defined by Byram [7].

Among the approaches to the development to L2 writing summarized in Mak and Coniam [41], the focus on the writer (including cycles of writing and re-writing activities) and the focus on the reader (including the writing shared with an audience, i.e. conducted as a social activity) are the primary practices adopted in the project in this paper, though focus on form is also present. On the whole, the project also aims to recognize the potential of online tools for enhancing L2 writing pedagogy, as suggested by Stapleton and Radia [42].

3 Methodology

The results of empirical investigation that are presented in the continuation of this paper represent only an initial/pilot study of the potential of the use of Web 2.0 tools in teaching English as a second language to increase intercultural competence of students. The main disadvantages of this pilot study are related to the small number of students (N=15) in a selected convenience sample. Also, it must be emphasized that *Business English* was an elective course chosen by less than 25% percent of students. This may have caused that the sample in our study consisted of students with an above the average positive attitude regarding learning English as well as rather high written and oral competence in this language.

3.1 Problem

The main purpose of the study described in this paper was to investigate the students' perception of several aspects of the implemented project activities. In particular, the usage and potential benefits of collaborative writing Web 2.0 tools for conducting written activities aimed at intercultural learning were examined. The data were collected by means of a survey which comprised items related the technical and collaborative aspects of the learning assignment, their complexity, appropriateness and effectiveness for the development of intercultural awareness.

3.2 Participants

Students of two analogous upper intermediate Business English courses in two study programmes at a Croatian academic institution were involved in online collaborative writing activities for over five weeks. The elective courses were enrolled by 9 and 7 students of informatics and economics, respectively, but only 15 participated in the survey and were considered as one small convenience sample. The subjects in the study were students of second and third

year of study, aged 19-23, and 2/3 of them were male. Most of them had been learning English for 10 or more years and their average grade for English as a second language at the academic level was 3.8.

3.3 Survey

When the students' online collaborative activity was completed, a survey was administered. The items of the survey were related to demographic characteristics of the subjects, technical and e-learning aspects as well as to intercultural competence development. The students had to respond to most items using a 1-5 Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*).

3.4 Results

The responses of the subjects (N=15) in our convenience sample to selected survey items are presented in Figures 2-7. The data presented in Figure 2 indicate that 60% of the subjects replied that they agree or strongly agree with the statement that writing the assignments in the *wiki* made them "think about the reader" of their text. In relation to the use of *Google Docs* for the same type of assignment it must be noted that 47% of those students also agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Reflection on the potential reader of the text

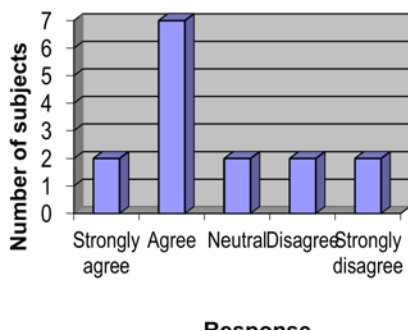


Figure 2. Responses to the item „Writing in this application made me think about the reader of my text“ (15 subjects who used *wiki*)

Beamer [43] stated that "Communication itself can best be understood from the perspective of the receiver, not the sender [...]". The collaborative work on this assignment with *wiki* and *Google Docs* proved to stimulate such a perspective in learners, at least regarding the convenience sample of subjects in our study.

According to the data presented in Figure 3 the predominant number (60%) of respondents in our study stated that they agree or strongly agree with the statement that *Google Docs* was an application suitable for writing tasks in foreign language classes

because it enables access to other students' work. Moreover, all of the subjects (100%) stated that they agree or strongly agree with the statement that *wiki* was suitable for the same purpose. Other research has indicated that the use of computer-mediated communication has the potential to increase information flow and improve peer-to-peer interaction between students as well as to provide "time to reflect on others' opinions" [44].

Access to other students' work

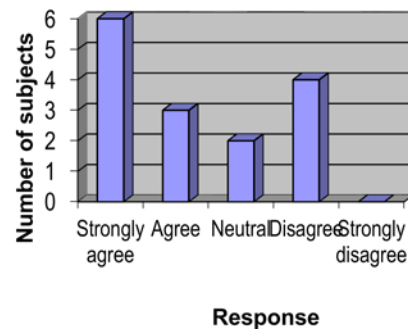


Figure 3. Responses to the item „I found the application suitable for writing tasks in foreign language classes because it enables access to other students' work“ (15 subjects who used *Google Docs*)

Most of the students (73%) also responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that *wiki* was suitable for writing tasks in foreign language classes because it enables commenting of other students' work (see Figure 4). *Google Docs* was almost equally evaluated in our study. It must be noted that in their study Miyazoe and Anderson [44] emphasized that *wiki* is suitable for supporting collective language skills as well as for facilitation of students' sharing of ideas and critical feedback. Also, most of the students in their study evaluated *wiki* as useful for translation and reading activities.

Commenting of other students' work

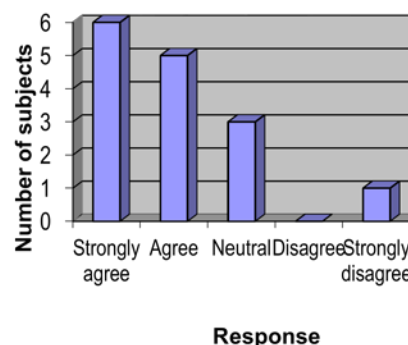


Figure 4. Responses to the item „I found the application suitable for writing tasks in foreign language classes because it enables commenting of other students' work“ (15 subjects who used *wiki*)

The data presented in Figure 5 illustrate the interest of the students in our pilot study in intercultural communication. Most of the students (60%) indicated considerable interest in this topic, but it must be noted that the same percentage of students had received the final grade 4 or 5 in their earlier L2 English academic course.

Interest in intercultural communication

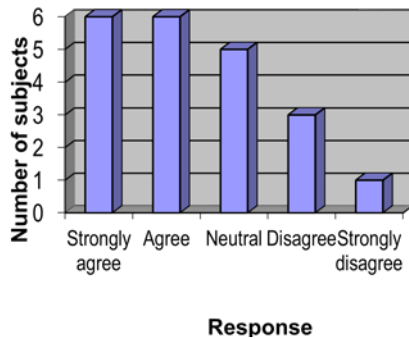


Figure 5. Responses to the item „I have a great interest in intercultural communication“

Figure 6 presents the responses to the survey item „I found this kind of written assignments suitable for acquiring knowledge about communication with people from other countries“, which is related both to the use of wiki and Google Docs. As many as 80% of the subjects in our pilot study agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. According to Dervin [46], Web 2.0 offers great possibilities regarding creativity in forms of L2 and IC learning, for instance by creating various documents that record student learning activity in the areas of culture, communication, identity, stereotypes, intercultural competence, encounters with people from different cultures etc.

Knowledge about communication with people from other countries

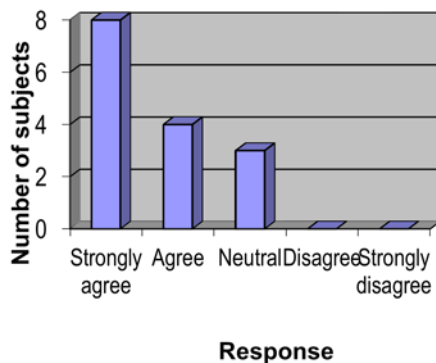


Figure 6. Responses to the item „I found this kind of written assignments suitable for acquiring knowledge about communication with people from other countries (cultures)“

According to the data in Figure 7 it can be concluded that 53% of the subjects in our study perceived the assignment of online collaborative writing with wiki and Google Docs as contributory to their ability to overcome problems in intercultural interaction, 33% subjects were neutral, and only 15% opposed that possibility. Even though the sample of subjects in our study was not representative of the general student population, this indicates that there is a reason for the continuation of our research on this topic.

Overcoming potential problems in intercultural communication

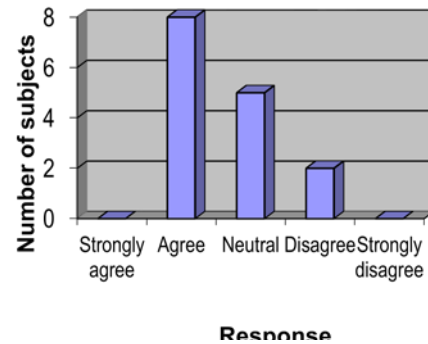


Figure 7. Responses to the item „By working on the project assignment I learned how to overcome potential problems in intercultural communication“

4 Conclusion

Second/foreign language courses are a convenient means for development of intercultural competence, especially in the area of business communication [47]. Educational use of online communication tools like chat rooms, blogs, wikies and videoconferencing can contribute to second language learning and development of intercultural competence [48].

In our pilot study we used a small convenience sample of Croatian students enrolled in two analogous Business English courses in two study programmes for a preliminary investigation of the potential of the use of collaborative Web 2.0 tools like wikies or Google Docs for second language writing. The specific focus of the study was to explore the students' perception of the appropriateness of such collaborative online assignments for the development of intercultural awareness and competence in communication with people from other cultures.

After a detailed overview of literature, even with the non-representative results of our pilot study, we conclude that most of the students who were included in our pilot investigation (1) positively responded to the use of wiki and Google Docs (tools that represent *read-and-write-web* collaborative technology) in terms of their structure, content and execution and (2) perceived their assignments as beneficial for their

awareness of other cultures and perhaps even for their ability to resolve intercultural interaction problems.

In interpreting the results of the research presented in this paper, beside the sample size, it has to be noted that it is based on quantitative data only, since qualitative data analysis of project outcomes (e.g. students' writing) is beyond the scope of this paper. In conducting further research after our pilot/case study a larger sample should be involved. Finally, another potentially meaningful future field of research could be the investigation of effects of extending constrained reading/writing activities aimed at developing specific language skills within the project presented in this paper to more interactive and open-ended online tasks with Web 2.0 tools.

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