1. The gains and drawbacks of virtual exchanges in higher education

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Abstract

This paper reports on some of the results obtained from a virtual exchange project between upper-intermediate learners of English for Specific Purposes from a Spanish university and learners of Spanish as a foreign language from a North American university. The discussion focuses on the gains and drawbacks identified through a pre- and post-questionnaire. The results revealed that both sets of learners were satisfied with the project and found it rewarding in terms of intercultural awareness, linguistic development and generally enriching.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning, Telecollaboration, Virtual Exchange, Learner perceptions, Internationalisation of Higher Education

1. Introduction

Despite the many gains associated with virtual exchange projects in higher education to enhance foreign language learning (Duffy et al., 2022; Lenkaitis, 2020; Lou & Yang, 2022), there are also drawbacks that have been reported in relevant literature (Hagley, 2016; Helm, 2015). In this paper, I shall refer to both aspects in a project conducted with upper-intermediate students of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), Spain, and learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language from the University of Maryland at Baltimore County (UMBC), USA.

To contextualise the study, I shall use Guth and Helm's (2010, p. 14) definition of telecollaboration/virtual exchange, that is, an 'internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence through structured tasks'.

Virtual exchange is also seen as a means of providing opportunities to support the internationalisation of Higher Education by 'globalising the curriculum' and engaging learners in dialogue with peers. Such is the case of the recently launched Erasmus+ funding initiative that is a complement to physical mobility and focuses, among other aspects, on encouraging intercultural dialogue to increase tolerance, as well as promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom and non-discrimination.

In addition to increased motivation and linguistic output (Gimeno, 2018), several studies have pointed out the following as being some of the benefits for learners in participating in virtual exchanges:

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- language development (Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Kern et al., 2004)
- accuracy and fluency (Gimeno, 2018)
- intercultural communicative competence (Di Sarno, 2023; Fuchs, 2007; Oskoz et al., 2018)
- pragmatic competence (Di Sarno, 2020)
- learner autonomy (O'Rourke, 2007)
- online literacies (Gimeno, 2018)
- multimodal communicative competence (Hauck & Youngs, 2008).

2. Context and participants

2.1. Participants

Two groups of learners, 12 students enrolled in Aerospace Engineering from UPV and 12 from UMBC taking a Spanish history and culture course as a requirement for their major or minor in Spanish engaged in a telecollaborative encounter during one semester. The online encounters were therefore bilateral (between two groups of students from two different institutions), bilingual (where both English and Spanish were used depending on the topic being discussed) and bicultural (students from two different cultural backgrounds).

2.2. Tools

A private community using Google+ was used. The asynchronous nature of the postings was also a feature that the instructors sought to allow students time to think out and plan their responses (Guth & Thomas, 2010). As well as written interaction, students engaged in 30-minute synchronous sessions using Skype. After concluding both online written discussions, each group had to prepare a sound-enhanced presentation for their counterparts to watch in class and then comment on fluency, content and style. Audacity was chosen for students to create the main artefact to be peer-assessed in the form of a radiophonic podcast focussing on one of the topics discussed in the project. This requirement was in line with Helm's (2015) recommendation to have students collaborate and create a joint product instead of merely having them exchange information or compare products from both cultures. Lastly, SoundCloud was used to upload and share the podcasts for all the group members to listen to and peer assess.

2.3. Procedure

Organized into six groups, each with two participants from the USA and two from Spain, students initiated the project by introducing themselves to their counterparts in the forum. Subsequently, the students participated in three discussions, each of which took place over a period of two weeks, within the Google+ community. The first focused on the discussion of the TED Talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' by novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009). Discussions two and three focused, on the one hand, on immigration and, on the other, nationalism and patriotism. In order to allow all the students to interact in their target language, the discussion

on immigration took place in Spanish and the discussion on nationalism/patriotism took place in English. All the group members were required to provide personal opinions and share personal experiences, integrate ideas from their classmates' contributions into their own comments, search for additional information, and ask questions that would help maintain the conversation. All the learners were required to post a minimum of four comments per topic.

2.4. Data collection

The results reported here were extracted from a pre-project questionnaire seeking students' expectations and a post-project questionnaire upon completing the virtual exchange project looking into their overall satisfaction. Both questionnaires were created *ad hoc* for the project. An ethics clearance form was signed by all participants.

3. Results

Regarding how they perceived that the virtual exchange project had helped them, the Spanish students reported benefits in all the areas queried, as can be seen in Figure 1.
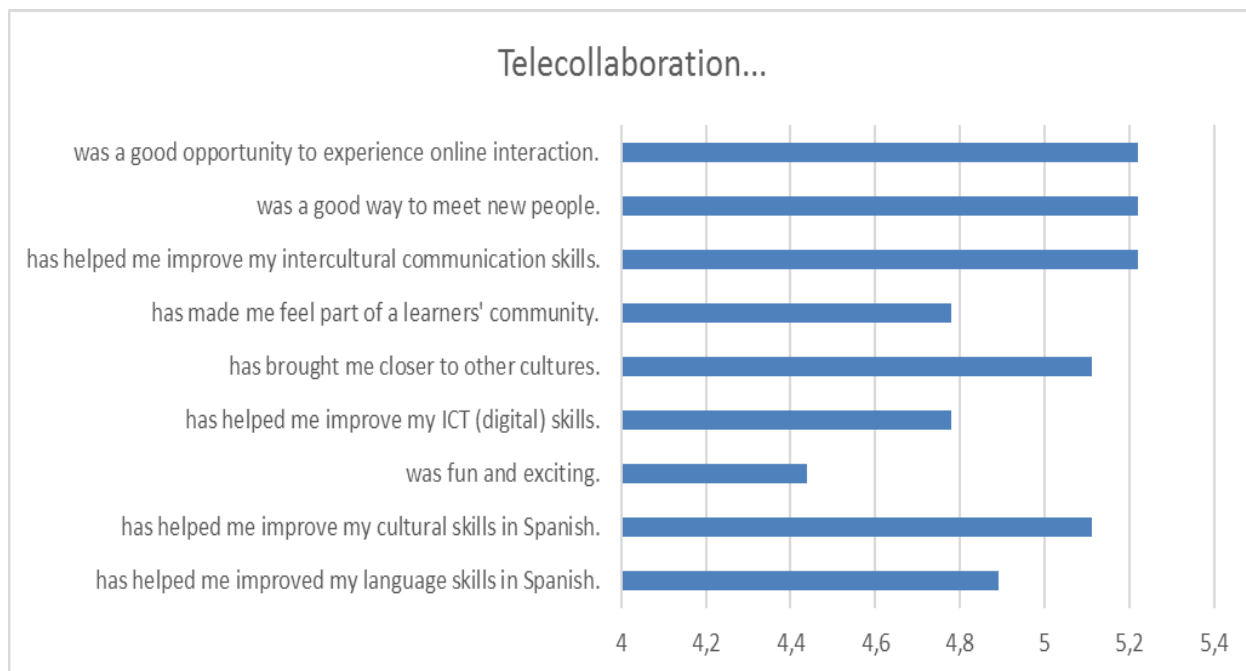
Figure 1

How Spanish students perceived that the telecollaboration project had helped them
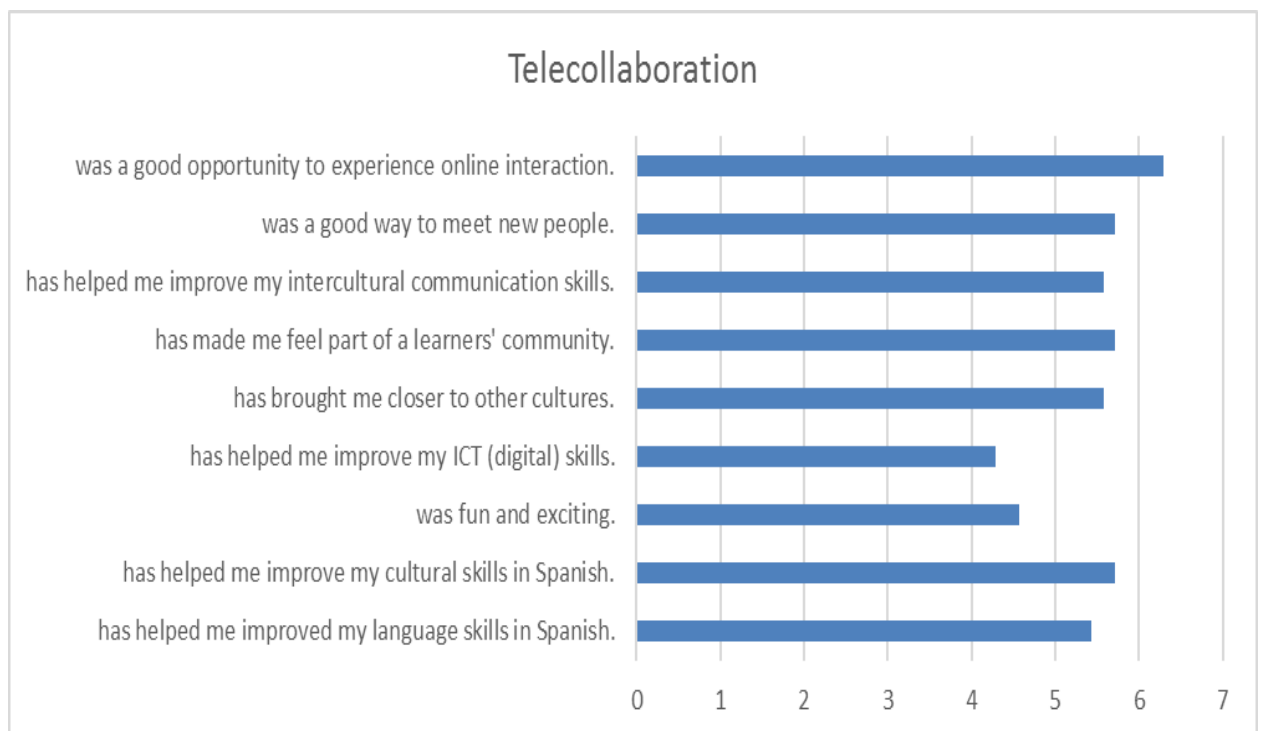
The US students rated all the categories slightly lower, thus showing a somewhat lower degree of satisfaction.

Figure 2

How US students perceived that the telecollaboration project had helped them


The Spanish students highlighted the opportunity to experience online interaction with fellow learners followed by three aspects: a) being able to meet new people; b) being able to improve their intercultural communication skills, both of which coincide with the US students; and c) having felt that they belonged to a community of practice, which the US students rated lower.

Regarding the benefits of participating in the online forums to discuss cultural issues, the US students pointed at four primary aspects: a) learning facts about their exchange partners' culture; b) having been given the opportunity to explain the cultural issues under debate (immigration and nationalism/patriotism) from the perspective of their own culture; c) acquiring an insight into how one's culture is perceived by others thousands of miles away; and d) having had the opportunity to learn facts about their counterparts' culture that are not presented in the media.

Figure 3

US students' perceived benefits of participating in the online forums (7-point scale)

Participating in the forums with the Valencia/Baltimore students to discuss cultural issues helped me...
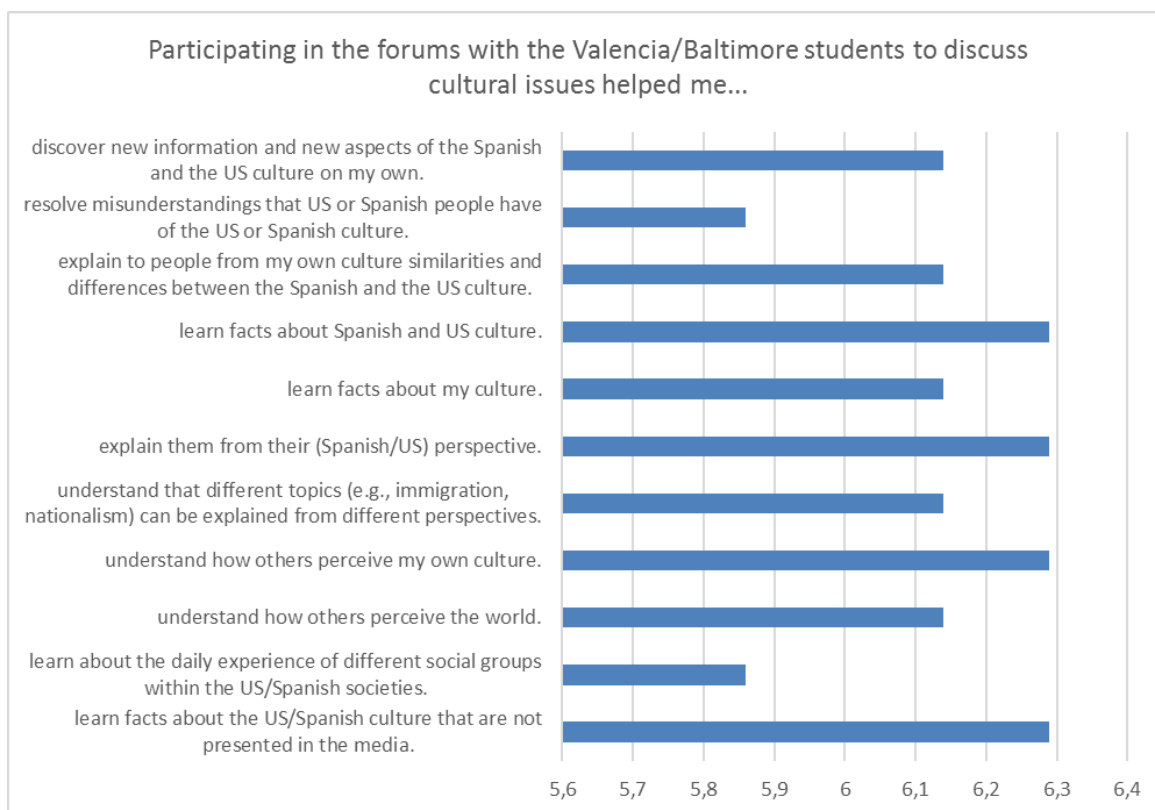
Likewise, the Spanish students also felt that participating in the forums had helped them understand how others perceive one's own culture but differed in other aspects. Specifically, they pointed out that the forums had helped them learn new information and new aspects about the culture of their foreign language (L2 culture) *on their own* (which implies that, in order to discuss a specific cultural issue pertaining to the L2 culture, they had to investigate the topic and gather relevant information that would allow them to contribute meaningfully to the forum discussions), and also that a given topic can be explained from different perspectives, a fact that undoubtedly contributes toward becoming more open-minded and tolerant with opposing opinions. Additionally, this last benefit was not foreseen to such an extent by the students in the pre-questionnaire.

Overall, the results derived from the pre-questionnaire correlate to those from the post-questionnaire, which leads us to believe that, in most cases, the leaners were able to foresee how participating in the online discussions would help them in terms of 'interculturality'.

Figure 4

Spanish students' perceived benefits of participating in the online forums (7-point scale)
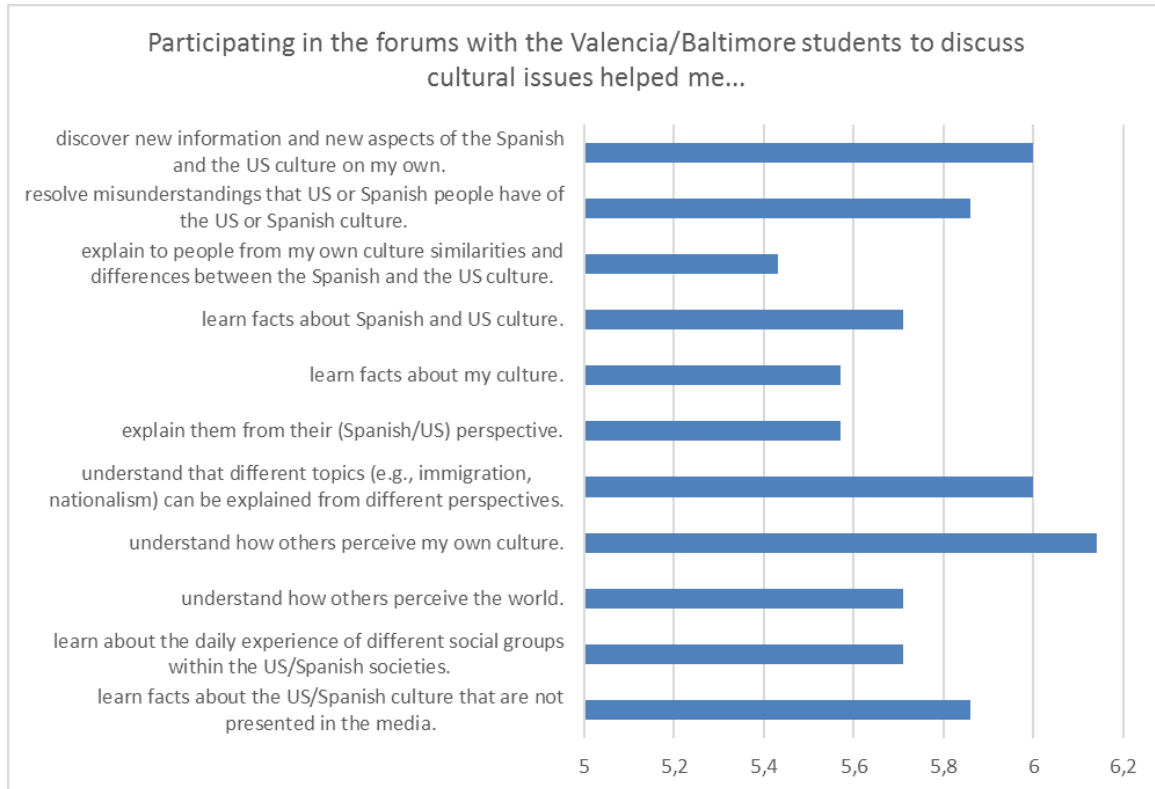
Regarding the learners' perception of the activities that were most useful, the American students preferred the online written discussions in the project forum, that is, interacting with their counterparts and exchanging points of view and opinions regarding the topics under discussion; whereas the Spanish students favoured taking part in and watching the sound-enhanced presentations that all the students had to prepare and deliver after each discussion concluded. The synchronous sessions were preferred by the Spanish students compared to the US students, something that may seem surprising considering the six-hour time difference which meant that the Spanish students carried out these sessions in the evening from home.

When asked what they thought about the virtual exchange project itself, the US students found it, on the whole, interesting, fun and useful, although a small number of them reported a certain degree of frustration. The Spanish students were of the same general opinion, but did not report being frustrated mainly because they saw the project as an innovative add-on to the subject which was also part of the final grade.

Lastly, when asked how the project had contributed toward the development of certain skills, the US students emphasised that the project had mainly helped them develop their team-working skills, whilst vocabulary, speaking, reading, writing, critical thinking and research skills came in second place.

The Spanish students, however, believed that the project had helped them improve a) their listening skills – thus placing more weight on the linguistic side of the learning process – followed by; b) vocabulary and speaking skills alike; c) reading skills; and d) writing skills, creativity, critical thinking, research skills and team-working skills.

4. Conclusions

The responses to the pre- and post-questionnaires showed that both groups of students were open-minded about discussing intercultural issues and collaborating with fellow students from a different cultural background. They did not think that communicating in writing through the online forum nor orally through video conference hindered authentic intercultural communication and interaction. The surveys also provided evidence that the learners' expected benefits correlated with their stated benefits after carrying out the project, which supported our belief that any frustrations and possible communication breakdowns had been kept to a minimum. Regarding specific gains, there was clear evidence that UPV students saw the project as being beneficial for their EFL improvement, which was also one of the project's aims.

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