Virtual Cultural Communication. Establishing Dialogues Between China and Poland

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Abstract

The overall aim of the current paper is to establish best practices for developing, engaging and working critically in virtual intercultural communication. The need to build practical language communication skills is not a new idea or a new part of methodology. With the development of technology, the range of communicative opportunities has grown and allowed virtual intercultural dialogues to take place. The focus of these situations is not only language development and practice, but also critical cultural awareness and intercultural skill development. The paper presents contrasting approaches in the methodological construction of one such programme between young students in Entel Foreign Language School, China, and Krosno State College, Poland. Over the course of the link from Spring to Summer 2017, different approaches were taken by the instructors and students in both countries resulting in varying levels of engagement and critical understanding. The Chinese approach stresses communication as an outcome and delivers more time to oral activities in the classroom, which contrasts with the Polish approach of a stricter language-based teaching strategy. As a result, the paper will discuss the relative merits of the two methodological frameworks in the communication project. This will be achieved by evaluating the overall success of the communication based on interviews with the student participants and observations of interaction during the link meetings. Finally, the paper will illustrate a methodology for working with such links and developing intercultural communication.

Wirtualna komunikacja kulturowa. Nawiązywanie dialogu między Chinami a Polską

Streszczenie

Ogólnym celem niniejszego artykułu jest ustalenie najlepszych praktyk w zakresie rozwijania, zaangażowania i krytycznej pracy w wirtualnej komunikacji międzykulturowej. Sama potrzeba budowania praktycznych umiejętności komunikacji językowej nie jest nowym pomysłem ani nową częścią metodologii. Wraz z rozwojem technologii zwiększył się wachlarz możliwości komunikacyjnych, umożliwiając prowadzenie wirtualnych dialogów międzykulturowych. W takich sytuacjach kładzie się nacisk nie tylko na rozwój języka i praktyki językowej, ale także na krytyczną świadomość kulturową, jak również na rozwój umiejętności międzykulturowych. W artykule przedstawiono kontrastujące podejścia w metodologicznej konstrukcji jednego z takich programów wśród młodych studentów w Entel Foreign Language School w Chinach i Państwowej Wyższej Szkole zawodowej w Krośnie w Polsce. W trakcie wspólnej inicjatywy w okresie od wiosny do lata 2017 r. nauczyciele i uczniowie w obu krajach podejmowali różne działania, skutkujące różnymi poziomami zaangażowania i krytycznego zrozumienia. Podejście chińskie podkreśla komunikację jako główny wynik, przeznaczając więcej czasu na zajęcia ustne w klasie. Kontrastuje to z polskim podejściem zasadzającym się na bardziej rygorystycznej strategii nauczania opartej na języku. W rezultacie, w artykule zostaną omówione względne zalety obu tych dwóch metodologicznych ram w projekcie komunikacji. Dokonamy tego poprzez ocenę całościowego sukcesu komunikacji, opartą na wywiadach z uczestnikami i obserwacjach interakcji podczas spotkań prowadzonych w ramach projektu. Na zakończenie, w artykule zilustrowano metodologię pracy do zastosowania dla takich wspólnych inicjatyw i rozwoju komunikacji międzykulturowej.

Słowa kluczowe: współpraca globalna, komunikacja międzykulturowa, nauczanie online, Chiny, Polska, metodologia EFL

1. Introduction

The use of virtual platforms is a contemporary tool for the language teacher. It provides teachers with the ability to bring students from different countries together for cultural exchange and communication. Many educational establishments make use of technology and offer innovative courses that allow real-time conversations. These courses are challenging not only from the perspective of the technology used, but also from the methodology and collaborative nature of the act of teaching. The nature of the course requires that the students be prepared for the

communication event locally. The instructors must work together to foster a successful environment for the communication to take place. Just as the students have to establish a constructive dialogue, the instructors need to be involved in intercultural dialogue. This is as much a challenge due to the different expectations and curricula as it is for the instructors to deal with their own intercultural competences.

The project is not an attempt to test existing theoretical models of virtual education. It is an attempt to work around situations and problems caused by intercultural issues between approaches, educational systems and student/teacher expectations as and when they arise. In many ways, the work undertaken builds upon the concept of Third Place Culture (Kramsch 1993) as the central approach. The objective is to develop a framework which is adaptable to the cultural requirements of China and Poland. Furthermore, the work undertaken online is in line with much of the expectations of both the Chinese and Polish educational systems. The Chinese educational system has elements that focus on the idea of Educational Migration and skill development for overseas study (Graddol and Bolton 2012: 8). The Polish system of Higher Education includes extensive international integration and cooperation as part of the 'Gowin' reforms of 2018 (cf. Information from the Ministry 2018).

In this paper, we will describe the creation of a virtual communication programme between Krosno State College in Poland and Hangzhou Entel Foreign Language School in China. The rationale behind the link and the structure of the programme will be explained to establish the overriding principles of the communication idea. The ideas behind the approaches of Krosno College and Entel will allow the reader to see the differences and similarities in the integration of such a programme into established curricula and methodology. Finally, the comments and outcomes of the communication programme from the students' perspective will be presented allowing for conclusions to be drawn on the relative successes and failures as well as recommendations to be given for future work.

2. Establishing virtual communication between Krosno and Entel

The development of new technology and globalization has led to the dissemination of communication process all around the World. It is mainly by dint of the Internet, thanks to which Virtual communication is possible. National borders are no longer creating any barrier for people, since they easily use communication tools and break the distance. According to Ingrid Potisková (2012), virtual communication should be more frequent in education system. The reason for this is not only enhanced learning of students, but also the teaching process which is

enhanced (Potisková 2012). Much has been written on the establishment and creation of online courses (cf. Beaudin 1999, Kearsley 2002, Palloff and Prat 2001) and this paper will not explore in detail the theoretical frameworks of online learning. It is worth noting that the virtual cultural exchange programme created for this project is based on methodology which dates to the earlier phases of online communication in the early 2000s (see Chia, Poe, and Yang 2011 for a discussion on the background of the Global Understanding methodology).

Moreover, the construct of the Krosno-Entel link uses synchronous videoconference technology to create an extended classroom environment, rather than using asynchronous tools such as Moodle, Blackboard, Edmodo etc. The face-to-face aspect of utilising videoconference tools is an essential part of the model that Krosno and Entel adopted. The main feature of such an approach is that the methodology creates a classroom environment with participants in two cultures working in synchronous time and responding to each other (see Ng, Cheung and Hew 2011). Similar online programmes use chat and discussion boards and, frequently, more of an asynchronous approach, which often leads to issues of motivation (see Lindeman 2003). In considering the research that has previously been conducted on virtual exchange, it is worth highlighting the work by Zhu, Payette and DeZure (2003:2), which provides a clear strategy of aspects to be considered in creating an online course: Course Content, Delivery of Instruction, Course Design, Communication and Interaction, Student Time Spent on Learning Tasks and Assessment of Student Learning.

It is also worth emphasising that Virtual Communication courses are well established in both Krosno State College and Hangzhou Foreign Language School. Krosno's cooperation with East Carolina University and their Global Understanding (GU) programme began in 2011 and Entel developed their first GU link with NCSSM in North Carolina in 2014 based on the East Carolina University programme. Both institutions presently run several GU style courses each semester and collaborate in online classes and lectures with other institutions. The fact that these institutions undertook to start their virtual communication course at roughly the same time illustrates the importance of such courses as part of the two school's educational curricula.

Krosno and Entel have similar rationale for developing such courses as part of a wider internationalisation strategy in their institutions. Institutional internationalisation is often seen as a part of the globalisation of education (Jickling and Wals 2008: 5), which is sometimes driven by a desire "to be seen" as international, rather than "to be" international. Yet, the approach of both institutions is to ensure that students are exposed to cultural diversity in the classroom environment. This has been achieved by the integration of overseas teachers and link projects in both Krosno and Entel, as well as with the Erasmus+ project in Krosno. Through

exposure to such projects, the students are open to alternative narratives of culture and can build a guided understanding of cultural diversity (Hale, Snow-Gerono, and Morales 2008).

Such transformative educational methods, as outlined by Mezirow (Kitchenham 2008), bring different dimensions to the practice of teaching. Collaboration is no longer limited to the available students in a classroom or school environment. The broader nature of online collaboration brings access to a diversity of opinions, ideas and narratives beyond the limited scope of a physical school building. The development of the online project brought collaboration between the Polish and Chinese students through the extended classroom environment and outside the classroom through social media communication. This encouraged exploration of new narratives of events, celebrations and worldviews. Furthermore, the students and instructors engaged in a process of working with difference during their link cooperation. This enabled them to overcome expectations, as well as create new problem-solving skills (Smith 2002).

Following the above discussion, it can be stated that the overall purpose of the Krosno-Entel project is twofold. Firstly, to raise awareness of Europe among the Chinese students and of China for the Polish students. Secondly, to build language development. It was also believed that collaboration can lead to a shift in the learner's beliefs and attitudes. All three aims are evaluated, and the findings presented in the analysis part of the paper.

3.   Structural background of the links

Unlike other programmes run by Entel, the most interesting feature of the link programme was that the target group of students were non-native speakers. Entel's other link programmes focus on students in the USA and UK. By contrast, Krosno College participates in the Global Understanding programme run by ECU in the USA, which provides access to 44 institutions in 23 different nations allowing greater virtual communication diversity. Furthermore, Krosno College has many non-native students from the Erasmus+ programme and this provides Krosno students with exposure to different types of spoken English (see McKay 2008).

Vital to the success of the project were intercultural collaboration and exchange of information, the exploration of differences and similarities as well as building acceptance of each other. Therefore, much of the language work and pre-link development was part of facilitating greater communication of cultures and ideas. It was considered that accuracy and fluency were not necessarily important. Intercultural communication of an idea or message was the focus of the conversation and, in this sense, the programme was more focused on creating

situations for intercultural exchange than on language development. The language development work for the students centred on communicative competence and oral English.

Utilising some of the strategies for managing online communication, as discussed before, a prior list of topics was agreed upon. Louise Damen (1987: 79) describes culture as "a set of learned models for living" and this was considered in the development of the topics. As a result, discussions led to the creation of topics covering student and youth life, family and society, fashion, music and entertainment. One specific goal of the programme was to explore the overlap between the central values of Polish and Chinese societies. Over the last two decades both Poland and China have undergone profound social changes. The values listed by the Polish Public Opinion Research Center (2010) are reflected in the themes most central to the discussions: family, health and sincerity. According to Polish public opinion the most vital values in life are a happy family, good health and honesty. It was assumed, by the instructors, that there is a considerable similarity between the values mentioned in the Polish study that relate to China. The instructors considered that this would provide a solid foundation for conversations.

The link structure was designed as a 60-minute videoconferencing virtual class divided into three phases. The first phase was Introduction of the Topic and allowed a prepared presentation to be delivered on the theme of the lesson. The second phase was Discussion, and this was divided into two sections. Initially, to help guide the students, the teachers ran a guided class discussion asking questions and eliciting responses to the presentations. Students who felt comfortable were encouraged to ask their own questions and to reflect on their own thoughts to a wider group. After the class discussion, students were then asked to contact one-on-one or two-on-one with each other using the social media app WeChat. This enabled private conversations on the topic and more personal communication. The final phase was feedback where students could summarize things they had learnt and discovered in the discussion phase. With this structure in mind, the classes had a framework which required advance preparation from students and guidance from the instructors for the meetings to have successful outcomes.

4.   Chinese methodology for the link preparation

The planning and design of the link lesson from the Chinese viewpoint is based on the Chinese government's Key Competences as an English Learner (Ministry of Education of China 2012). These competences and skills overlap with the European Framework and other established approaches for language learning (cf. Byram 1997). The approaches state that to master a basic

knowledge of English, it is important to develop the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as the ability to communicate with others in English. Further, the Chinese concept of language learning promotes the development of critical thinking and understanding in English. The framework document consists of four parts: Linguistic Competence, Learning Abilities, Thinking Qualities and Cultural Awareness.

4.1. Linguistic competence

Linguistic competence in China is defined as the ability to understand and express meaning by proper language. This includes a focus on: basic phonetics for pronunciation and intonation; grammar; the function of speaking, listening and reading. It is considered that these elements are required for an individual to express his/her thoughts and ideas and to understand thoughts and ideas expressed by another.

Therefore, for the students who participated in the link class, it was essential for their linguistic competence to be improved for oral delivery. Before the link class, students were required to prepare a presentation and do research on the assigned topic. This was important for them to build a good linguistic structure. Further, during the preparation time new vocabulary which was necessary to deliver the presentation was explained. This allowed for the introduction of new linguistic elements, which required the instructor's input to explain and answer student's questions. This phase was considered very important to improving the key competences of the students.

During the link, students were given plenty of opportunities to speak about the topic and listen to presentations on the topic by Krosno students. This provided time for them to practice their communicative skills including questioning, delivering prepared speeches and free discussion. To evaluate the student's performance, the instructor was a participant observer in the link class and required student self-reflection, with the students assigned some written homework to summarize or compare the cultural exchange. This exercise aimed to enhance their writing skills and allow them to express their critical understanding and interpretation of the topic.

4.2. Learning abilities

Learning abilities focused mainly on the students' abilities to expand learning areas, actively adjust learning strategies, and strive to improve the awareness, quality and potential of learning efficiency. Chinese students in the link programme are highly motivated and driven to learn and

participate as it is a selective programme with prestige in the school due to the global dimension. Because of the desire for linguistic competence, it is not uncommon for students to look for the definition of words on their mobile phones when they meet new vocabulary spontaneously.

One of the assignments given to improve the student's learning abilities is making a mind map. To complete this task, students are asked to use different applications, such as bubbl.us, to make different kinds of mind maps. Furthermore, students learned to take notes on their phones and graphic organizers to help them study.

4.3. Thinking qualities

The characteristics expressed in logical, critical and creative thinking can be improved with the teacher's instructions and assignments. The input of the teacher is to provide help in making the students' presentations more logical, such as through the mind map discussed above. Working to present data in a standardized order and with a clear structure of results leads to improvements with logic and flow. Comparing the facts, the similarities and differences they find between the two countries allows students to analyse their cultural values. Students are encouraged to work on understanding the historical, religious and geographical reasons for certain values and actions. Utilising such an approach can improve their critical thinking as the students are not just presenting information about their own culture but being asked to understand their own culture.

4.4. Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness, in the Chinese educational system, refers to the understanding of both Chinese and foreign culture and understanding of the nature of culture. To aid this development, a popular methodology in Chinese schools is to use the Know-Want-Learn worksheet. In this structure students write down what they Know or believe about a certain culture and then are asked to reflect upon what other information they Want to know. After the activity, students reflect on what they Learn and whether their predictions in the Know phase were correct. The method is a good way to promote cultural curiosity by allowing the students to target areas they wish to discover.

Using this method, students in the link class worked on presenting Chinese festivals, families, traditions, music and other aspects of China. This aided in the students' self-learning and awareness of Chinese culture as well as an understanding of other cultures as comparisons were made to Western society in general given that this was the target audience of the

presentation. They then were asked to say what they Know and Want to discover about Polish culture. As the links developed, the Chinese students asked questions and made discoveries about Polish traditions and customs. In the end of the links, the students in China were able to understand cultural differences which introduced the idea of cultural respect. This exercise showed the instructor that the most important thing is that the young generation in China sought common interests with their Polish peers. As a result, the students were often pleasantly surprized by connections they could create and stepped across barriers as their cultural awareness developed. For the instructor, the student's cultural awareness is helpful for them to stand out in a globalized world.

5.   Polish approach to the link classes

As has been said earlier, the link structure was created between two of the authors of this article, using their professional experience of other link programmes. The instructors on the programme were involved in such an activity for the first time and their comments illustrate that virtual communication programmes are not straightforward to run. Indeed, the two instructors highlighted the time, energy and investment required to ensure a successful outcome. Instructors must lead by example and set the standard that they expect from their students. A positive approach, not only to the use of technology but also to the different culture, is a necessity in building such a project.

A positive approach is no more apparent when examining the methodological approach. Although on paper, there are few differences between the Chinese and the Polish approach to foreign language learning (see the Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*), spoken English has often been criticized as being a less important part of language teaching in Poland, due to the old philological approach (Kasztalska 2014). Despite reforms in recent years towards a more communicative approach in language teaching in Krosno College, there is a lack of a structured approach that promotes speaking. As Xu Lin (2007) argues, spoken language patterns create conversational differences which appear primarily during intercultural communication and, therefore, the awareness of spoken strategies is as important as linguistic structure in dealing with conversational difference.

By contrast to the Chinese approach, the Polish classroom practice lacks clear overlapping goals or clear focus in preparing students prior to the link class. Preparatory work is often seen as the student's responsibility and to be conducted independently. In result, the Krosno students

lacked organisation in terms of linguistic outcomes, learning abilities, thinking qualities or critical awareness. This is even though in each aspect of the CEFR the students are measured on their understanding, spoken and written work. Although teachers in Poland expect that cultural awareness and critical thinking are part of the curriculum of a college student, through such interactive programmes and other language work, there is no specific manner in which students are given guidance or direction on how such aspects are developed or explored beyond their experience in virtual links (Brighton forthcoming).

6. Chinese and Polish students' response to the link class

The results of the pedagogical approach are highlighted by the student outcomes and comments. This section will present the student's attitude to the link class and what they believe they have learned and gained from the programme.

The data was collected by way of a 9 question 5-point Likert scale survey and participant observation. The questions asked about the students' personal attitudes to the link as well as how they dealt with specific issues of intercultural communication, such as cultural background, communication difficulties and cultural awareness. The information presented highlights the students' perspectives of the virtual exchange programme and how they dealt with the issues of cultural awareness and understanding. The survey (n=30) carried out amongst Polish (n=15) and Chinese (n=15) students is presented. Data collected from the survey students illustrates that people are shaped by the culture they live in and, therefore, each may interpret a certain situation differently.

Of the Polish respondents (n=15), 80% believed that their cultural background plays an important role in intercultural communication. It is illustrated by the fact that 53% of Polish respondents (n=8) admitted to having the impression that the Chinese interlocutor is acting 'wrongly' in their opinion based on their cultural stereotype for behaviour. Similarly, of Chinese students (n=15), 86% of the respondents (n=13) also found understanding problematic due to cultural origin. Each student in the programme (n=30) admitted to having at least one communication problem with understanding because of their own cultural conditioning and different habits.

A further issue highlighted by the survey is a lack of cultural self-awareness. As Quappe and Cantatore (2007) state, before we try to understand the behaviour of our interlocutor we should be aware of our own behaviour. They posit that our perceptions of things generate our reaction. In this sense we should be aware of our "cultural baggage" (Kramsch, 1993) and the

lens of cultural perception. Sixty percent of Polish students (n=9) expressed their opinion of the need for cultural awareness, regarding their own as well as the foreign culture. Similarly, around 70% of Chinese students (n=11) also believe that cultural awareness is essential when it comes to intercultural communication. Moreover, referring to the discussion phase of the class interaction, one in two students from all the cohort (n=30) admitted failing in a conversation because of certain aspects of their own culture.

The students' comments from interviews reinforce these findings and focus our understanding of the impact of following the methodological guidelines. At the beginning of the class, the Polish students lacked confidence in their spoken English and were more reserved than their Chinese partners. A Polish student commented that: "I am excited about the link but am afraid whether they will understand me". Further evidence pointing towards methodological issues can be seen in a second student's comment: "I am worried about the moment when they ask me a question and I don't know the answer […] What scares me the most is my English level and the mistakes I make". By contrast, the Chinese students displayed a great interest and involvement in the links without any apparent concern for their spoken English. These students approached the links with a different point of view, stating that: "I'm looking forward to meeting my Polish friends" and "I am so excited, and have so many questions to ask my new mates".

The issue of self-confidence in Polish students' spoken English is an individual aspect, but also a result of the curriculum, as mentioned above. As highlighted earlier, the Chinese students were well prepared by their instructor for the class. This built their confidence, as evidenced above, and enjoyment of the intercultural exchange as they had time in advance to consider what information they wanted to bring to the meeting and what they wanted to share. Therefore, some of the personal issues connected to spoken English were dealt with beforehand since they had prepared and were ready for the information exchange.

The survey's findings show that greater self-awareness and self-confidence resulted in greater engagement and participation. This is not an unusual finding but demonstrates that lacking a conscious awareness of one's own values and beliefs in an intercultural situation creates negative outcomes in communication. Students who had been given help to understand and control their own reactions to situations produced better communicative results in the initial phases.

The lack of prior preparation and readiness for the class was noted by the Polish students. The Polish students felt less able to engage in the class, as evidenced by the comment of a Polish student who stated: "I am impressed by their [the Chinese] professional preparation for the classes and their culture, but I don't know what to ask about". The authors' observations

identified that the lack of preparation meant that many of the Polish students had little to contribute to the discussion as they lacked knowledge of the topic and vocabulary for immediate engagement. The student's statement illustrates, further, the need of the instructor to take a leading and guiding role in delivering the information to the students to engage.

The consequence of such behaviour is also of interest. Intercultural communication often works on perceptions of attitude and effort to ensure a successful outcome to communication. In this situation, the lack of preparation by the Polish students created the impression of a lack of interest. A Chinese student, who had mixed feelings about the situation, stated: "I'm not sure what I should think because they are very nice and friendly, but they say so little". This emphasizes the need for energetic communication and a willingness to engage in and to work on producing successful outcomes. As has been indicated above, a lack of preparation can be misinterpreted and create a negative outcome and so it becomes essential that students are prepared as much for an intercultural communication event as they would be for other courses in their study of English.

7. Conclusions

As the paper illustrates, students require preparation and a clear methodological structure to engage in such a virtual communication course. Whereas the concept of intercultural exchange might appear to be a straightforward goal, the exact construction and development of such a programme requires a well-built methodological framework with the acknowledgement from all sides of shared goals and outcomes. The authors' findings indicate several pedagogical conclusions and recommendation that can be drawn from the research.

Overall, there is no doubt that this project was a valuable experience for each participant. The general perception from the students was that it was an interesting and novel class in which spoken language was used as a way of discovering culture. The programme provided them with the opportunity to develop and build confidence in spoken English. Yet, we also need to acknowledge that intercultural communication is a journey that requires guidance and support from the teachers involved. Students cannot be let to undertake the journey alone.

Therefore, the teachers need to overcome differences in approaches. These pedagogical differences, as has been noted, led to differences in the administration of the programme and in student outcomes. It is important to acknowledge that the methodology of collaborating with another instructor and dealing with different objectives is a skill that is essential in creating the atmosphere and structure for a virtual communication exchange. The instructors must

collaborate and put a framework in place which promotes enthusiasm, understanding and the ability to deal with uncertainty.

The overall student outcomes, as illustrated above, show the need for pedagogical oversight and preparation. There is no doubt that each online meeting was an opportunity to raise awareness among students and build intercultural language development. Yet, in spite of differing approaches, over the course of time the cultural awareness of the two groups of students developed. In some cases, the development was self-driven and in others it resulted from a reaction to the teaching factors. It can be clearly stated that self-awareness stemmed from the communicative integration and online learning process. The cooperation between the students is the outcome of the programme design and illustrates the need for ensuring a situation where intercultural exchange is possible regardless of external factors. Such a conclusion is highlighted by the fact that different pedagogical approaches were undertaken and yet in both classrooms intercultural development occurred.

The student testimonies illustrate the barriers some of them overcame to ensure that they benefitted from the programme. Through their interactions and collaboration in various situations, both groups of students learned to look at things through the eyes of others. This led to the experience of engaging with different worldviews and other cultural communities. It is a testament to the students' ability to make these steps, and a point of pedagogy to note that the instructors must help students manage their own intercultural journey.

To conclude, there are several recommendations that this paper can provide for others wishing to follow this path. Firstly, and perhaps most crucially, any virtual exchange programme must establish an environment where student centred activity can successfully take place. The extended classroom model using videoconference is a positive example as it brings students together in personal synchronous communication, rather than using impersonal online tools. Secondly, it is necessary to understand the different cultural approaches to the programme, as well as the intercultural approaches that can impact the overall aims. Thirdly, raising student self-awareness and promoting critical reflection are essential for successful outcomes. It is important, as the students develop their intercultural understanding, that any potential areas for conflict need to be dealt with. And finally, neither side should be afraid to redesign the programme as it is in operation to address institutional, individual and structural needs. Flexibility and acceptance of uncertainty are key skills in intercultural communication and, by design, in any virtual intercultural communication.

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