

SVETIMŲJŲ KALBŲ STUDIJS/STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Developing Students' Creativity and Collaboration Skills in Learning English: a Case Study of an International Online Project

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Abstract. The growing demands for international cooperation in the EU labour market have raised a special challenge to language teachers at technical universities: to organise authentic communication environments in addition to the usual classroom activities, to develop students' collaboration and creative thinking skills. The paper contains an overview of studies carried out by leading experts in foreign language learning/ teaching, confirming the fact that creativity and collaboration are significant aspects of the learning process. Theoretical considerations are supported by the analysis of a case study: an online collaboration project between the University of Angers Institute of Technology (France) and Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) (Lithuania), which took place in 2011. Six bi-national students teams were asked to design a product or service that would meet the needs of other first-year university students. The participants worked together on the *Moodle* virtual learning platform to evaluate target needs, brainstorm for possible solutions, negotiate a common plan, create attractive and convincing promotional materials, and present their work to peers for approval by videoconference. The paper includes the description of the process and the products/ services created by the international students' teams, and their comments that prove the positive added value of the project which can help to implement principles of cultural interaction and creative thinking more effectively. The project experience has shown that there is room for improvement, therefore the authors discuss the possibilities of facilitating the students' interaction and involvement. Recommendations regarding creative communication online are presented.

Key words: *Online project, creativity, collaboration, virtual learning platform, cultural interaction, videoconference.*

Introduction

The present-day demands of the European Union labour market pose a special challenge to foreign language teachers training technology specialists all across the EU: to create authentic communication situations for students of technical universities, to develop collaboration skills in English — the *lingua franca* of today's world — and thus to prepare them for an easier integration into the EU community, where

multicultural and multilingual teams are often created to solve problems, find innovative solutions and develop new goods and services. Multicultural teams can bring different perspectives to problems, leading to new solutions that foster creativity and innovation (European Commission).

Currently, foreign language courses at higher technical schools, in addition to providing the basics of academic and professional language, also aim at developing students' communication skills. The broadening access to information-communication technologies (ICT) has made the task much easier, as students from different countries can work together online, negotiate and make decisions together. The process of collaborative learning significantly contributes to the students' autonomous learning and the involvement of critical thinking, innovation and creativity.

The importance of creativity in language studies is stressed in the European Commission documents: "Creativity is

central to language learning and hence language teaching. The creative strategies needed when learning a new language or trying to communicate in a foreign language, are transferable skills which are useful in other areas of learners' lives and to society as a whole." (European Commission). Therefore, foreign language teachers face **the problem** of developing creative language learning activities and integrating them into the learning/ teaching process which would contribute to the current demands.

The aim of the present case study is to investigate how students' creativity and collaboration skills can be developed with the help of online projects. Through the analysis of the virtual communication project, which was carried out between the students' groups of the University of Angers Institute of Technology (France) and Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania) in 2011, the hypothesis of the positive impact of creative collaboration tasks on the process of language learning/ teaching has been tested. The survey of students' opinions at the end of the project proved the efficiency of the project and provided ample commentaries for formulating recommendations and future improvements. **The methods** used were theoretical analysis and students' survey.

Theoretical Background

Theoretical study of modern language learning/ teaching approaches (e.g., communicative, constructivist, learner-centred approach) testifies to the fact that creative tasks

enhance learners' motivation, involvement, commitment, and consequently, the learning efficiency.

In terms of the socio-psychological aspect of learning, it is widely accepted that educators should take into consideration Stephen D. Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis of second (or foreign) language acquisition (Krashen, Terrell, 1983). It claims that conditions which promote low anxiety levels in class allow improved learning on the part of students. When learners enjoy class activities, their Affective Filter is low and they learn more. Different innovative activities also lower learner affective filters. This language acquisition model has been very influential among language teachers. Krashen's theory has much in common with both the communicative approach to language study and Noam Chomsky's theory of generative grammar (Chomsky, 1966) in which he stresses the innate creativity in language itself.

Experts of communicative language learning/ teaching approach (Holec, Little, 1998, Nunan, 1989, etc.) give special attention to learners' communication skills and creative tasks. They claim that in constructing utterances for communication students have to innovate, express their own ideas by exploiting their abilities "to the edge of their current linguistic competence. This will result in drawing closer to the discourse of normal conversation" (Nunan 2005). In order to increase the learners' involvement and to lower their affective filter, communicative situations have to be chosen considering the learners' interests and needs. Experience confirms that students learn languages best when they are learning about things that interest them, when they feel capable to add their own contribution to the ultimate goal. Therefore, problem-based tasks, simulation games, role plays and other activities requiring creative thinking skills stimulate the learners, and raise challenging goals for them by bringing the learning process closer to real-life situations.

Developing learners' creativity is also an essential aspect in the constructivist approach, in terms of both the final product and the process itself. Its initiators, psychologists and philosophers as Jean Piaget, Lev Vigotsky, John Dewey, and Jerome Brunner (Matthews, 2003) focus on encouraging foreign language learners to become critical thinkers, to construct their own concept and interpretations, to know how to apply language skills in various situations. All the supporters of constructivist strategies emphasize the importance of the learning process itself, not only the final product. As pointed out by Tapscott (1998), learning is moving away from one-way instruction to construction and discovery of knowledge. Therefore, it is essential to provide learning environments that offer maximum learner control and learning opportunities that are meaningful to the learner, allowing the learner to be more active in their construction of mental representations of phenomena (McCombs, 2000).

Marlowe and Page have summarized the essential principles of the constructivist approach as:

- constructing knowledge, not receiving it;
- thinking and analyzing, not accumulating and memorizing;

- understanding and applying, not repeating;
- being active, not passive. (Marlowe & Page, 2005).

The above mentioned principles serve as the basis for the present-day educators aiming at high quality language learning/ teaching outcomes. In addition, representatives of different educational schools stress the widely acknowledged advantages of integrating interactive computer applications into foreign language courses. ICT is undoubtedly considered an efficient tool in educational practice, and language teaching in particular, facilitating the implementation of the set goals and application of modern teaching strategies.

In the light of technological advance, many foreign language educators have explored the potential of integrating Internet technologies into foreign language programmes with the purpose of developing learners' intercultural communicative competence (O'Dowd 2007).

In the introductory chapters of his book *Online Intercultural Exchange — An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers*, O'Dowd discusses the theoretical origins of online exchange for language teaching purposes and outlines areas of current research and debate. Drawing from a wide range of literature, O'Dowd frames the key issues on conducting online intercultural exchange, such as the teacher's role, working language(s), task design, feedback, and the use of communication tools.

From the constructivist perspective,

computer technology has the potential to support diverse needs and capacities within the student population and to allow students greater control over their learning (McCombs, 2000).

Introduction of computer-assisted learning/ teaching programmes has changed the traditional teacher-centered classroom to a learner-centered classroom with greater learner autonomy and deeper individual processing of information advocated by the constructivists.

During the last decades, foreign language specialists have acknowledged the positive impact of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) tasks on the quality of their courses for many reasons. The main of them were enumerated by Warschauer as far back as 1998:

The benefits of adding a computer component to language instruction are many, and include:

- (1) multimodal practice with feedback
- (2) individualization in a large class
- (3) pair and small group work on projects, either collaboratively or competitively
- (4) the fun factor
- (5) variety in the resources available and learning styles used
- (6) exploratory learning with large amounts of language data
- (7) real-life skill-building in computer use (Warschauer, 1998).

The unlimited availability of authentic materials which help to update the traditional coursebooks, the non-linear structure of the information, accessibility to multimedia applications, and communication capabilities through

networking have been quoted as the most rewarding features of CALL by Chun and Plass (2000), and many other authors. It may be said that the Internet has provided unlimited resources for creating a great variety of problem-based tasks and real-life simulations, it has turned language learning into an active, social, and collaborative process. For theoretical and practical support, special journals, such as *Computer-Assisted Language Learning*, *Language Learning and Technology* have been published for several years already; research conferences are regularly held; professional associations are organized; books by the leading experts in the area are published, containing tips for creative strategies in using computer technology (Dudeny&Hockly, 2007; Sharma&Barrett, 2007; Chapelle, 2008, etc.). The latest recommendations in the area mainly focused on collaboration and project work activities (Lee, 2011).

Internet-based projects have recently become the most challenging and motivating applications of ICT in foreign language courses as they allow the learners to transfer the acquired knowledge to real-life applications, to construct their personal meaning. According to Warschauer (2003), "Over the years, research on CALL has shifted away from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with human beings through a computer." Lee (2011) describes communication projects online (blogs) as developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) which presents a conceptual framework consisting of four-interrelated components — *knowledge, skills, attitudes* and *awareness*. Within this framework, the goal is to promote cultural learning that goes beyond a superficial "facts only" approach. To become competent intercultural speakers, learners need to be open-minded to people of other cultures so that they understand cross-cultural perspectives. Lee also underlines self-directedness, critical reflection and cognitive engagement through social interactions as the key principles of autonomous learning for web-based projects.

As summarized by Stoller (1997), the advantages of such projects are the following:

- 1) Project work focuses on content learning rather than on specific language targets. Real-world subject matter and topics of interest to students can become central to projects.
- 2) Project work is student-centered, though the teacher plays a major role in offering support and guidance throughout the process.
- 3) Project work is cooperative. Students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to complete a project, sharing resources, ideas, and expertise along the way.
- 4) Project work leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from various sources, mirroring real-life tasks.
- 5) Project work culminates in an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, a report, or a stage performance) that can be

shared with others, giving the project a real purpose. The value of the project, however, lies not just in the final product but also in the process of working towards the end point. Thus, project work has both a process and product orientation, and provides students with opportunities to focus on fluency and accuracy at different project-work stages.

6) Project work is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging. It usually results in building student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities.

Thus, computer-assisted project-oriented work embraces principles of learning that are promoted by the theories, approaches, and philosophies mentioned above (communicative language learning, constructivist, learner-centered and autonomous learning principles, etc.). The accessibility of the Internet has become essential for network-based learning and further affects students' motivation (Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005).

Kaunas–Angers Collaboration Project Online

English language teachers at the University of Angers Institute of Technology and Kaunas University of Technology are experienced in integrating the Internet into different language courses. Taking into consideration the future prospects for graduates-engineers, who will probably have to work collaboratively with colleagues from other EU countries in their professional life, language specialists in both universities give special attention to developing students' communication skills in English as *lingua franca*. For several years running, students majoring in engineering have had possibilities to develop their communication skills by participating in international communication projects online, some of them dealing with students' life, others — with business communication skills (as part of Business English course). KTU students have been communicating with peers from Denmark, France, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, etc.

The University of Angers Institute of Technology started collaborating with International Studies Centre, KTU, in 2010. In the first joint French-Lithuanian project students shared their university experience, discussed similarities and differences of students' life in both countries, proposed a programme for a weekend in their city.

In 2011, a new 8-week collaboration project was launched, using a shared *Moodle* virtual learning platform. It was called: The First Annual Student Product/ Service Innovation Contest.

The **aim** of the Project was to develop students' creativity and cooperation skills.

The authors of the Project had set the following **objectives**:

- to use English for negotiations and team work;
- to discover another culture;
- to design a useful product or service aimed at European students.

The Project plan was developed by the authors of the present paper, taking into account the main requirements for problem-based tasks:

- Identify a problem suitable for the students.
- Connect the problem with the context of the students' world.
- Organize the subject matter around the subject.
- Give students responsibility.
- Create learning teams, encourage collaboration.
- Encourage all students to demonstrate the results of their learning through a product or performance.

The participants were 20 first-year students from University of Angers Institute of Technology and 18 first-year students from the International Studies Centre, Kaunas University of Technology. They were divided into 6 bi-national teams, each consisting of members from both universities. These mixed teams were an innovative aspect of the Project, as in the previous projects students had usually worked and prepared presentations within national teams first, and only later negotiated with their counterparts abroad. In the project under discussion, the French and Lithuanian team members got to know each other on the *Moodle* Forums, then suggested their own individual ideas, negotiated which ones were most appropriate and acceptable, and developed them into the final product.

Each team had a separate Forum for discussion/ negotiations on the *Moodle* platform. This virtual learning environment, accessible at both universities, had been tested in the previous project a year before and proved to be suitable for collaboration — it is learner-friendly, easy to use and exchange ideas, gives great opportunities for uploading prepared material, both slides and video clips, and adding links to other websites. Besides, work on the *Moodle* forum is very useful for enhancing students' self-confidence and fluency in asynchronous communication. Since it is done by writing messages, the instructors can identify the mistakes students make. It is obvious that accuracy corrections are not appropriate in a public forum online, but the mistakes were discussed individually with the students all through the duration of the project.

The project consisted of the following stages/ steps:

Step 1: Start team building.

Task: Present your team members and your school.

Expected production: A slideshow or a video.

Step 2: Offer a product or service to solve students' problems.

Task: Evaluate problems that all first-year students face (transport, budget, making friends, work/ life balance, etc.) Propose a solution (product or service). Create a company.

Expected production: A slideshow or a video.

Step 3: Advertise your company's product or service.

Task: Create an appropriate ad campaign.

Expected production: Advertising, slogans, jingles, marketing actions, sales policy.

Step 4: Present your work.

Task: Present your team's product or service to the class.

Expected production: A videoconference and oral presentation of the teams, together with a slideshow.

Students were very active all through the eight weeks of the project, working on it also in their free time, discussing the proposed ideas, finding the best ways of presenting their final product. The role of the teachers was to prepare the tasks and upload them on the *Moodle*, to give instructions in the early stage of the project, to explain the structure and the task sequence, to organize the teams and forums for discussion, and later they acted just as advisors and facilitators, prompting advice, providing help, or individually correcting essential mistakes. In accordance with the constructivist approach, the learner was the centre of the learning, with the instructor playing an advising and facilitating role (Anderson, 2008).

At the end, the teams presented their creative collaboration results which were demonstrated during the videoconference:

- Low-cost, healthy catering company
- Pillow alarm for late-risers
- Student party organization service
- Healthy, green and outdoor activities club
- Loan, parties and student jobs service
- Internet food shopping & recycling service

Special arrangements were needed in organizing the final videoconference. Due to some technical reasons, the conference was held in two shifts (Group 1–3 and Group 4–6), and it turned out to be a successful solution since the teams had ample time for introducing themselves, their companies and their ads.

In the **follow-up survey** after the videoconference, the students were asked to:

1. vote for the best product or service according to the criteria:

- a) the seriousness of the problem they presented
- b) the usefulness of the solution (product or service)
- c) the elegance and esthetic aspects of the solution (design, style, general attractiveness)
- d) the overall presentation techniques (working together, being clear, using good English).

The peers' voting results were graphically presented as a bar chart on the *Moodle* platform, which showed the leaders: Team 1 (a Lithuanian-French company of fast and healthy food for students), Team 2 (a Waking-up pillow with an alarm clock inside), and Team 4 (Eco Entertainment company).

2. explain why they had voted for the chosen product or service

The main reasons were: the best presentation and good English; an original idea; a very useful product; a very effective advertisement, etc.

3. evaluate their team work by answering the questions:

- Did you manage to finish what you wanted to do ?
- What problems did you encounter ?
- What were the positive aspects of the project ?
- What were the negative aspects of the project ?
- What would you change in the project for next year ?

All the students wrote that they managed to finish their tasks, they had no complaints about the Moodle platform, technical hindrances or shortage of the instructors' attention and assistance, however, some of them mentioned lack of time as the main problem.

The number of answers about positive aspects of the project significantly outweighed the ones pointing out the drawbacks: all the participants found a number of reasons why they liked the project (some of them are quoted below), whereas some critical commentaries concerning the organisation of the process (not the content!) were presented only by nine students. See the quotations below.

When summarizing the students' responses, it should be noted that the positive aspects mentioned by them went **in line with the project goals and objectives**:

- All the students enjoyed the creative tasks and highly evaluated collaboration in developing their final products, e.g. :

- *There are a lot of positive aspects of the project. Firstly, we communicated with a foreign country and its people... Moreover, in the end of the project we did a video conference and met our friends from France. It is a very good experience for the future (Greta).*
- *It was great to meet new people, communicate and create together (Gediminas).*
- *The positive aspects of the project were that it enabled us to share ideas with people we have never met and helped us to be creative. It enabled us to accomplish a specific task, and we discovered new English words (Teld).*
- *I think the most positive and fun aspect was the communication itself. Also the team work and the creativity was great too (Ruta).*
- *The positive aspect was we learnt to work with foreign people without even knowing them and organize our work (Thomas).*
- *The main positive aspect is that I learned a lot about teamwork, about generating an idea. It was a perfect experience working with foreign people and learning English as well (Karolis).*

- 66.6 % of the respondents emphasized their improved English skills due to practical real-life usage of the language, e.g.:

• *It was good to speak English otherwise than in English lessons, meet other persons, improve our English (Benjamin).*

• *We met some students who speak good English, we have communicated and exchanged our work. I think it's a good project because it pushed us to learn our English (Marryoune).*

- 86.6 % of the respondents stressed that when working together, they learnt about a different culture, e.g.:

• *We got more knowledge about France, their culture, people and we gained more English knowledge (Aiste).*

• *In my opinion, this project is a very good idea, it was a good experience not only for talking English with foreigners, but for gathering people together and learning that we can make something even with those who we did not really know (Viktorija).*

• *This project has taught me teamwork and communication with persons located in another country. In addition, this project allowed me to improve my English and work. I could learn more about the Lithuanians and their country (Jeremy).*

When commenting on negative aspects of the project, students wrote a few critical remarks concerning their wish to have more time, more synchronous communication, more realistic results, and their suggestions for the future were related to those aspects, e.g.:

- *I would like to make more video conferences, also it would be great if we could get more opportunities to communicate with other country students (Aiste).*
- *Strong contact early (video conference) would improve the perception of other student groups, make it faster, closer (Erwan).*
- *For the next year, I think you must make several video conferences (Benjamin).*
- *Insist on communication and real co-working (Thomas).*
- *For next year, I propose that the best product should be realised in reality (Teld).*

Conclusions

All the participants found the Project a challenging and rewarding experience. It did not distract the students from other tasks of the syllabus (it took only approximately one fifth of the whole course time during the eight weeks), on the contrary — the friendly cooperative atmosphere created during the project contributed greatly to mutual understanding and more active participation in other class activities.

Even though it is impossible to present a quantitative evaluation of the project's efficiency, the students' enthusiastic involvement in the process and the creative outcomes of their team work produce obvious evidence of

the project's positive impact on the learners' motivation and consequently, the learning results.

Following the students' suggestions and the instructors' observations, recommendations for future project work were formulated:

- Continue collaboration: it is essential for motivating students.
- Start with a videoconference to create stronger ties among the participants.
- Find possibilities for more 'real-time' communication (chat).
- Invite another European partner school to participate.
- Search for more efficient ways of implicating all students and evaluating individual effort.

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Studentų kūrybiškumo ir bendradarbiavimo įgūdžių ugdymas mokantis anglų kalbos: tarptautinio projekto internete atvejo tyrimas

Santrauka

Europos Sąjungos darbo rinkoje didėja tarptautinio bendradarbiavimo poreikis, kuris kelia specifinius tikslus užsienio kalbų dėstytojams techniškiauose universitetuose: šalia įprasto darbo auditorijoje, organizuoti autentiškas komunikacijos aplinkas, vystyti studentų bendradarbiavimo ir kūrybinio mąstymo įgūdžius. Straipsnyje apžvelgiami užsienio kalbų mokymo(si) ekspertų tyrimai, patvirtinantys faktą, kad kūrybiškumas ir bendradarbiavimas – svarbūs mokymosi proceso aspektai. Teorinius teiginius patvirtina ir analizuojamas atvejo tyrimas: 2011 metais vykęs bendradarbiavimo internete projektas tarp Angers universiteto technologijos instituto (Prancūzija) ir Kauno technologijos universiteto. Šešios tarptautinės komandos, sudarytos iš abiejų šalių studentų, turėjo sukurti produktą ar paslaugą, tenkinantį universitetų pirmakursių poreikius. Bendraudami „Moodle“ virtualaus mokymo platformoje, dalyviai analizavo poreikius, ieškojo sprendimų, sudarinėjo bendrus, visiems priimtinius planus, kūrė patrauklią, įtikinančią reklaminę medžiagą ir ją pristatė vaizdo konferencijos metu. Straipsnyje aprašoma projekto eiga, aptariami komandų sukurti produktai bei paslaugos. Pateikiami studentų komentarai, patvirtinantys projekto pridėtinę vertę, įrodantys, kad tokiu būdu galima efektyviau diegti tarpkultūrinio bendravimo ir kritinio mąstymo principus. Projekto patirtis parodė, ką galima tobulinti, tad autoriai aptaria būdus, kaip palengvinti studentų bendravimą ir skatinti aktyvų dalyvavimą, pateikia rekomendacijų, kaip toliau plėtoti bendradarbiavimą internete.

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