

Collaborative Activities in the Development of Writing Skills Using the Internet-based Platform

Jonė Čižinauskienė, Audronė Daubarienė, Roma Marcinkonienė

Abstract. The paper discusses the uses of the Internet – based collaborative activities for language learning. It presents two examples of an international project and surveys their methodological implications. One of the activities, called WebSiteStory, is a model for creative writing. This activity involves enhancing language learning and raises cultural awareness for participating students from five countries. ACROSS is a cross-curricular cross-cultural problem solving activity where on-line exchange of specific information leads to final reports on energy sources in European countries.

Language learning and the subject matter created a powerful link between the language classroom and the world outside motivating students for collaboration. An evaluation survey that followed brought forward the benefits of co-operative creativity in language learning using the Web as a communication platform.

Introduction

Learning society is a condition of human survival. Scholars agree that the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century will enter the history of education as a period when the idea of lifelong learning expanded all over the world and when exceptional qualitative changes took place in the attitudes to the strategies of learning. “The emphasis on mutual learning reflects the fact that there is no one way to transfer knowledge and expertise. Improving knowledge and understanding as a basis for improved action requires proper management of learning experiences based on learning strategies that permit learners to learn in the way most appropriate for them. Teaching is no longer enough; instead knowledge and expertise available in all contexts and at all levels must become part of the learning process” (Buchert, 1998).

Globalization, for better or worse, is implemented in the extraordinary expansion of learning through new technologies, especially the Internet, the latter being viewed by students as a means of self - directed learning on their way to taking a proper place in society (Duke, 1992). This trend is observed all over the world in the growing number of intranational and international projects that help to benefit from mutually created new methods having the following advantages:

learning without any time or space restrictions;

arranging the course that takes individual learning needs into account;

developing creativity in the process of mutually beneficial learning;

developing responsibility taken by students in the learning process.

The generation of new ideas in changing learning strategies needs creativity but their implementation calls for both creativity and responsibility in order to be sure

that the new ways of learning will help students to meet the challenges and uncertainties of the complex world.

The **aim** of the research is to analyse the role of collaboration and creativity in the development of writing skills as part of language learning using the Internet-based approach.

The **object** of the research – the web-based project possibilities of enhancing collaboration in the language classroom.

The **research methods** involved literature review and survey analysis. Lithuanian students from KTU filled in two different questionnaires (Appendices 1 and 2). The questionnaires differed for creative story writing and the report-writing participants.

Background

Some innovations are being brought about in the Centre of Foreign Languages at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) by taking part in international SOCRATES projects. Computer-mediated communication among European countries and student interaction in the classroom are at the core of it. Blend of reality and responsibility convert students into active participants who use the spoken (classroom) and written (structured environment) word of the target language. Students are exposed to reality of function in the language and need to handle in the customised environment, whilst their teacher-facilitator is in charge for the mechanism to work.

IT use in language learning is becoming a reality in many educational institutions. This has provided a shift in curricula, and computer-mediated activities and projects entered the language classroom. The principles of collaborative learning – learning through group interaction, learning from discussions with peers, etc. – are being implemented and proved to be beneficial to learning process. This is being enhanced with the support of the

Internet-based platforms, TELSI in our case, designed by educators in Oulu University, Finland.

Role-plays and simulations have been widely used in the language classroom by many teachers and approved by well-known methodologists (Hadfield, 1992; Jones, 1990; Di Pietro, 1990) in favour of the communicative approach. With the advent of information and communications technologies, traditional role-plays and simulations have been treated in an innovative way. The Internet-based platforms support the traditional story and report writing. As a result, a WebSiteStory and cross-curricula model ACROSS have been introduced by an international team of educators and teaching professionals within the framework of Socrates Grundtvig project "Internet-based collaborative learning in adult education (eCOLE)". A structured setting applied in the project, enables to achieve what D. Shoemaker (1998) says about the use of technology, namely:

- bridging the geographical gap,
- permitting live interaction and immediate feedback,
- providing a structure for interaction between students,
- creating educational access on a scale never before possible.

Creative writing and report writing employed in the project have been aimed at writing skills development within language learning. This takes techniques and habits to be built up. Thinking through the writing process can be really helpful and new, improved habits can be established quite quickly. Some strategies for writing have been suggested to empower students with to achieve better results:

- brainstorming ideas,
- remembering words/phrases to do with an appropriate topic/story,
- gathering familiar language from a range of sources,
- using authentic materials to understand different styles,
- thinking about purpose and style,
- listing key ideas,
- developing ideas,
- writing collaboratively with a peer/peers,
- making language fancy, extending it,
- linking ideas, paragraphs into an appropriate structure,
- organizing report/story writing,
- reading it through to get the sense of the "flow",
- including as much detail as possible, etc.

What is mentioned above is in line with project "Internet-based Collaborative Learning in Adult Education" coordinated by the Danish partners from adult education institution VUC, which involves partners from six European countries – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Lithuania and Germany. The concept of eCOLE lies in learner group work through WSS and ACROSS models supported by the Internet-based TELSI environment, and it emphasizes the pedagogical potential which makes advantage of short term collaborative activities. WebSiteStory is a model for creative writing in a foreign language learning, whereas ACROSS is a model for curricula problem solving activities.

The project is aimed at developing students' creativity and collaboration, i.e. to arouse all their potential faculties and powers through reading, writing, listening and communicative processes.

In WebSiteStory it was agreed upon the scripts for five stories of different genres: love story, soap opera, travel book, autobiography, and detective story. Each country student group had to contribute by writing a chapter to every story within a limited time span. An evaluation phase provided by the German partners took place on completion of the creative writing which lasted for five weeks. Each script was given a different starter:

- a love story - a few initial sentences,
- an autobiography - a painting,
- a detective story - a short chapter,
- a travel book - some key words,
- a soap opera - a person gallery.

The participants were given access to the Internet environment by providing them with user names and passwords. When a student group from a certain country completed their chapter, the platform was closed for them and was opened to the next group of learners following the compiled calendar.

In ACROSS model energy sources were to be investigated in each country and a final report produced on the basis of the obtained information and collected material via email communication with partner groups about energy situation there. The following types were agreed upon for different countries:

Portugal – solar energy,
Sweden – hydroenergy,
Norway – gas energy,
Denmark – wind energy,
Lithuania – nuclear energy.

Easy Web-based environment handling was achieved through a user-friendly TELSI platform improved and adapted by the Swedish partners. This setting enabled students in five countries to allocate produced pieces of writing within limited space by using "file" and "document" locations and authorised them to edit their writing and give "read" or "write" rights to their partners. The ability to communicate among the groups of students was provided by "mail" and "chat" options in the platform.

Within a period of 5 weeks one group of students was busy with story writing – each week a chapter. The other group was involved in the search of appropriate information to present a survey of nuclear energy and its use in Lithuania in partner countries. Alongside, students' messaging via mail took place. The reports encompassed different aspects of the energy situation: technology, national discussions, political decisions, importance of this source for the country, etc. in English. Therefore, twofold aims have been pursued by the model – investigation of the situation of energy sources in different countries and the use of English as a means for collaborative communication and report writing.

“Various approaches to cooperative learning all fit well with more complex writing tasks and projects and are especially effective when writing is also used to learn and work with specific sets of information... The transfer and adaptation of information is not only a problem of technical content but also a problem of language, language variety, of cultural bias, and of intercultural understanding (Grabe, Kaplan, 1997).

Results

Having completed their writing tasks each group of participants in all five countries was provided with unified evaluation questionnaires. The questionnaires differed for WebSiteStory (WSS) and cross-curricular report writing (ACROSS). These are the results of the Lithuanian survey. Commenting on the mostly liked issues of the work, the student answers ranged as follows in (WSS): *innovation, teamwork, expressing one's mind, doing one's best*.

Among options of dislike these were mentioned: WSS – *lack of time, ending some stories, lack of help from some peers*, ACROSS – *lack of interaction with foreign students*.

Also, the students in WSS pointed out that their participation entailed creativity development.

In their expectations about the forthcoming work (WSS), the students listed these ideas: *having a good time while writing, communication with peers from other countries, a difficult task taking much time*.

After all the project work tasks were completed, the final evaluation revealed that all expectations listed in WSS pre-project questionnaire came true, whereas in ACROSS only 80% of the students agreed about expected.

Table 1. Global evaluation of the project by Lithuanian students (WSS)

Evaluation grades: 5 – most positive, 1 – least positive.

	Evaluated aspects	Mean
1.	Liking the project work	3.8
2.	Identifying oneself with the project	3.5
3.	Teamwork within the group	3.6
4.	Contacting foreign people	4
5.	Working with computer	4
6.	Story writing	3
7.	Story reading	3,3

All aspects of the project were positively assessed by the Lithuanian students.

Table 2. Students' evaluation of their experience in writing different stories (WSS)

Evaluation grades: 5 – most positive, 1 – least positive

	Story type	Evaluation
1.	Love	3.2
2.	Autobiography	2.7
3.	Detective	2.9
4.	Travel	3.7
5.	Soap	2.5

The most popular story plots were travel and love.

Table 3. Assessing the degree of importance of the listed issues (WSS and ACROSS)

Evaluation grades: 5 – most positive, 1 – least positive

	Important issue in the activity	Means in WSS	Means in ACROSS
1.	teamwork	3.5	4.5
2.	work with computer	3.3	4
3.	contacts to foreign people	3.6	4.2
4.	story writing/collecting materials	3	3.8
5.	story reading/writing process	3.1	3.9
6.	content-based language learning	3.1	3.4

In both groups teamwork and contact to foreign people were ranked as the most important. Content-based language learning (style/vocabulary/grammar related to the specific subject) were ranked much lower. In general, ACROSS students gave higher evaluation to the project activities than the WSS students. The reason for this could be explained that students of a technological university are more interested in learning something new about a specific subject matter than in producing creative writing.

Table 4. Evaluation of motivational issues in WSS

Evaluation grades: 5 – most positive, 1 – least positive

	Motivational issues	Means
1.	Demands of language skills	4.1
2.	Demands of time	4
3.	Chances to be creative	3.3

Throughout their involvement in the assignments, the students (WSS) pointed out that they needed the teacher's support in *generating ideas, grammar check and vocabulary*. To achieve better results, what was mentioned as missing in their project work were: *more contacts to foreign peers and more enthusiasm*.

The aspects in with ACROSS students profited most were ranked as follows: *teamwork, work with computers, the materials collection on the subject matter, increased vocabulary, communication*.

Among suggestions to improve the project work, the students' considerations ranged in this way: WSS – *better and more realistic introductions to stories, smaller groups of learners, possibilities to choose topics (stories)*, ACROSS – *more time for the project, WSS and ACROSS - more communication with foreign partners*.

Conclusions

In the students' performance within the project work, emphasis was made on collaboration and creativity, also adding expansion of the alphabet by capability, competence, confidence, critical thinking and cultural awareness. These define some of the main routes in learning. The development of the abilities is closely interrelated; each of them stimulates one another and becomes a part of it. With reference to the above, the project work has contributed in making use of collaborative and creative work, thus enabling the students in five European countries to put factual information into a

predetermined format. This has been achieved through team work that lowered psychological barriers, facilitated the pooling of resources and generated shared knowledge in the form of the story or the report. The use of language, as mediator of social interaction and purposeful communication, both in the spoken and written form, has proved to have become a powerful motivating tool to enhance creativity and collaboration in five European classrooms providing a useful insight into writing as a process and as a product. It has been validated that written texts had to be made cohesive and coherent to be applicable to the current project requirements. Fruitful experiences of the involvement in the story and the report writing have been indicated in the student evaluation. What is likely to be of considerable benefit to all participants of the project is the empowerment to write in order to communicate knowledge and message within a predetermined framework using information and communication technology (ICT) devices as an innovative means in the language classroom. The use of ICT made viable international interactive learning way:

- teachers ↔ learners,
- computer-based software applications ↔ learners,
- learners ↔ learners.

Jonė Čižinauskienė, Audronė Daubarienė, Roma Marcikonienė

Kooperuotos užduotys rašymo įgūdžiams ugdyti panaudojant Internetą

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami kalbos mokymosi būdai, kai, bendrai dirbant ir pasitelkiant interneto platformą, atliekamos trumpalaikės užduotys. Pateikiami du tarptautinio projekto pavyzdžiai ir aptariama jų pedagoginė reikšmė. WebSiteStory yra kūrybiško rašymo modelis. Ši užduotis skatino kalbos mokymąsi ugdant rašymo įgūdžius ir kultūrinį sąmoningumą penkių Europos šalių studentų grupėse. ACROSS yra tam tikro dalyko nagrinėjimo remiantis kultūrine kompetencija užduotis, kur pasikeitimas atitinkama informacija iš interneto baigiamas išsamia dalyko ir su juo susijusių problemų apžvalga. Kalbos mokymasis ir dalyko pristatymas užtikrina glaudų partnerių bendradarbiavimą. Projekto užduočių įvertinimo tyrimas apibendrina ir iškėlė integruoto kalbos mokymosi, naudojant internetą kaip bendravimo įrankį, privalumus ir naudą.

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Jonė Čižinauskienė, lecturer at Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania.

Academic interests: ELT material, skills development, research into language learning/teaching methodology, ESP, computer assisted language learning/teaching.

Address: Kaunas University of Technology, Faculty of Humanities, Centre of Foreign Languages, Gedimino str. 43, LT-3000 Kaunas, Lithuania.

Audronė Daubarienė, lecturer at Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania

Academic interests: ESP, computer assisted language learning/teaching.

Address: Kaunas University of Technology, Faculty of Humanities, Centre of Foreign Languages, Gedimino str. 43, LT-3000 Kaunas, Lithuania.

E-mail: audra.daubariene@ktu.lt

Roma Marcikonienė, lecturer at Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania

Academic interests: ESP, computer assisted language learning/teaching.

Address: Kaunas University of Technology, Faculty of Humanities, Centre of Foreign Languages, Gedimino str. 43, LT-3000 Kaunas, Lithuania.

E-mail: romarc@ukc.ktu.lt

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1. WSS

eCOLE Evaluation

Country: _____

1. Global evaluation

- 1.1. How much did you like the work in the eCOLE project?
 (5=very much; 4= much; 3= o. k.; 2=not much; 1=not at all)
- 1.2. What did you like most in the project?
- 1.3. What did you not like?
- 1.4. Did you notice a development in your own work?
 Yes no .
 If yes, in which way?
- 1.5. How much did you identify with the project: (5-1: see above)
- #### 2. Your expectations
- 2.1. When you read the introduction to the project, what did you expect of it?
- 2.1.2. Did your expectations come true? Yes no .
- 2.2. How much did you look forward to the following aspects?
- 2.2.1. Teamwork within my group: 5=very much
- 2.2.2. Working with computers: 4= much
- 2.2.3. Contact to foreign people: 3= o. k.
- 2.2.4. Story writing: 2=not much
- 2.2.5. Story reading: 1= not at all
- 2.2.6. content-based language learning (=style/vocabulary/grammar related to the specific subject matter): (5-1)

3. Your experience during the project work

- 3.1. How much did you like to work with the following texts?
- 3.1.1. Love story 5=very much
- 3.1.2. Autobiography 4= much
- 3.1.3. Detective story 3= o. k.
- 3.1.4. Travel book 2=not much
- 3.1.5. Soap opera 1= not at all
- 3.2. Which of these points were important for you?
- 3.2.1. Teamwork within my group: 5=very much
- 3.2.2. Working with computers: 4= much
- 3.2.3. Contact to foreign people: 3= o. k.
- 3.2.4. Story writing: 2=not much
- 3.2.5. Story reading: 1= not at all
- 3.2.6. Content-based language learning: (5-1)
- 3.2.7. From which aspects did you profit most?
- 3.2.8. Which aspects of the project work did your teacher emphasize?
- 3.3. Where did you need most support?
- 3.3.1. Did you get it from your co-learners? Yes no .
- 3.3.2. Did you get it from your teacher(s)? Yes no .
- 3.3.3. Where could you give support?
- 3.4.1. I found the demands on language skills: 5=very motivating
- 3.4.2. I found the demands of time: 4=motivating 2=not much
- 3.4.3. I got chances to be creative: 3=o.k. 1=not at all
- 4.1. What did you miss in the project work?
- 4.2. Suggestions for improvements:

APPENDIX 2. ACROSS

eCOLE Evaluation

Country: LITHUANIA

1. Global evaluation

- 1.1. How much did you like the work in the eCOLE project?
 (5=very much; 4= much; 3= o. k.; 2=not much; 1=not at all)
- 1.2. What did you like most in the project?
- 1.3. What did you not like?
- 1.4. Did you notice a development in your own work?
 Yes no .
- 1.6. How much did you identify with the project: (5-1: see above)
- #### 2. Your expectations
- 2.1. When you read the introduction to the project, what did you expect of it?
- 2.1.2. Did your expectations come true? Yes no .
- 2.2. How much did you look forward to the following aspects?

- 2.2.1. Teamwork within my group: 5=very much
 2.2.2. Working with computers: 4=much
 2.2.3. Contact to foreign people: 3=o.k.
 2.2.4. Collecting materials: 2=not much
 2.2.5. Writing process: 1=not at all
 2.2.6. content-based language learning (=style/vocabulary/grammar related to the specific subject matter): (5-1)
- 3. Your attitude during the project work**
- 3.1. Which of these points were important for you?
- 3.1.1. Teamwork within my group: 5=very much
 3.1.2. Working with computers: 4=much
 3.1.3. Contact to foreign people: 3=o.k.
 3.1.4. Collecting materials: 2=not much
 3.1.5. Writing process: 1=not at all
 3.1.6. content-based language learning (=style/vocabulary/grammar related to the specific subject matter): (5-1)
- 3.1.7. From which aspects did you profit most?
- 3.1.8. Which aspects of the project work did your teacher emphasize?
- 3.2. Where did you need most support?
- 3.2.1. Did you get it from your co-learners? Yes no .
 3.2.2. Did you get it from your teacher(s)? Yes no .
 3.2.3. Where could you give support?
- 3.2.4. Did you get it from foreign groups? Yes no .
 If yes, in which way?
- 3.3.1. I found the demands on language skills: 5=very motivating
 3.3.2. I found the demands of time: 4=motivating 2=not much
 3.3.3. I got chances to be creative: 3=o.k. 1=not at all
- 4.1. What did you miss in the project work?
- 4.2. Suggestions for improvements:

