

**AN EXPERIENCE OF VIRTUAL LINGUISTIC EXCHANGE FOR THE
DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

***UNA EXPERIENCIA DE INTERCAMBIO LINGÜÍSTICO VIRTUAL PARA EL
DESARROLLO DE LA COMPETENCIA COMUNICATIVA***

***UMA EXPERIÊNCIA DE INTERCÂMBIO LINGUÍSTICO VIRTUAL PARA O
DESENVOLVIMENTO DA COMPETÊNCIA COMUNICATIVA***

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the characteristics of a university virtual interaction project for the development of communicative competence for Spanish's students as a foreign language, from the Marketing, Gestão e Contabilidade degree in Escola de Tecnologia e Gestão de Guarda (Portugal), and for Portuguese's students as a foreign language of the degree in Translation and Interpreting at the University of Granada (Spain). Acknowledging the fact that linguistic exchanges result as an accelerating framework for learning a foreign language as well that collaborative learning encourages the students participation and motivation, we present in this article a didactic plan of virtual linguistic exchange to implement interuniversity collaboration between Portuguese and Spanish teachers together with students, aiming for increasing communicative competences, throughout activities of written expression and textual revision that results in activating the awareness of linguistic error and reflective learning.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic exchanges. Collaborative learning. Communicative competence of the LE. Written expression. Textual revision.

RESUMEN: *En este artículo exponemos las características y los resultados de aprendizaje de un proyecto de interacción virtual universitaria para el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa de los estudiantes de español como lengua extranjera del grado de Marketing, Gestão e Contabilidade, da Escola de Tecnologia e Gestão de Guarda (Portugal) y de los estudiantes de portugués como lengua extranjera del grado de Traducción e Interpretación de la Universidad de Granada (España). Partiendo del hecho de que los intercambios lingüísticos son un marco acelerador en la adquisición de una lengua extranjera y de que el aprendizaje colaborativo fomenta la participación y motivación de los estudiantes, presentamos en este artículo una propuesta didáctica de intercambio lingüístico interuniversitario virtual con el objetivo de conseguir un aprendizaje reflexivo a través de actividades de expresión escrita y revisión textual.*

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PALABRAS CLAVE: Intercambio lingüístico. Aprendizaje colaborativo. Competencia comunicativa de la LE. Expresión escrita. Revisión textual.

RESUMO: Neste artigo são apresentadas as características e os resultados de aprendizagem de um projeto universitário de interação virtual para o desenvolvimento da competência comunicativa dos alunos de espanhol, língua estrangeira, da licenciatura de Marketing, Gestão e Contabilidade, da Escola de Tecnologia e Gestão de Guarda (Portugal) e dos estudantes de português, língua estrangeira, do curso de Traducción e Interpretación da Universidade de Granada (Espanha). Partindo do pressuposto que os intercâmbios lingüísticos constituem um marco acelerador na aquisição de uma língua estrangeira e que a aprendizagem colaborativa fomenta a participação e motivação dos estudantes, desenvolveu-se uma proposta didática de intercâmbio lingüístico interuniversitário virtual com o objetivo de conseguir uma aprendizagem efetiva através do recurso a atividades de expressão escrita e revisão textual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Intercâmbio lingüístico. Aprendizagem colaborativa. Competência comunicativa da LE. Expressão escrita. Revisão textual.

Introduction

In 1987 the Erasmus program was created, based on the name of the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, which is simultaneously an acronym for the official name European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, and as the name itself indicates, it aims to promote international exchange among higher education students.

Since 1987, the year in which 3,200 students from 11 European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom) participated in the program, the program has achieved great success. According to the report prepared by the European Commission (2017) to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of its creation, up to that date the program offered nine million people the opportunity to study, train, work as volunteers or gain professional experience abroad. Today, the Erasmus+ program has evolved and offers a wide range of opportunities for education, higher education, vocational training, youth, and sport:

Erasmus+ has become much more than mobility. Cooperation projects are a tool that offers organizations active in the fields of education, training, youth, and sport the opportunity to create partnerships, both among themselves and with other actors, such as companies and public authorities (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2017, our translation).

The project that we present in this article has as one of its main objectives to implement what the Erasmus+ program proposes, that is, it is a learning experience based on inter-university cooperation between the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (IPG) of Portugal and the University of Granada (UGR) from Spain. It is a virtual collaborative learning project to develop the communicative competence in Foreign Language (FL) of the members of the project (Spanish as a foreign language, ELE, for students from Portugal and Portuguese as a foreign language, PLE, for students from Spain) through virtual linguistic immersion activities that enable reflexive learning and linguistic awareness to be activated.

Language exchange and collaborative learning

The use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in language teaching has made it possible to implement virtual exchange programs with similar results to face-to-face language exchange programs, which have been carried out for decades in language learning.

As O'Dowd (2018) states, there are several terms and definitions of virtual exchange, although the common elements, according to this author, are the interaction between students from different backgrounds, both culturally and geographically, who participate in educational programs of all kinds under the supervision of teachers or facilitators in the collaborative process. According to this author, virtual exchange in a foreign language (FL) teaching has been carried out through two models: the e-tandem model, focused on fostering student autonomy to continue their language learning in interaction activities outside the classroom, and the model of intercultural telecollaboration or online exchange implemented at the end of the 90s, oriented to emphasize the intercultural and sociocultural aspects of FL teaching.

Different studies (ROMAÑA CORREA, 2015; GUADAMILLAS GÓMEZ, 2017) have demonstrated the effectiveness of these exchanges as a tool to improve communicative and intercultural competence; they favor interaction with native speakers of FL and allow the real and contextualized use of lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic elements. In addition to their effectiveness in developing communicative fluency, they increase student confidence and stimulate motivation to learn FL. The collaborative learning generated from a linguistic exchange creates a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, encourages participation, reduces anxiety to speak the foreign language, and increases motivation and consequently the

involvement of the student and their productivity (CRANDALL, 1999; COSTA; SALOMÃO, ZAKIR, 2018).

Collaborative learning consists of carrying out tasks and didactic activities between the different members of a group to learn something through dialogue and the exchange of ideas. Already in 1997, Driscoll and Vergara stated that "True collaborative learning requires that students not only work together in groups but also cooperate in achieving a goal that cannot be achieved individually" (DRISCOLL; VERGARA, 1997, p. 91). Carrió Pastor (2007) also considers that the characteristics that identify and differentiate collaborative learning from other types of learning are:

Pride of belonging to the group. The group must recognize itself as such and be convinced that the distribution of tasks is equitable.

Heterogeneity of the components of the group. This allows the different points of view of the members of the group to generate more complex and rich conclusions.

The intersubjectivity of knowledge. Subjective points of view are exchanged and discussed until only one is obtained.

Individual leadership. Each member of the group is his leader and has to answer the questions that are entrusted to him by the group.

Emergence and solutions of group conflicts. The conflicts that appear are solved collaboratively between the members of the group (CARRIÓ PASTOR, 2007, p. 3, our translation).

The role of the teacher and the student changes in this context of collaborative learning: the teacher becomes a mediator or facilitator of linguistic exchange, whose main function is to create and manage opportunities for students to interact with other students (ROMAÑA CORREA, 2015), as well as that of "supervising the work of the teams, evaluating the level of student learning and encouraging them to determine how effectively their learning groups are working" (JOHNSON; JOHNSON; HOLUBEC, 1999, p. 4, our translation). The student, for his part, adopts a proactive and participatory role of an autonomous nature in the learning process. According to Cardoso:

Students assume an active and interventive role in their learning process, developing skills that will be required in the world of work, an opposite perspective to the more traditional paradigm, which is based on a model in which students are passive knowledge players (CARDOSO, 2020, p. 99, our translation).

Although there are numerous research studies (CARRIÓ PASTOR, 2007; SUÁREZ GUERRERO, 2010; ALARCÓN OROZCO; REGUERO GONZÁLEZ, 2018) that show the effectiveness of collaborative learning systems, as well as various proposals for didactic

innovation in FL teaching based on models of interaction (SILIBERTI, 2011; FIGUEIREDO, 2018), there are still few collaborative educational practices in the teaching program of FL teaching. This shortage is perhaps motivated by the institutional and methodological difficulties to implement these collaborative practices or, in the opinion of Alarcón Orozco and Reguero González, (2018, p. 64) by "the fears, myths or erroneous beliefs about the difficulties that are associated to the implementation of innovative methodologies". The truth is that it is a complex process that requires an adequate organization to obtain the desired objectives. According to Suárez Guerrero (2010, p. 56, our translation) "it is not enough to group students around the Internet for cooperation to sprout, [...] it is necessary, therefore, to recognize a degree of organization that ensures and guides interaction as a favorable element for improving group performance". This author proposes a model of educational organization for cooperative interaction in virtual contexts based on a set of pedagogical categories. These are five categories and their respective 39 subcategories that revolve around the five essential elements of collaborative learning established by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec:

1. Positive interdependence: The teacher must propose a clear task and a group objective. The members of a group must be clear that the efforts of each member not only benefit himself but also the other members.
2. Individual and group responsibility: The group must take responsibility for achieving its objectives, and each member will be responsible for fulfilling the part of the work that corresponds to him.
3. Stimulating interaction: Students must carry out a task together in which each one promotes the success of the others. By personally promoting each other's learning, group members make a personal commitment to one another as well as to their common goals.
4. Interpersonal and team skills: Group members must know how to lead, make decisions, create a climate of trust, communicate and manage conflicts, and must be motivated to do so
5. Group evaluation: This evaluation takes place when the members of the group analyze the extent to which they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Groups must determine which actions of their members are positive or negative, and make decisions about which behaviors to keep or modify (JOHNSON; JOHNSON; HOLUBEC, 1999, p. 8-10, our translation).

Adapting these essential parameters of collaborative learning to the specific needs of the students who are part of our project and recovering the theoretical approaches of Carrió Pastor (2007), we present below the bases of the didactic model carried out to improve written expression in FL. This proposal is based on the incorporation of virtual exchange or telecollaboration activities within the academic activities of PLE and ELE subjects of the university careers involved, making use of information and communication technologies of

various kinds and taking advantage of the possibilities they offer. Erasmus+ university agreements for international collaboration. It is a project that brings together the bases that identify collaborative learning, given that all students have the same goal: to improve written competence in FL and to achieve it "they need a fair distribution of tasks" (CARRIÓ PASTOR, 2007, p. 3, our translation) consisting of all students writing in the FL and reviewing in their mother tongue (LM). Students develop a feeling of belonging to the same group but, at the same time, they recognize the existing heterogeneity due to their cultural and linguistic differences, which favors the diversity of points of view during interactions.

A collaborative learning model of group correction: Application context. Description of the groups that make up the project

The group from Spain is made up of PLE students from the degree in Translation and Interpreting at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI) of the UGR. These students receive training as generalist translators and liaison interpreters in two foreign languages. A first language, called language B and in which it is essential that they have a level of linguistic competence B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2002), at the beginning of the degree, and a second language, called C language, among which is Portuguese and for which it is not mandatory to have previous knowledge. Thus, the majority of students in the Degree in Translation and Interpreting at the UGR begin their language training in Portuguese in the first year of their degree, and the activities of this project are carried out when the student has already reached a B1 or B2 level of linguistic competence.

The team of Portugal is made up of ELE students (level B1 and B2) of the degree in Marketing, Management and Accounting of the Escola de Tecnologia e Gestão of the IPG de Guarda. These students receive business training. Most of them are of Portuguese nationality and they study the Spanish language for 1 year of the degree with subjects that associate the learning of the language with the practice of accounting and marketing. When starting this university degree, students usually have previous knowledge of the Spanish language, since most of them have studied it for at least two or three years in secondary education. It should be noted, however, that the fact of not having studied FL does not cause these students great difficulties in communication, since, due to the proximity of Portuguese and Spanish, they are false beginners. In the words of Almeida Filho (1995, p. 14-15, our translation):

In fact, among the Romance languages or Portuguese or Spanish are the ones that maintain greater affinity with each other. [...] In practice, everyone who lacks Spanish naturally has common knowledge and skills between the language and the starting language, or that allows them to start learning with a post-elementary index of comprehension of the input of the new language.

Linguistic proximity facilitates oral and written comprehension, but it is also a double-edged sword since it can lead the student to believe that the language he is going to learn is very easy and therefore minimize study. "When the student does not have a deep knowledge of the SL and dismisses the differences between the LM and the SL, he gets carried away by the similarities and increases the risk of the appearance of interference and fossilization" (DÍAZ FERRERO, 2017, p. 19, our translation).

In both the Guarda and Granada degrees, the use of Spanish and Portuguese in real situations and with native speakers in the academic field is not very frequent, although it is easy to access information in a foreign language through social networks or, in border areas such as Guarda, through television or the press. The comprehension of texts in FL discourages in some cases the study of the language motivated by this false perception of ease. This is one of the reasons that lead us to consider that participation in language exchange programs such as the one we propose here has a positive influence on learning since the student carries out linguistic tasks with peers/native speakers.

Positive Interdependence: Group Goal

Of the possible tasks that can be carried out in virtual exchanges for learning FL (debates, writing texts, oral presentations, among others), our project is focused on the activity of production and revision of written texts. As we will explain below, different individual and group activities are carried out so that each member of the group masters the technique of written expression or composition applied to writing cover letters and preparing a curriculum vitae (CV) in both Spanish and Spanish. in Portuguese. This activity has been chosen because in the medium term it can be a very useful tool for students of both nationalities who intend to join the labor market. The students of the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda are oriented to the business field and are immersed in a border city with the neighboring country, Spain. Therefore, it is very natural that they try to send their application to companies based in Spain. In addition, there are also Spanish companies based in Portugal, which justifies the relevance of this activity, not to mention the impact of the Spanish and Portuguese languages in the world. In turn, Spanish students, given their specialization in Translation and

Interpretation, are interested in preparing to respond to job requests in Portuguese, such as translation agencies located in Portugal, companies in the publishing field, or international trade.

Individual and group responsibility

To implement this project, a didactic sequence is proposed in which the tasks that the members of the group must assume are defined. These activities are integrated into the regulated learning process of the university education of these students and are divided into four phases: Presentation of the group. Individual drafting of a cover letter and personal CV. Individual revision and correction. Group correction and preparation of a final report.

The first phase of the cooperation project consists of contact interaction with a double purpose: on the one hand, all the members of the group are introduced, to get to know each other and establish affective bonds between them. On the other hand, the working pairs or subgroups are created and the dates and times for sending the texts and for group interactions are established, as well as the platforms and media that will be used for communication both by pairs and by groups.

First, the teachers present the activity, referring to its usefulness in the field of FL learning, as well as in the short/medium term for the student who wants to apply for a job vacancy. They explain the structure that a cover letter and CV should have, the inherent objectives, and the mistakes to avoid. They are documents that must attract the interest of the recruiter, provide brief information on the candidate's professional career, describe what they can contribute to the company, and in no case show anxiety or desperation to get the job.

Next, each student writes individually in the corresponding foreign language their CV and a cover letter that will be addressed to a company related to the area of specialty of their area of study. Thus, for example, in our project, the students from Guarda write their CV and a cover letter in Spanish addressed to management, marketing, or accounting company located in Spain, and the students from Granada write their CV and a cover letter in Portuguese. to direct it to a translation company in Portugal.

Once the two texts have been written, each student sends them —respecting the date and the established ICT—, to the student who will act as a reviewer. In this way, the Portuguese students review and comment on the texts sent by the Spanish students and vice versa. To facilitate this review process, a correction template is prepared with the aspects that must be taken into account, such as grammatical correction; adequacy of the lexicon, spelling

,and punctuation; organization, and textual structure, organization of ideas, coherence, cohesion and adaptation to the recipient, among others.

Once the individual review has been carried out, some texts are selected to carry out a group exhibition and debate through videoconference. This review is very useful, as it allows the author of the text to justify his choices and verbalize his thoughts; to the reviewer, explain the reasons why he has suggested corrections and alterations; and to the other members of the group, comment on the corrections and clarify any doubts. As Cassany (2009 p. 61, our translation) points out:

When the learner justifies what he wrote, verbalizes his thoughts, or explains the difficulties he had, he shows the public (teacher, classmates) what is hidden inside his mind and allows other people to help him develop his composition processes.

Finally, each pair or subgroup of students (Portuguese and Spanish) writes a final report describing the process of written composition, the successes, and errors detected in the compositions and the oral presentations, and a final interaction is carried out to comment on all these aspects. in a group.

Stimulating interaction

According to Arnold (2006), affective factors such as anxiety, inhibition, self-esteem, or motivation directly influence the success or failure of learning a foreign language. Thus, for example, anxiety and insecurity prevent participation in the classroom, and self-esteem, however, allows one to be more relaxed and with a positive attitude to collaborate. According to this author "what the teacher can do is make sure that the classroom environment fosters positive relationships between students" (ARNOLD, 2006, p. 417, our translation).

Thus, throughout the collaborative work process, teachers must facilitate group work and encourage the creation of a positive cooperative environment. The individual commitment of each member of the group must be aimed at achieving the success of the others. For this, each student must comment not only on the mistakes but also on the successes of their classmates. In this way, the public praise of the positive aspects increases the confidence of the students and encourages the motivation to continue with the learning process. To reduce anxiety, Arnold (2006) suggests maintaining a policy on error correction that is not threatening to the student but provides support to overcome errors. For this reason, we consider that the student must adopt an empathic reviewer or corrector attitude, that is,

they must treat classmates with respect and kindness, and try to convey encouragement and confidence so that learning is more effective and avoids mistakes in the future.

The correction of the texts of the companions and the preparation of the exhibition promotes conscious and reflective learning about the language. In this sense, we recover the Latin expression attributed to Seneca, *Homines dum docent discunt*, which means that one learns while teaching. Transposing this thought to the project configured here, the participants assume a double role: they are FL learners and, at the same time, SL teachers who act as reviewers. Portuguese students help Spanish students to overcome their difficulties and vice versa. In this way, students activate attention by having to act as reviewers and evaluators of their classmates' mistakes and acquire greater linguistic awareness of their mother tongue while explaining and teaching it to students who have it as FL. When the student is simply the recipient of the information transmitted by the teacher, they have a more passive role and it is easier for them to disconnect and become abstracted from the class content. If the student acts as a reviewer, he has to know the linguistic rules to be able to argue the corrections that his classmates must make, as well as to know the possible interferences that may arise between these two languages to avoid or correct them. In short, informal and dynamic learning is promoted in this way, facilitating the natural assimilation of linguistic-discursive content.

Interpersonal and team techniques

Collaborative learning is more complex than competitive or individualistic "because it requires students to learn both school subjects (task performance) and interpersonal and group practices necessary to function as part of a group" (JOHNSON; JOHNSON; HOLUBEC, 1999, p. 9, our translation). To achieve the proposed objectives, reviews must be carried out throughout the collaboration process to check the aspects that must be corrected or rectified. The exchange of opinions of the members of the group allows decisions to be made to adjust or regulate the activities, either to improve linguistic aspects related to written expression, to encourage the participation or motivation of the members of the group or to resolve possible conflicts, or technical problems.

In this sense, the teacher will act as a facilitator and will teach the necessary techniques to constructively manage the conflicts that may arise during collaborative learning, such as the case of students who present excessive protagonism, or others who are too shy and have difficulty participating and presenting their points of view. In these situations, the teacher's action is essential, to show that there are no leaders and thus stimulate the

participation of all team members. It is about encouraging active listening and generating a dynamic conversation. In addition, in the case of students with affective difficulties for participation, the collaborative learning designed in our project promotes the distribution of roles to guarantee the equitable intervention of the members of the group, which makes it possible to acquire more security and self-esteem and to overcome more easily the shyness.

Group evaluation

In this stage, the students prepare a final report in which they reflect the evolution of the activity carried out in pairs and group: the positive and negative actions and proposals for improvement. In the case that concerns us, the students reflected the learning results (skills and oral and written expression skills acquired during the project) and proposed alternatives and advice to avoid the errors detected in the work of their classmates, whether linguistic or lexical. inappropriate, incorrect use of verb tenses or spelling errors; textual as an inadequate structure of the letters or the CV; or interaction such as little participation due to indecision or shyness.

This report contains a well-founded analysis of the process, which is why it constitutes a review guide or manual to improve communicative competence in PLE and ELE and allows both teachers and students to draw conclusions or evaluative reflections that are very useful for preparing exercises, make reviews or propose improvement proposals for the coming years.

Final considerations

Based on the theoretical contributions considered in this article on collaborative learning and linguistic exchanges, as well as the possibilities that ICTs offer for learning FL, we have presented the bases of a collaborative learning didactic model carried out between the IPG of Portugal and the UGR of Spain for the development of linguistic and communicative skills.

Throughout the process, the growing degree of participation and enthusiasm of the students has been notorious. If in the group presentation phase, the students expressed some strangeness and inhibition, the writing of the cover letter and the personal CV, followed by the textual review, allowed the creation of bonds of trust and empathy between the work partners.

The project has not only made it possible to improve skills related to written expression and develop an awareness of linguistic errors but also to improve self-esteem and motivation, as well as to develop skills and competencies for teamwork. We have been able to verify that interacting with speakers of the language under study to carry out a specific activity with the role of proofreader directly influences the motivational factor, considerably improves communicative competence, and allows the acquisition of knowledge of the metalanguage used for the correction of texts.

Given the arguments presented in this article and the conclusions we have reached during the development of this activity; we consider that the results of the didactic proposal prove its effectiveness in achieving the objectives set. We can affirm that it becomes a very useful tool to develop competence in LE, mainly aspects related to oral and written expression. Although the activity focuses on written composition exercises, the fact that it is a collaborative project implies language exchange in pairs and groups, and in this sense, the students have acquired greater oral skills.

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