

Language Learning through Cultural Exchanges on Site

Trinidad Fernández

Trinidad.fernandez@upm.es

Joaquín Santiago

Joaquin.santiago@upm.es

*Department of Linguistics Applied to Science and Technology
Polytechnic University of Madrid, Spain*

The Spanish educational system has been engaged in a far-fetching language program that promotes a bilingual training for a high number of students in most primary and secondary state schools. At tertiary level, most universities in Spain, among them the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid-Spain (UPM), require a B2 certificate (CEFR) to enroll in the compulsory subject “English for Professional and Academic Communication”. Even though students are supposed to have achieved a B2 level on completing their secondary education, experience over the last years shows that they are far from this high-intermediate level. Fully aware of this problem, the UPM is promoting several programs of Innovation in Education to help students bridge the gap and obtain the B2 certificate. The Language Learning through Cultural Exchanges on Site Program presented in this article is based on a partnership between the UPM and the University of British Columbia, Canada (BCU). This program offers opportunities for language learning (English-Spanish) through in situ encounters and acts as a model for innovation in language and culture engagement. This initiative aims to follow novel methodological trends such as the promotion of autonomous learning, self-assessment and peer-assessment.

Key words: Innovation, second language (L2) learning, virtual exchange, international cooperation, sustainability, inter-disciplinarily.

1. Introduction

New social imperatives point not only to new course content, but also to new ways of teaching that content. At present Sustainability is frequently applied to courses at universities offering a valuable paradigm for rethinking issues related to a wide variety of disciplines throughout the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities [1]. Education for sustainable development means including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning. It also requires participatory teaching and learning methods –interdisciplinarity- that motivate and empower learners to change their behavior and take action for sustainable development. Interdisciplinarity can be a challenge, but it becomes easier with a more effective use of resources on one's campus community and beyond, such a team teaching with colleagues from different disciplines or in different campuses. Consequently, education for Sustainable Development promotes competencies like critical thinking, imagining future scenarios and making decisions in a collaborative way. Education for sustainable development requires far-reaching changes such as autonomous learning, self-assessment and peer-assessment as well as the incorporation of new technologies to the learning process [2].

Most universities around the world are looking for ways to give students more international training. Foreign language competences need to be significantly improved in Europe and the European Commission has called for language policies to address the creation of language-friendly learning environments and motivate young people to learn languages. The UPM encourages its graduates to reach a good level of proficiency in the English Language, which is now a growing demand in the workplace and a basic requirement for engineers, architects, scientists and researchers all around the world [3]. All UPM graduates have to be accredited with a B2 certificate as specified in the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFL) [4] [5] as a basic condition to registering in the curricular English subjects—*English for Academic and Professional Communication*—and thus to obtaining their degree. Within this framework, the university is undergoing a deep changeover that is affecting both its curricular and normative structure and its teaching and learning dynamics.

2. Motivation

The world is increasingly interdependent and there is an urgent need to develop a deeper understanding of this interdependency and to address major global challenges through multilateral and intercultural collaboration. One of the ways in which the objectives of the new UPM curricula can be met is by virtual exchange programs with English speaking universities. The INTENT Project (Integrating Telecollaborative Networks into Foreign Language Higher Education) [6] funded with support from the European Commission estimate that only about 4.5% of the total student population in the European Higher Education Area experience a period of study abroad at some time during their studies. The European objective for the year 2020 is that 20% of the student population has a period of study abroad. If this objective is achieved, this will still leave 80% of students without an international, intercultural experience as part of their university studies.

2.1 Infrastructure requirements

Current perspectives on how students learn have resulted in significant changes when designing new learning environments; likewise the Information Age has provided an excellent tool for teachers to create virtual learning spaces [7]. Virtual encounters not only reduce communicative distances between people, but they also serve as a tool to enhance language proficiency and develop intercultural awareness in Second Language Teaching and Learning (SLTL). The implementation of virtual exchange programs add new flexibility and time prospects to the universities in order to fulfill SLTL objectives. In this sense, a virtual program can offer more varied forms of study that can be shorter, time-specific and venue-independent, and in turn, it can offer the students more personalized opportunities. Additionally, distant learning programs provide different dimensions of mobility, and facilitate international collaborative work between lecturers in different countries and with different academic cultures [8].

Virtual exchange programs can offer greater equity in access to intercultural exchange than physical mobility, and reach a far greater number and diversity of the student population. Virtual exchange is not intended to replace physical exchange or mobility, but it can be a stimulus for students' intercultural curiosity and spark an interest in engaging in physical mobility; it can be an alternative or a combined and preparatory activity for Erasmus or other mobility programs. Virtual exchange can be introduced into any university course as a way of innovating teaching practice and internationalizing the curriculum. However, due to the diverse requirements for large scale virtual programs, all requirements cannot be met by a single experimental and testing environment.

2.2 Developed infrastructure objectives

On the one hand, the virtual exchange programs follow new methodological approaches such as the development of autonomous and life-long learning and self-assessment as key to improvement. On the other hand, they incorporate new technologies and virtual systems to the learning process. Students will learn not only about writing and speaking but also about how to question the effects of globalization, intercultural communication by re-examining their assumptions about technology, culture and location. Hence emphasizing the analysis of culture will let the students understand the contextual and situated nature of communication processes. Students need to make the language a part of their life, nevertheless most students approach language learning in a very confined manner, they see language learning as something to be studied during a certain period of time during the day/week, and then everything else they do is totally unrelated to the language they are learning. If the students do nothing or study through their textbooks, and as soon as the lesson is over they turn a switch in their brain, consequently they might forget about the language they are learning. It is advisable to make the language a part of their lives. To be fluent in a language, students need to have comprehensive practice with their accent; the word they say and the word they hear need to sound the same. To speak fluently students need to automate the language and to do that they need to have long periods of reception of the target language –listening- to be ready to produce it – speaking. To get used to something like driving naturally requires lots of exposure in order to automate the language and think in it. How can the students automate the language they are learning? It is recommended to go abroad to learn a foreign language as it forces them to step outside of

their native tongue bubble. However, as mentioned in section 2, only 4.5% of the students go abroad.

We think there is no need to go abroad to be immersed in the target language. Virtual and tandem exchanges open up new perspectives for students promoting interpersonal communication skills and supporting the development of cultural awareness. With all these ideas in mind, an agreement was signed with the University of British Columbia Okanagan (UBC) in 2012, most specifically, the Department of Critical Studies in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies. To raise cultural awareness as well as inspire linguistic confidence in the students is the ultimate goal in such encounters. Moreover, it is expected that their knowledge of L2 will considerably improve by sharing experiences with each other via e-mail or Skype. Accordingly, the UPM and the UBC have been facilitating virtual encounters among Spanish and Canadian students. The Language Exchange Program between the UPM and UBC acts as a model for sustainability innovation in language and culture engagement. Using a case study to analyze the impact of virtual encounters on learning improvement and language-culture awareness, both effectiveness of the program and exploration of the nuances of a multi-dimensional perspective are assessed.

2.3 Methodology

In view of the fact that motivation is a key issue in learning, only students who wanted to connect with a pen-pal from Spain/Canada were recruited. Moreover, we followed a participatory design approach where all students had a sense of ownership during the scheduling of times and activities they would carry out with their international counterparts. Faculty members involved in the project in both institutions selected a range of topics including but not limited to: youth culture, current events, cultural heritage, curriculum background, curricular subjects taken, difficulties of second language learning, home descriptions, reasons that have made students choose their degree, etc. These topics were graded from the easiest to the most difficult depending on the students' stated proficiency levels [9].

Students in both universities were required to fill in a questionnaire related to the program. The information retrieved from their answers proved that a good number of students, at both universities, understood and embraced the objectives of the project and wanted to engage on the different writing and speaking tasks. Students were also enthusiastic to be able to communicate with native speakers, to practice their skills and to improve their Spanish or English. Most students liked the idea of being able to help their peers with their native language and most of them at both universities expected to continue their relationship beyond the project requirements.

An experimental design with a pre-test/post-test procedure was used in order to determine the subjects' intercultural and language proficiency followed by a guided program with virtual encounters. The intercultural development and language proficiency of the participants in the language-culture learning program was compared with that of a control group of language learners (in the two locations) undergoing more traditional language instruction.

Madrid is 9 hours ahead of British Columbia, but UPM and UBCO share the same academic year schedule; consequently in order to guarantee effective communication across different time zones, students were encouraged to schedule meetings using online

collaborative tools such as Microsoft Office Live Workplace or Google Wave. Weekly status updates of these meetings were also requested.

Fifteen Canadian students who were enrolled at the Spanish Language Program at UBC were selected to match fifteen counterparts in the ETSEM at the UPM, in Spain. These groups were divided into two experimental groups (15 students each) and two control groups (15 students each). The groups received a guided program list of virtual encounters requesting information on topics such as early events in each country, national customs, accomplishments, global connections, provinces and territories, traditions, and national holidays. The control groups received a regular on-campus language class [10].

The tasks for the experimental group were as follows:

- a) Pre-program tasks: students attended an information session where we explained the objectives of the study and advised then to use one language at a time when they were practising with their peers. Then students completed a language background questionnaire, took an online language proficiency test were provided with a guided program of the virtual assignment (see appendix 1).
- b) In-program procedure: students could practice their tasks before submission as many times as they considered fit, both on Skype, Moodle or email. After practices, they had to post in Moodle the written assignments (properly corrected by his/her peer). At the end they had to submit their instructors a record of their oral and written connections
- c) Final-program tasks: in the final stage all participants will be required to complete a language proficiency test a second time and a questionnaire.

The assignments are specified in Appendix 1.

2.4 Students' profile

UPM students from the 2nd and 3rd years were selected based on a personal interview with the program instructors. Language proficiency was important but not decisive in the selection and not L1-L2 language level matching was considered, given the fact that students were engaged in the tasks using one language at a time. Another key issue was to find a group of students with a high degree of motivation and an eagerness to learn about other cultures and contexts. UBC students were selected from the Spanish program in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies (FCCS) at the University of British Columbia in the Okanagan (UBC Okanagan) which is aimed at students who are interested in acquiring abilities, experience and skills other than English language-based, and secondarily students who are pursuing a major or minor in Spanish. The language-learning aspect of the program covers practical skills and daily application of Spanish, as well as skills that are transferable to a work environment and to an academic setting. The program follows a standard university four-year B.A. structure and length (four years, eight terms, 120 credits). The program offers courses per school year plus 2 first and 2 second year language courses in the summer, and is committed to creating opportunities for students to participate in international types of learning.

2.5 Some outcomes

These programs have been helping students not only to improve their speaking and writing skills but also to gain a wider insight into the effects of globalization, intercultural

communication and information technologies by making students re-examine their assumptions about technology, culture and location. At the end of the programs, students filled out a questionnaire on what they had learnt about the Spanish and Canadian culture. In this way, they were able to analyze their peer's culture and customs, and raise awareness of other contexts and educational realities. It is important to note that all these achievements were at no cost contributing thus to the sustainability principles that led the undertaking of the project.

3. Moving forward: Summer Field Schools

As mentioned ahead these Programs also aim to look into the intercultural aspects and language learning. It is our belief that by developing the intercultural competence of the students who learn Spanish at UBC and English at the UPM in Madrid, the students' overall language proficiency will improve. Additionally, by providing the students with in situ intercultural encounters their intercultural awareness will be raised.

Virtual exchanges could be implemented by individual teachers from both universities designing our own projects according to our specific needs. However, sustainability can only be guaranteed with institutional support to integrate virtual exchange into the curriculum across disciplines. There needs to be a commitment to provide professional development to both educators and staff to successfully implement virtual exchange. We wanted to go further establishing in-person encounters, among the students who have participated in the virtual encounters. The new program was based on the establishment of Summer Field Schools: UPM Spanish and UBC Canadian students were supposed to stay in Spain/Canada for three weeks so as to live an on-site learning experience (see Appendix 2 for the program). It has been often argued that learning a language entails learning a culture and the socio-cultural patterns associated with that language. This program offered students the possibility to improve their communicative competence and also to acquire pragmatic and sociocultural aspects that otherwise can hardly be learnt. However, the Summer Field Schools had to be cancelled due to lack of funding.

4. Conclusions

As indicated in the introductory section of this paper, all UPM students are now faced with the necessity to proof an upper-intermediate level of language proficiency (B2 as specified in the CEFL). It is important to note that at the moment most UPM students have not acquired this stated level nor obtained the B2 certificate. November, 2014 figures were 2448 students taking the accreditation test out of which only 289 scored B2. Given the present situation at the UPM, our program makes full sense as the perfect way to conflate both linguistic competence needs and intercultural exchange. Virtual exchanges have an undeniable value in promoting linguistic and cultural awareness; they are a wieldy tool that can bridge distances. However, we wanted to step ahead and provide a life-like learning environment under the auspices of the bilateral agreement.

The students were very pleased to have new friends that are native in the language they are learning and to gain insights into cultural codes that are hard to learn from text books or prepare for a trip overseas. Students gained conversational experience and confidence in communicating in English or Spanish, and have maintained or improved their language skills. Through these virtual encounters, participants gained a sense of ownership for being asked to give feedback to their pen pals. Furthermore, they developed a sense of learning

community: groups sharing the same values that are actively learning together from each other. At the same time, in keeping with the guidelines in the CEFL referring to self-assessment and autonomous learning, they became more aware of their own language development and of the problems they had with grammar and pronunciation, and started being more conscious of the mistakes they make. Our Language Exchange Programs have allowed UPM and UBC students to meet and exchange language and cultural insights in a relaxed environment at no cost meeting the required statements to be sustainable. We expect that when students graduate from university and are faced with the need to actually apply many of the theoretical knowledge that they have acquired in their classrooms, they should benefit from this program, which attempts to provide them with not only the basic ability to employ innovative and modern communication hardware and software, but also to develop self-teaching and self-learning skills at no cost.

However, there is a need for more research, development and evaluation of new models of virtual exchange addressing current European and global issues. We call for a system of grants for virtual exchanges, specifically for Summer Field Schools, to cover the costs for the development and implementation of innovative exchange projects. We demand a coherent strategy for virtual exchange programs to mitigate fragmentation and enhance consolidation of approaches and resources to be a dominant practice in higher education as well as the integration of virtual exchange programs as an important component of quality in higher education curricula, and their recognition with credits and support for more research to measure the impact of virtual intercultural exchange programs.

5. References

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APPENDIX 1

General Instructions to Students

When speaking in your second language:

- Ask for explanations immediately when something is not clear - it's your responsibility to do so.
- Feel free to ask your partners to repeat or explain when you don't understand something.
- Be sensitive to your partners' needs when speaking in your mother tongue.
- Encourage them to participate in your conversation and make sure they can follow the conversation.
- Explain, repeat, write down or translate when necessary, and slow down if your partners ask you to.
- Do your utmost for communication, not correction. The objective is to communicate and be understood.
- Don't correct grammar all the time, and especially do not interrupt your partner in the middle of a sentence to correct them; too much correction interferes with the conversation and can frustrate and block speakers. Only clear up errors that interfere with understanding.
- If someone insists on being corrected, ask them what they want you to focus on: verbs, prepositions, pronunciation, gender, etc.
- The best way to correct is to just repeat the word or phrase the way you would say it. You do not need to explain anything unless your partner asks.
- Be Considerate
 - Speak loudly and clearly.
 - Don't monopolize the conversation.
 - When not speaking, develop a listening attitude.

OBJECTIVES

General:

- To encourage communication between citizens of different continents
- To encourage understanding of different cultures, educational systems and approaches to teaching and learning
- To prompt and inspire students' confidence in this type of communication
- To develop cooperative learning skills for a smooth lecturer/student collaboration

Specific:

- To foster students' knowledge of the second language learning (English/Spanish), by means of exchanging successful written and oral communication in students' target language in written form first and oral communication on a second stage. Each student is matched to a 'virtual' class mate by means of the virtual platform Moodle, emails, and Skype.

CONTENTS/ASSIGNMENTS

1. Getting to know each other/describing yourself (ORAL + WRITTEN)

Preparation: each student prepares questions prior to a personal interview with the Canadian/Spanish peer. During the Skype encounter, each takes turns to speak while the other one takes notes. With the information obtained and based on the notes, the student writes up a document including the most relevant details. The Spaniard describes the Canadian in English and the Canadian describes the Spanish student in Spanish. Once completed, the document is sent to the peer who will revise and correct the mistakes giving alternatives. The final document will be included in the progress portfolio in Moodle.

2. Describing your university. Campus, building features, plan, context, history, location; differences and similarities between the two universities (ORAL + WRITTEN)

Preparation: Same as task 1. Students can send photos to see the differences of both universities. Then each student writes a document including the topics and subtopics proposed in the heading and sends it to the peer for revision and correction as explained in task 1.

3. Holidays, Spanish 'puentes', Christmas: differences and similarities. The school/ university schedule (ORAL + WRITTEN)

Preparation: Same procedure and directions as for task 1.

4. Types of houses and housing standards. Cost of living (hotels, restaurants, accommodation, rentals) (WRITTEN)

Preparation: Each student draws up a sketch/ outline on this topic including the main ideas and the main sources consulted or webs visited with full access path. Once done, this preliminary document is sent to the peer. The student who receives the document completes the work and writes up a final version that may as well include other supplementary sources and information.

5. Gender matters. Describing customs and traditions in Canada and Spain. Schooling, labour market conditions, social trends in marriage, child rearing and new family types, household chores (WRITTEN)

Preparation: Each student writes up a document in the L2 (second language) including full details (also sources consulted) and sends it to their peer who will revise and correct grammar and style, including reasons and alternatives for improvement.

6. Eating in and out (food stuffs, fruits, vegetables, drinks, traditional dishes, cooking. At the restaurant. Habits and manners (ORAL + WRITTEN)

Preparation: each student explains the main culinary habits, traditions and idiosyncrasies of their city/country; also, their likes, dislikes and preferences. The activity takes place in turns. Each student makes notes to be later reworked so as to write a document including full details obtained, specially, those referring to the differences and similarities between the two countries. Once completed, the document is sent to the peer who will revise and correct the mistakes giving alternatives.

7. Final task (ORAL)

Preparation: each pair of students chooses a topic or subtopic within the ideas proposed in the main content headings, prepare the topic in full detail and get make it real, that is, videotape the situation by acting it up.

APPENDIX 2

1	Activity Program (May 3 to May 24)		Activity	Where	Guests
2	Week one (Arrive in Madrid on May 3rd)				
3	Day 1 (May 4) Monday				
4	Morning	Activity	Welcoming Remarks, Tour around UPM	UPM	Director Mercedes del Río, Prof. María Aurora Flores, Pilar Izquierdo
5			Meeting with Linguistics Professors	UPM	Trinidad Fernández
6	Afternoon		Showcasing building construction: Aula Museo	UPM	Ricardo
7	Evening		Free		
8	Day 2 (May 5) Tuesday				
9	Morning		In Class discussion	UPM	
10	Afternoon		Los Austrias (El Escorial)	El Escorial	Guided Visit
11	Evening		Free		
12	Day 3 (May 6) Wednesday				
13	Morning		Los Austrias (Madrid)	Old City of Madrid	
14	Afternoon		In Class discussion	UPM	
15	Evening		Tapas in Madrid	Tapas Restaurant	Trinidad Fernández
16	Day 4 (May 7) Thursday				
17	Morning		In Class discussion	UPM	
18	Afternoon		Academia de San Fernando	Academy of San Fernando	
19	Evening		Free		
20	Day 5 (May 8) Friday				
21	Morning		Los Borbones: Visita al Palacio Real	Palace	Guided Visit
22	Afternoon		In Class discussion	UPM	
23	Evening		Flamenco in Madrid	Theater	
24	Day 6 (May 9) Saturday				
25	Whole Day		Trip to Segovia: Granja de San Idelfonso	Segovia	Trinidad Fernández Guided Visit
26	Day 7 (May 10) Sunday				
27	Morning		Flea Market (El Rastro)	Flea Market	
28	Afternoon				
29	Evening		Free		
30					
35	Activity Program		Activity	Where	Guests
36	Week two				
37	Day 1 (May 11) Monday				
38	Morning		In Class discussion	UPM	
39	Afternoon		Architectural visit "The Madrid-Río Project"		María Aurora Flórez
40	Evening		A night in Calle Preciados	Calle Preciados	Trinidad Fernández
41	Day 2 (May 12) Tuesday				
42	Morning		In Class discussion	UPM	
43	Afternoon		Self Study (research assignment)	UPM	
44	Evening		Free		
45	Day 3 (May 13) Wednesday				
46	Whole Day		Trip to Toledo	Toledo	Guided Visit
47	Day 4 (May 14) Thursday				
48	Morning		Free		
49	Afternoon		In Class discussion	UPM	
50	Evening		Free		
51	Day 5 (May 15) Friday				
52	Whole Day		Visit to Museo Reina Sofia and Retiro Park	Museo	Guided Visit
53			Dinner in Madrid		Professors from UPM
54	Day 6 (May 16) Saturday				
55	Whole Day		Travelling to Colegio Mayor de San Pablo, in Huelva		
56	Day 7 (May 17) Sunday				
57	Whole Day		Visit to Sevilla (Catedral, Giralda, Parque de María Li Sevilla)		Guided visit
58	Evening		Flamenco in Sevilla		
59					
60					