



New Hungarian Experiences with the Joint Course Methodology

Virág Rab

Judit Dombi

University of Pécs

virag.rab@gmail.com

judit_dombi@yahoo.co.uk

1. Introduction

Stakeholders in education have realized the need for changing education to meet the challenges posed by the 21st century. E-learning, blended learning, web 2.00-based learning, technology supported learning... these are all signal words in today's discourse on changing education. No doubt there is a huge potential in technology supported learning, as positioning the learning process in an entirely new context enables students and instructors to develop otherwise unattainable skills and thus to rise to the challenge. This paper presents our inquiry into a small segment of technology supported learning. The study presented here endeavors to map the possibilities inherent in a method associated with blended learning, namely the joint course methodology. Due to the relatively novice nature of this methodology, empirical studies are needed to understand how it works, what effect it has on students and instructors and which are its major benefits. This study is such an inquiry and is hoped to trigger studies of a similar kind.

2. Theoretical background

Alavi and Leidner (2000) suggest that although recent years have witnessed an abundance of research on how information technologies may improve education and training, even more in depth investigation is needed to fully understand the possibilities inherent in technology supported learning. The inquiries, the authors argue, should focus on various factors, such as (1) relationships among technology capabilities, (2) instructional strategy, (3) psychological processes of the students, (4) the relevance of the actual contexts, and (5) the effects of technology on program design.

There is also a growing body of literature focusing on the differences between traditional, teacher-centered, hierarchically organized, text-book based classes dominated by frontal teaching and tasks which lack real-life relevance and new



approaches to learning, which aim at involving students in the learning process and make them more responsible for their own development. However, as Herrington, Oliver, Harrington and Sparrow (2000) highlight, although web-based learning has the potential to produce learning contexts which are more up-to-date, a review of a number of online courses revealed the pervasiveness of the traditional methods in online teaching as well.

3. Introducing the project

It was the second time that the authors have conducted a joint course at the University of Pécs (UP). Through this joint course we connected to another university during the entire semester giving the same course, and regularly (in every third week) having discussions via Skype. (This semester, the course involved two lecturers): a History professor and a History PhD student who gives lectures at the English Department.

The title of our joint course was International Relations and international institutions in the Cold War from the Viewpoint of South Korea and Hungary. It was a new course for both Universities, the Kyungpook National University (KNU) and the UP. We provided this opportunity to eighteen students of the U of Pécs and thirty-four of the KNU. We provided this opportunity individual (without the other university) classes per week (90 minutes) and we also had additional occasions such as complementary lessons, forum-meetings, and preparatory lessons according to the demand of the students. Then we discussed the results of the previous meetings in three videoconferences with the other university. Two viewpoints were compared in various topics. It was interesting to learn how students were thinking about issues in the light of a country which belonged to the Western bloc, and one which belonged to the Eastern. The most fascinating experiences were related to our new experiment, notably the Korean and the Hungarian students formed joint groups, and presented joint papers at the online conferences. The Korean and the Hungarian students worked together on the forum. Each group has its own platform to meet, to change ideas, to work together on their project.

The course requirements were the same as general. The students were expected and required to attend all classes. Since this course was a seminar course, it was



crucial for them to be in class to benefit from all that the lecturers offered. No more than three unexcused were permitted.

The students were required to do library-based research exercises and to present their results on the online lessons. What the most important benefit was, that they had to learn how to cooperate with each other, how to pay close attention to their partners and how to solve any bump in the road.

4. Study

4.1 Method

Employing both qualitative and quantitative means of data collection this empirical study follows the tradition of mixed-method research. According to Dörnyei's definition, mixed-method studies 'integrate the two approaches [i.e. quantitative and qualitative] at one or more stages of the research process' (2007, p. 163) with the aim of achieving 'a fuller understanding of a target phenomenon' (p. 164).

Mixed-method research has been in the centre of attention recently, as Cresswell notes: 'with the development and perceived legitimacy of both qualitative and quantitative research in the social and human sciences, mixed method research, employing the data collection associated with both forms of data, is expanding' (2003, p. 208).

Following Johnson and Christensen's typology of method constituents (cited in Dörnyei, 2007, p. 169) this study employs a 'QUAN→QUAL' approach, where the capitalized abbreviations mean that regarding dominance neither constituent is of lower importance, while the arrow indicates the sequence of data collection. A quantitative instrument was used to map participants' ideas and preconceptions in connection with learning/teaching. Answers to the qualitative instruments, on the other hand, made it possible to in-depth understand the way participants shaped their beliefs and developed their schemes on the basis of their previous conceptions and experiences.

In this paper, however, due to limitations of time and space, only the findings of the qualitative part of the study are presented.



4.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

- (1) How did the course contribute to students' intercultural development?
- (2) How do online blended/joint courses foster students' motivation?
- (3) How did the experience with a significantly different academic tradition affect students' attitudes towards learning?
- (4) How did the course design affect students' language skills?

4.3 Setting

The study was conducted at the University of Pécs, which, with its 27,936 students is one of the largest universities in Hungary, with students representing every region of Hungary. Moreover, with 1762 international students enrolled, it is also a popular university among foreigners (data from UP Statistics, 2010). The city itself is a beloved tourist destination, all the more true since its hosting of the European Capital of Culture series of cultural programs in 2010. The number of foreign tourists visiting the country has been steadily increasing in recent years. Thus, the city's multicultural atmosphere is granted, and this actually contributes to the university's popularity among both Hungarian and foreign students. The narrower research site, the Institute of History at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pécs is an institute comprising multiple departments of History, and hosting a number of undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate programs,

4.4 Participants

Participants of the study were 18 students studying for a BA in History at the University of Pécs, Hungary. There were 10 female and 8 male participants, and their age varied between 20-27. Students' native language was exclusively Hungarian, and they all considered English their first, and most important foreign language. Participants' language proficiency overwhelmingly was B2 level, however, a few of them were very confident in using English, and had a C1 level according to the Common European Framework of References.

All the participants were enrolled in the seminar 'International Relations in the Cold War Era, and they all agreed to participate in this study. They were informed about



the purpose of the study prior to data collection and they gave their informed consent that their answers can be used for academic research purposes.

4.5 Data collection instrument

As the study has a mixed-methods design, there were two data collection instruments. The first one was a survey questionnaire, which elicited information on course-related questions, such as how much time students spent online working with their group members, how often did they exchange emails, how long did it take them to prepare for the online meetings, how did the course affect their language skills and their content knowledge.

The second instrument was a qualitative course evaluation, it comprised open-ended questions and statements to find out about students' ideas, attitudes, and changes in their motivation and intercultural competence as a result of the course. Findings of the content analysis of the second data collection instrument are discussed in this paper.

4.6 Procedures

Data were collected in December, 2011, on the final session of the course. Students filled in pen-and-paper questionnaires. It took participants 60 minutes to complete the booklets. Data were collected in Hungarian. The dataset was digitalized in January, 2012, and qualitative content analysis took place between February-April, 2012. Relevant quotes were translated to serve as illustration in this study.

4.7 Findings and discussion

The data collection resulted in rich qualitative data, which was subjected to content analysis. Findings relate to four ideas, and are discussed in this section accordingly. First, the effects on students' (1) intercultural development are discussed, followed by the findings concerning their (2) motivation and (3) attitudes. Finally, findings related to the development of (4) language proficiency are presented.

Intercultural development

As for the first research question, it can be observed from students' answers that their intercultural competence developed as a result of the course. Many report on positive experiences concerning cooperation with students from different cultural



backgrounds, and almost all students emphasize how they managed to overcome initial problems. The following quotes illustrate this point, as they show how students became aware of the importance of appreciating cultural diversity.

„I have learned how to relate to other students from a perfectly different cultural background”

„The course taught me to cooperate with others in a foreign language and I became more patient and more tolerant.”

„Sometimes we had problems, but all in all the differences between us were fruitful and resulted in something great – our joint project.”

„The diversity represented by the students on both continents was the very thing that made the course so prolific.”

Motivation

An affective factor, motivation, i.e. the drive that makes students pursue academic goals, was also detectable in their answers. As it was anticipated, the course did enhance students' motivation due to its innovative design and its reliance on technology. Here are some quotes to show how motivated students were about the course.

„The interesting classes and the inspiring tasks made me get connected and comment on the forum regularly. I really got involved.”

„I was curious how about their reactions and their ideas. It was very dynamic. I could hardly wait the online sessions.”

„I really felt very willing to talk in English. It was a great practice. I could talk in English about a topic I liked with others, who were interested. It was great.”

Attitudes

Attitudes towards *Others* are of great importance in intercultural studies, and have a crucial role in intercultural development. The extracts of students' writings illustrate how students learnt during the course how to deconstruct stereotypes about others and also how to avoid harmful generalizations. Attitudes of openness and curiosity are of utmost importance in intercultural development (Byram, 1997) as they make students realize that the dichotomy *Us vs. Them* needs to be revisited.



„I learnt to respect others. Sometimes they were weird, and very different, but I slowly realized that this is, indeed, great.”

„Sometimes they didn't reply to emails immediately, and I was very much worried. But during the semester I realized that they simply don't check emails that regularly, and I started not to worry and be more patient.”

„They came from a different academic tradition. It was strange, but interesting.”

Language proficiency

Although this course was a history course, and expected outcome was a detectable development in students English language proficiency. As the course was conducted in English, and assigned readings were in English, too, students did not only use English to communicate with their Korean peers, but to prepare for the lessons week by week. The extracts below illustrate that they do believe their language skills developed, especially their oral skills, their communication strategies and their vocabulary.

„My English developed a lot during the lessons. Unfortunately I didn't dare to speak up in the conference sessions, but I communicated with the Koreans on Skype, via emails and on Facebook.”

„The classes were communication-centered, and we really liked that. The teachers spoke a great English, so we learned a lot. Sometimes it was very difficult to understand Asian English, because it was the first time for us to hear it.”

„The readings in English were very tiring but useful I became familiar with many technical expressions related to history and the cold war. This will help me in writing my thesis.”

There were also some additional benefits of the course as mentioned by students. These include the development of their soft skills and their technical skills; the strong friendships they developed through *facebook* with their peers from the other country, and most importantly, the possibility of a study-abroad experience for some



Hungarian students, which was offered by the Korean University as a response to the success of the joint course-

5. Conclusions

In conclusion it can be asserted that initial findings about the joint course methodology are absolutely positive. These findings echo those of Rohleder et al., (2008) which highlighted the positive feedback received by the students as well. Students are enthusiastic about this new way of learning, and they show development in intercultural competence and English language proficiency. Most importantly, their motivation to study increased, and their attitudes became more favorable towards both the learning process and towards different academic traditions and people of different cultural backgrounds. However, as this study is a qualitative inquiry, care ought to be taken not to generalize the findings. More empirical studies addressing this issue are needed to fully explore the potentials inherent in the joint course methodology.

6. Acknowledgements

The authors of this paper would like to express their deepest gratitude to Melinda Szappanyos the instructor of the Korean course, for her innovative ideas, great help and supportive attitude in planning and implementing the course. The authors acknowledge the generous support of the TÁMOP4.2.2/B-10 / project. The paper has been delivered at the 21st GASI Conference during the Hungarian State Eötvös Fellowship of Virag Rab, supported by the Balassi Institute.

7. References

- Alavi, M. & Leidner, D. (2001). Technology-Mediated Learning—A Call for Greater Depth and Breadth of Research. *Information System Research* 12 (1) 1-10.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press



Duff, P. (2007). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Herrington, A., Herrington, J., Oliver, R., Stoney, S. & Willis, J. (2001). Quality guidelines for online courses: The development of an instrument to audit online units. In (G. Kennedy, M. Keppell, C. McNaught & T. Petrovic (Eds.) *Meeting at the crossroads: Proceedings of ASCILITE 2001*, (pp 263-270). Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.

UP Statistics. (2010) Retrieved May, 2011 from http://www.pte.hu/files/tiny_mce/File/cikk/PTE_Stat_2010.pdf