

Telecollaborative Project as a Method of Intercultural Communicative Competence Development in a Non-Linguistic University

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Abstract—The article discusses key elements, typological parameters and didactic functions of telecollaborative projects. Particular attention is paid to implementation stages of this type of project. The paper presents an example of using telecollaborative projects in a non-linguistic high school as a means of creating a unique interactive environment for representatives of different cultures in virtual reality.

Keywords—project method; telecollaborative project; communicative competence; intercultural communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Extension of international contacts in all areas of human activity, information technologies and use of social networks at all levels of society, free access to information and rapid development of telecommunication technologies create fundamentally new conditions for the education sector. A modern specialist should have the skills to work with data sets in a foreign language, search the right information, evaluate and interpret it considering various factors, including the cultural-specific ones. An important condition for compliance with international educational standards is the high level of intercultural communicative competence development necessary for effective interaction with representatives of other cultures. In the context of computerization and globalization of education, it becomes necessary not only to introduce innovative methods into the process of professional training, but also to develop intercultural communicative competence as a necessary condition for effective interaction both at the personal and institutional levels [1].

The modern model of educational process is focused on transition from education as knowledge transfer to productive education, which allows students to master strategies and systems of educational activities, design personal tasks and interact with other participants of educational process and the world around as an active, autonomous and creative person [2].

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

Use of modern technologies in intercultural telecollaborative projects brings teaching of foreign languages

to a fundamentally new level, creating a unique environment for active interaction of different cultures' representatives in virtual reality, discovery of other cultures and deeper understanding of their own one.

Theoretical justification and practical use of telecollaborative projects that combine the advantages of the project method and the educational potential of information technologies are the subject of many studies by domestic and foreign authors [3-5].

A telecollaborative project is an invariant of the well-known project method, which is perceived now as one of the integrated components of education system. Its main goal has remained unchanged, namely, solution of the problem posed the participants using both existing and new knowledge, critical thinking regarding the results achieved and ability to design follow-up actions.

E.S. Polat, the founder of project methodology in Russia, defines the project method as a way to achieve a didactic goal through detailed elaboration of a problem (technology), which should be completed with a real, tangible practical result, done in one way or another [6].

The Internet development gives rise to extension of telecommunication technologies in different spheres, including education. In the scientific literature, a new term *telecollaborative project* has emerged, which is proposed to be defined as joint training and cognition, research, and creative activity of students, aimed at solving a designated problem and achieving a final result, designed on the basis of the Internet technologies [7].

Whereas the telecommunication networks that appeared in the early 1980s were initially used in the field of science and education only as a convenient and operational form of written communication, the current development of communication technologies allows creating a kind of virtual reality.

The key provisions for the telecollaborative project implementation include the following:

- a telecollaborative project is aimed at solving an identified problem and achieving final results of the activity;

- interaction between participants and creation of the final product is carried out via the Internet technologies;
- telecollaborative projects can be implemented individually, in pairs or groups;
- participating in a telecollaborative project, students acquire new knowledge and develop new skills in the process of achieving the goal;
- during a telecollaborative project implementation, students get involved in search, research and creative activities;
- a foreign language is not the purpose of learning, but a means of communication between participants and a medium of information transfer;
- project should be well scheduled;
- project implies acquisition of new knowledge and development of new skills through the use of already gained knowledge and skills in practice;
- project involves a set of research and problem methods.

For telecollaborative projects within the higher education framework, certain typological parameters of the Internet projects are of primary importance.

These include:

- project implementation platform (Web 1.0 implies use of forums and chats, while Web 2.0 is focused on Internet blogs, wikis, podcasts);
- language of implementation (native, foreign, combination of both);
- purpose of using the Internet (information retrieval, communication between project participants, creation and placement of the final product).

The main didactic functions of a telecollaborative project are the following:

- organizational, consisting in organizing various kinds of joint research activities;
- informational, including prompt search and exchange of information, ideas, plans on issues of interest to participants;
- interactive, aimed at interaction of all project participants;
- motivational, allowing to reveal the ability, individuality, increase the motivation to master a foreign language;
- integrative, the implementation of which consists of formation of qualities in their unity in the course of a project [8].

An important role is played by the function of increasing intercultural sensitivity that is the ability for perceptual evaluation, structuring characteristics of representatives of different national groups and effective prediction of people's behavior. According to G. Triandis, the recognized authority in

the field of intercultural communication, before establishing differences between cultures, it is necessary to identify their similarities within different parameters [9].

Since the projects have practical orientation, the methods of empirical research are most relevant, in particular the method of field studies, i.e. direct observation of people's behavior in real life situations for research of social and cultural phenomena. The main practices of empirical research in sociology and other sciences include: survey, observation, experiment, and analysis of documents. The most acceptable in the framework of the project are intercultural research methods such as questionnaire (questionnaires, interviews), observation (direct and included observations). Questioning is an accessible and frequently used research method which allows to collect statistical information. Being easy to handle, especially for educational purposes, the survey takes the first place among the intercultural research methods. It can be applied for studying of any culture. Another survey method is an interview, a focused conversation. However, individual direct interviews are more appropriate for intercultural studies as they provide maximum amount of information, still being the hardest to analyze. As in the case of questioning, the interview method requires preliminary preparation from the researcher.

The second method is observation, the method of collecting primary information by direct registration of events and conditions by the researcher on the ground. In direct observation, the researcher does not interfere in what is happening but is just a spectator who records the elements of interest. In the case of included observation, the researcher himself temporarily becomes a member of the group under study (or already is, regardless of his scientific interests), that is, he studies the behavior of group members from the inside [10].

During implementation telecollaborative projects undergo three main stages.

The preparatory stage includes search for partners; problem statement; discussion of goals and objectives, content, end result, evaluation criteria; determination of composition and size of participants' groups; defining the role of tutors; arrangements of control meetings and setting deadlines; selection, systematization and evaluation of information received from project partners and independent authentic sources; choice of methods for conducting intercultural studies; development of common criteria for such important aspects of cooperation as rules for writing reports, rules for quoting and avoiding plagiarism, drawing up presentations, incentives to record achievements in cases where the course is integrated into the main program; determination of topics and content of preparatory trainings on intercultural communication.

The main (procedural, fundamental) stage involves working together on a project; presentation of the information received; discussing ways of presenting it in the final product during negotiations with project partners using instant messengers and written communication; making a final decision on the design of the final presentation; conducting surveys, interviews, as well as observation; preparing various types of project presentation; holding a final teleconference and follow-up discussion.

The final stage includes reflection, evaluation of the overall project performance, discussions on degree of involvement of each participant, level of satisfaction with achievements, and enhancement of intercultural awareness; conducting final surveys and questionnaires; preparation of information blocks for Internet pages devoted to this project.

The algorithm for conducting a telecollaborative project can be formulated as a 7P rule: *Problem - Project Design - Project Information Search - Product - Presentation - Project Summing Up - Participant Portfolio*.

However, the problem associated with the study of a foreign language as a means of intercultural communication in a non-linguistic university using computer telecommunications requires a more detailed study of the methodology for preparing, conducting and evaluating telecollaborative projects from both linguistic and organizational points of view.

III. PROJECT

The project which serves as an example is the joint telecollaborative project of Foreign Languages Department of Novosibirsk State Technical University (NSTU) and the Language Center Hochschule RheinMain (HSRM), Germany titled *Live & Study in Russia and Germany*. This successful project has become the starting point for cooperation between Russian and German students. The project participants were the trainees of professional retraining course "Translation Program", NSTU. The group of the Russian students worked under the guidance of foreign language teachers Natalia V. Elfimova and Larisa F. Luchikhina; the students of the German university were run by Louise Klein, an expert of the Hochschule RheinMain language center. The working language was English, a foreign language for all participants.

The project, which was held under the motto "To Explore another culture in order to learn more about your own one", aimed to expand intercultural communicative competence of the participants, develop the soft skill of interpersonal communication, and improve the prospects of international academic mobility. The objective of the project was to obtain and reciprocally provide information about the differences in the higher education systems of Russia and Germany, student life and the mentality peculiarities in the process of interaction within mixed international small groups using the Internet.

The project included a special course "Basics Intercultural Communication" in Russian, which gave knowledge of the theoretical foundations. The course consisted of several blocks, grouped by topics: the role of intercultural communication; basic concepts; categorization of cultures (E. Hall, G. Hofstede, M. Bennet); obstacles in intercultural communication and ways to overcome them. This was followed by 6 blocks of classes in a foreign language and the fulfillment of independent communication tasks in small groups, which included 2-3 participants from each of the Russian and German sides.

Independent tasks in small groups were aimed at the following tasks: acquaintance with partners in the group and mutual interviews about their hometowns, hobbies, and experience in learning languages; obtaining information about the higher education systems in two countries (admission,

training, exams, academic freedom); student life (accommodation, meals, free time, sports); getting information about the peculiarities of national mentality (rules of behavior, taboos, punctuality, privacy, eating habits, etc).

The final task of this project was to prepare for a videoconference. The project participants were allowed to choose the form of final presentation: video, video interview, cartoon, "bad advice" on how to behave in another culture, sketches, etc. Throughout the project, participants uploaded their research results to the wiki pages created specifically for these purposes. Since the project was divided into blocks, it was possible to easily track the degree of readiness of the information uploaded and its correlation with the theoretical knowledge obtained.

Within the project, both Russian and German participants independently identified and formulated for their partners significant differences in the systems of Russian and German higher education, training and grading systems, key requirements, prohibitions and opportunities. At the same time, Russian participants found out about two distinctive features of German universities, which are highly appreciated by German and foreign students. These are a harmonious combination of university traditions, sometimes dating back to the XIV century, and modern achievements of science as well as thoughtful, well-planned blending of educational process and scientific research. The Russian participants were supposed to create a positive image of a Russian university.

The project was highly appreciated by all participants, partners and the university authorities. The main objective of the project was to prepare students of NSTU for an internship at German universities and to attract German students to an internship at our university as part of academic mobility.

The opinions of the participants revealed the atmosphere on the project and gave an idea of significance of the project for expansion of international contacts.

"From the first minutes I realized that it would be a very interesting course and there would be an opportunity to communicate with foreigners! Not every day you get such a chance! The most remarkable was the ease of communication and involvement of all participants in discussions" (Yulia Bolshakova).

"Our course was divided into theoretical and practical parts where the project participants, carrying out case studies, were able to feel cultural differences between our countries. I could not even think that the facts from our lectures would be proved by the situations that our team has encountered in the course of communication with our foreign partners! The lesson materials were structured and relevant, which made me very thankful to our teachers" (Elizaveta Tkachenko).

2nd ANNUAL TELECOLLABORATIVE PROJECT

A great networking event connecting
NSTU, Russia & HSRM, Germany.



OUR EXCELLENT AND INSPIRATIONAL TUTORS
Larisa F. Luchikhina and Natalia V. Elfimova are highly educated and supportive professors who are always ready to help and give wise advice about anything. They literally convey their enthusiasm and passion for their work.

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Since 2017 the program has been providing culture understanding trainings and team-building events. The participants of the project are NSTU Translation program trainees and students of HSRM (Hoch Schule Reihn Mein), Germany.

OUR AIMS

- Discuss cultural theories
- Analyze and compare cultures and different ways of life at university
- Collaborate with students from HSRM University to research information and complete activities

HOW WE GOT IN TOUCH



We used different messengers and apps for videoconferencing



Pascal and Lukas – trainees from Germany, who were also a part of our NSTU team

WHAT WE DISCUSSED

- Our personal interests & ambitions
- University Life
- Cultural differences / taboos / dos and don'ts
- Our final presentations

THE RESULTS



At the final videoconference in joint groups of NSTU and HSRM students we prepared our final presentations and showed them to everybody.

WHAT'S NEXT?



We spent wonderful time celebrating Christmas and New Year in Russian & German traditions.



"I absolutely loved it! Now I can understand other cultures more – it's really awesome!"

Evgeny Lakomov, Russia

"I am very happy that I'm enrolled in this course and I will certainly search for additional information about Russia, on a daily basis!"

Chris Torres, Germany

"Everything was wonderful! Cultural insights were an eye opener."

Elizaveta Bykova, Russia

"This project has ignited a fire in the hearts and eyes of the students!"

Oleg Marilov, Russia

"I am glad that the German students were also very passionate about the project, and we were in touch with the guys every day. We are still communicating, because we have really got to know each other.."

Elizabeth Tkachenko, Russia

"Participation in the telecollaborative project was the most memorable event of the last year of study. It is a great opportunity to overcome language barrier, to learn more about other cultures and to understand our own culture."

Vera Elanakova, Russia

Fig. 1. Call-for-papers layout

“Participation in the telecollaborative project with students from Germany has become for me the most memorable event of the last year of study in “Translation Program”. First of all, this project has opened the way to networking with the students who are learning English, like us. Thus, this project has become an excellent chance for the students to overcome the language barrier. Besides, this is a great opportunity to learn something new about other cultures and about your own one” (Vera Elanakova).

“I would like to continue to participate in this project as a tutor, to make this project more interesting and important. Currently, students are actively looking for opportunities to apply for internships abroad, so the project is an excellent platform to prepare students for exchange programs. Hopefully, the project will become the starting point for the participants in meeting different cultures of the world! The project has provided me with an opportunity to travel to Germany for an internship at the University of Applied Sciences, Landshut. I hope that the reality will exceed my expectations!” (Irina Gevorgyan, the participant of the first season of the project, the most active member of the Russian team).

These are precisely the main goals and objectives of the international telecommunication project, which has become an integral part of the “Translation Program” curriculum.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, development of international networks requires designing flexible and combinable tools in the field of education. Today, internationalization implies not only mobility of students and teachers, but also mobility of programs, projects and services. Intercultural communicative competence plays a significant role in optimization of networking of universities in the context of internationalization as a necessary condition for effective interaction both at the interpersonal and institutional levels. One of the successful

types of network intercultural interaction is joint telecollaborative projects. Implementation of the method forges inter-disciplinary links for solving complex problems; generates new ideas, opens up opportunities for interaction of representatives of different cultures and contributes to development of students' intercultural communicative competence.

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