



International Network Influence on Students' Linguistic and Cultural Competence

Influencia de la red internacional en la competencia lingüística y cultural de los estudiantes

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Resumen

Este estudio explora el impacto de un proyecto de clase basado en la interacción en línea con un amigo nativo. El propósito del estudio fue analizar la relación entre los participantes colombianos y extranjeros, e investigar cómo los estudiantes pudieron establecer una relación con un hablante nativo y mejorar su conocimiento lingüístico y cultural a través de esta interacción. Además, el impacto del proyecto de clase se evaluó teniendo en cuenta la interacción con el nativo(s), los aspectos culturales y el uso de las Nuevas Tecnologías de la Información o TIC por sus siglas en inglés. El proyecto tenía como objetivo responder a la pregunta: ¿cómo influye la relación con un amigo por

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correspondencia en la creación de conocimiento de un individuo? El diseño de investigación adoptado es un estudio de caso definido por Yin (1984: 23) como "una investigación empírica que investiga un fenómeno contemporáneo (el " caso ") en profundidad y dentro de su contexto del mundo real". La muestra se seleccionó mediante la técnica de muestreo aleatorio y quince participantes tomaron parte en el estudio de forma voluntaria. Se propuso un cuestionario con preguntas abiertas y cerradas y un grupo focal como parte de los instrumentos de recopilación de datos para obtener las percepciones de los participantes sobre el tema en estudio. Los resultados revelan que el desarrollo de una red internacional fomenta la adquisición de conocimientos relacionados con la cultura y el idioma, que son vitales para los estudiantes de idiomas.

Palabras clave: creación de conocimiento, interacción con un nativo, relaciones interculturales, redes internacionales.

Abstract

This study explores the impact of a class project based on online interaction with a native pen friend. The purpose of the study was to analyze the relationship between the Colombian and the foreigner participants, and to investigate how students were able to establish a relationship with a native speaker and improve their linguistic and cultural knowledge through this interaction. In addition, the impact of the class project was evaluated taking into account the partnership interaction, cultural aspects, and the use of ICT's. The project aimed at answering the question: how does the relationship with a pen-friend influence the creation of knowledge of an individual? The research design adopted is a case study defined by Yin (1984:23) as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context". The sample was selected by using the random sampling technique and fifteen participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis. A questionnaire with open-ended and closed questions and a focus group were proposed as part of the data collection instruments in order to get participants' perceptions about the topic under study. The findings reveal that developing an international network fosters the acquisition of knowledge related to culture and the language both vital for language students.

Keywords: creation of knowledge, pen-friend interaction, intercultural relations, international networks.

Introduction

Globalization and development are two essential aspects in the current era of trading, commerce, tourism, and the like. That is why significant changes occur in everyday life in terms of worldwide communication so that boundaries are getting behind and people live in a connected and interdependent world.

Learning a language is not a mere process of learning words, sentences and grammar, it is also about understanding the different backgrounds, experiences, and people's ways of thinking and living. In this aspect, culture plays a significant role since it helps people to understand other people. In consequence, for a foreign language student the language and the culture it conveys are two important aspects for his life. They both need to be acquired and reinforced as means to undertake a better communication and to avoid misunderstanding. According to Hantrais (1989) culture is the governing entity of a society and it encloses a set of practices and beliefs that are expressed through a language. Therefore, the way people think and see the world is influenced and attached to the culture.

Many problems and barriers in speaking might be encountered because of the lack of cultural knowledge on the target language. That is why a second language learner's purpose is to understand the culture by interacting with other people. So, one way to learn a new culture is through *acculturation*, which is defined by Díaz-Rico and Weed (2006) as the process in which one adapts himself to a second culture, and adopts cultural aspects without having the need to abandon his first culture, therefore learners start mastering the second culture in a way that they acculturate by acquiring and understanding cultural aspects of the language under study. According to Schumann (1986) students who undertake the process of acculturation and adapt themselves to the language's culture become proficient in the language. In an ideal language acquisition process, students assume the gaining and understanding of cultural complexity features which gravitate above language itself in order, not only, to be able to

better understand his interlocutor and the way he sees the world, but also to express himself in the correct manner while communicating and interacting with another person (Jehad, 2012).

Furthermore, a study centered on a daily basis interaction with a native pen-friend helps the student to excel his linguistic competences and to comprehend the culture features conveyed through the language. In addition, the student improves his language capacities and gains specific cultural features from his/her pen-friend.

Justification

This study focuses on the creation of an international network in which interaction with a native speaker is the main focus. This will benefit students' cultural and linguistic knowledge which is an important element in any foreign language student. In this sense, this investigation will enrich students' language proficiency and at the same time it will present an overview of the professors' efforts to provide a meaningful project in which the knowledge gained in the classroom is applied in a real life online context with a native speaker.

Furthermore, with the development of this study, linguistics professors can determine whether continuing implementing this type of projects to benefit the teaching and learning process in the classroom or not, and finally, it would also be the opportunity for professors to modify the curriculum of the linguistics course at the university of Pamplona.

Research problem

During the initial interview students expressed that they would like to be more exposed to the culture and practice more the language. They expressed that it is vital to practice more the communicative skills of language outside the classroom and that they need to be ready to face cultural experiences in the Anglo and Franco speaking countries. In this sense, creating an international network (a relationship with a native pen-friend) appears to be an advantageous opportunity not only to put into context grammatical and linguistic aspects of the language outside the classroom but also to acquire and understand its cultural aspects.

Furthermore, undertaking a relationship with a pen-friend during the acquisition of a language seems to be a pertinent activity for the English and French program at the university and also for the students. In this sense Sotomayor (2010) expresses that conversations and dialogues with a pen-friend in a virtual context permit the establishment of a new type of knowledge that is built through the cooperation between the two entities.

The research problem is condensed to the following question: how do the creation of an international network and the interaction with a native speaker enhance the linguistic and cultural competence of a foreign language student in a non-native environment?

Research objectives

This study analyses the influence of the creation and establishment of an international network on the student's linguistic and cultural competence in an English course. In particular, the researchers are interested in evidencing the advantages and disadvantages of having an international network and interacting with a native pen-friend by highlighting the cultural aspects emerging during the study, and what it means to be a language student in the ongoing era of intercultural relationships in a context of cooperation and communication.

Literature Review

This study includes research and revision of central elements such as culture, the connectivism theory, the linguistic competence, a class-based project, and the interaction with a native speaker. These elements are categorized and treated separately in the text. The purpose of this literature review is to establish the significance of the general field of study and to give the theoretical foundations to develop the study.

The general theory that supports this study is the *connectivism theory* since this research implies that participants undertake the implementation of the information and communication technologies (ICT) outside the classroom by

connecting and providing information into the network or learning community they created in order to reinforce the learning process.

According to Siemens (2005) the central element of connectivism is the individual and learning that becomes a process where there is connectivity of specialized nodes or people with the needed knowledge. In this sense, personal knowledge constitutes and feeds the network, and so, there is a cycling transmission of knowledge and learning into the network which is beneficial to both individuals. According to Chetty (2013, p.188-190), students enter the connectivist approach as single hubs (a solitary element); as individuals from open online spaces by finding better approaches to contribute, convey and team up, utilizing an assortment of available devices that engage them to create and share thoughts. Because of these improvements, students are presently developing their very own insight. The learning setting suggests the learning exercises, circumstances of learning and instructing, hypothetical learning where this ability is reinforced by working on getting the hang of, learning through genuine circumstances, and so forth (cf. Figueiredo 2005: 127).

...Learners enter the connectivist approach as single nodes (a single entity); as members of open online spaces, learners are finding new ways to contribute, communicate and collaborate, using a variety of accessible tools that empower them to develop and share ideas. As a result of these developments, learners are now constructing their own knowledge. The learning context implies the learning activities, situations of learning and teaching, theoretical learning, concept learning, skill learning, practice learning, learning through real situations, etc. (cf. Figueiredo 2005: 127).

In our context, learning technologies refer to the different platforms and websites the participants used to contact their pen-friends; English and French groups on Facebook, Interpals, English baby, Lang_8, Sharetalk.com, and My Language Exchange, and subsequently, Whats App which offered them the opportunity to learn and expand their cultural and linguistic competences.

In connectivism, Landauer and Dumais (1997) argue that “people have much more knowledge than appears to be present in the information to which they have been exposed” (n.d). They emphasize the idea that being exposed to the normal educational setting provides the individual with knowledge but since

people are knowledge “containers”, individual through connections can get access, learn and build information from other containers.

For this study the native speaker is understood as an international network, since this person lives abroad and has a different nationality. International networks are a series of contacts or acquaintances that a person can have anywhere in the planet thanks to the use of Internet or the ICTs. It is a kind of relation between one or more people who can be connected. These relations are based on the trans-cultural diffusion and according to Bardini (1996) it is an ensemble of people (nodes) that are connected by links. Every link unites a node representing an individual. This kind of international network permits infinity of cultural and linguistic exchanges. The international network concept emerges in the educative domain since, when students communicate through social networks and develop relationships based on knowledge cooperation thanks to the use of internet or the ICTs.

Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery (2009) argue that the international networks allow individuals to undertake some kind of exchange and to maintain a relation established by the contacts. Nevertheless, the links or relations can reach to an end when the nodes please. The international networks emerge and disappear at any time thanks to the individuals’ willingness to create, maintain or end them. Depending on the time provided, the international networking process can lead to a more or less sustainable relationship due to in certain cases the international network can be seen as important and even fundamental part in the individual’s life (Cummings and Van Zee, 2005). This occurs when conditions allow this to happen. In education students see the need to create an international network because they experience the necessity to get to know people, understand and comprehend other cultures, travel or find a job (EACEA, 2007).

Class project to improve cultural and linguist competences

The notion of interacting with a pen-friend has emerged as relevant topic in the second language learning process and it presents the implications related to culture and linguistic awareness and online interaction. The study of developing an international network and interaction with a pen-friend is an effort to provide

students with a different learning environment to help them, somehow, to acquire and master their competences (cultural, linguistic and International Network Creation Capacity). It represents a challenge for students as well for teachers due to the commitment students should acquire at the time of selecting a pen-friend to exchange different aspects to understand the language as well as the culture. Several studies on interaction with pen-friends have been conducted showing the importance of this kind of strategy inside and outside a foreign language classroom.

Rooks (2008) conducted a research at Kwansai Gakuin University in Japan where his participants established an intercultural exchange using emails. His study concluded that thanks to the exchange among participants in Japan and Thailand, they could improve their language abilities, construct knowledge and develop skills related to cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity. In addition, they created long-term environments to communicate ideas and thoughts in English. This study draws the relevance of engaging students in an intercultural and collaborative process where they interact with other people.

Moore and Ritter (2008) state that in pen-friend projects students enter in a context where they encounter people with different backgrounds and specific cultural differences. This enriches the linguistic and cultural understanding process, and allows them to share their own personal experiences about the place and culture they live in. In this sense, pen-friend projects allow students to acquire new perceptions about the target culture and to develop the linguistic competences.

Chen and Yang (2007) studied the way technology and internet tools influence the development of tasks in the foreign language. The study was based on the premise that “in most Taiwanese high school English classes, the prevalent mode of instruction is based on large-groups, teacher-dominated grammar-translation methods, and exam-oriented textbook-based lectures” (p. 861). So, students expressed that they do not have the enough interaction to gain knowledge, practice and communicate in the language. Chen and Yang (2007) concluded that their project gave the students the opportunity to learn, expand their linguistic horizon, and experience pleasure towards learning English. Nevertheless, using internet tools demands pedagogical guidance and

methodological implications since being exposed to this setting can also imply challenge and problems related to trustworthiness.

The including pen-friends strategy allows students to learn in a profound way than ever before since having a pen-friend breaks down the frontiers that separate languages and their culture, specially, because students are not concerned by the geographical limitations of not being in the Anglo or Franco speaking country. Internet tools give students the opportunity to interact with a native friend without the need of being face-to-face. Today, it is essential to improve students' achievement and prepare them as professionals in the globalized world where it is essential to know a second language

Hall & Walsh (2002) associate the inclusion of interaction with a pen-friend with the Vygotskian sociocultural theory in which learning a language is seen as a social activity. In these social activities, children construct, understand, and acquire knowledge through the help of peers and teachers. With this in mind, including communication with a pen-friend in an English course is vital because it provides a social context for students to internalize, utilize, acquire and reinforce knowledge. It also gives them the confidence to interact with other people since they just need to put into practice previous knowledge from prior experiences.

In addition, Chen and Yang (2007) state that “language and culture are inextricable and interdependent, and understanding the target language culture improves understanding of the language” (p. 861).

Culture is sometimes neglected in the classroom or it is limited to ephemeral activities. That is the reason why projects based on technologies and interaction with native speakers permit not only to overcome the classroom limitations related to culture but also to provide real intercultural communication experiences (Byram, 1997 & Byram, 2012). When students undertake communications with native speakers, it means that they are connected with the real world. That is an aspect that does not happen in the classroom since this place is just a scenario or simulated context for the real world. According to Thorne (2005) this allows learners to “develop meaningful relationships with one another and to use the language they are studying to do so” (p. 3).

Finally, Kramersch (1998), in *Culture in foreign language teaching*, found that “when language is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways” (p. 3). Culture cannot be separated from language because they are intertwined. In this sense, language is the means in which cultural traits are shared and understood.

Method

The general approach selected to conduct this study is the mixed-methods in order to gather qualitative and quantitative data through various instruments such as a questionnaire and a focus-group. According to Creswell and Plano (2011) this approach gives the researchers the opportunity to collect and analyse sets of data coming from either quantitative or qualitative instruments to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under study. The general design selected is a case study. This study, entitled the “International Network Influence on Students’ Linguistic and Cultural Competence”, attempts to analyse existing information and quantitative and qualitative data regarding culture and linguistic competence.

In order to collect the data, two instruments were implemented. The first one is a questionnaire which contains a set of open-ended questions and a set of closed questions, some with predetermined responses and others with a multiple-choice answer. The second instrument is a focus group; its utility is based on the capacity it offers to understand how the participants view the phenomenon under study (Greenbaum, 1998).

Population

The population under study in this research is composed of adults belonging to The Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree program in Foreign Languages English and French at Pamplona University in Colombia. On average, study participants are between 20 and 24 years old, from whom four are women and eight are man. Taking into account the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) the population has a B2 level of proficiency which means that the students have

undertaken 670 hours of contact with the target language. This level corresponds to an independent user of the language.

The sample representing the population was selected through a simple random sampling technique. Twelve participants were selected at random from the entire amount of student belonging to the population. During the implementation of the simple random sampling technique the authors of this study fully described the set of ethical that guided the study such as anonymity, no harm and that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study.

Study and methods

As a means to undertake this research, the researchers present the following methodological perspectives. They proposed a class-based project that was welcomed by the students. It consisted in three major stages. In the first one the participants needed to contact a pen-friend (also understood as an international network) from an English or French speaking country. Some of the students received a name with a contact e-mail address and some others got their pen-friend by browsing certain websites concerning practicing languages. Once they managed to contact a pen-friend, they sent a short video introducing themselves. This was done in order to prove students were the people they said they were and not a fake person. The researchers explained that: they needed to have some tact and a certain number of skills and competences during the communications. Furthermore, they explained that there were a limited number of topics that they should not hold forth to in order to avoid misunderstandings and difficulties in the relationship; there were some ethical considerations that needed to be addressed; and finally, it was imperative to be autonomous throughout the project. This stage was the first time the participants contacted and befriended a native speaker who was outside Colombia and which whom they could talk on a regular basis.

In the second part of the project, the participants obtained a video from their pen-friends. In order to do so, they had to send first a video of their own talking about a topic familiar to them. In this sense, the relationship between the pen-friend and the student was based on equality. The pen-friend had the

freedom to talk about any subject. The ongoing relationship at this point was stronger than before since students had been chatting and exchanging messages for several weeks. With the video, students did a linguist and phonologic analysis of the video for class.

In the third part of the project, students were expected to create an interview to be implemented with their pen-friends. The interview was twofold, one was to obtain significant data about the English or French speaking country educational system and the teacher's methodology to teach a language, and the second one was to obtain relevant data about cultural aspects (learning the target culture was an ongoing process from the very beginning of the project). The interview had also an academic purpose in the classroom; at the end of the project they had to write an academic article taking into account the data gathered through the interview and the entire project.

Since the project was then a central and starting point for this study, the researchers established various steps before conducting this research. The first step was to establish a list of educational websites so participants had a starting point to contact a pen-friend. The second step was to prepare the different tasks to be accomplished and create the class project as such. Then, the researchers socialized the project and explained what it was about. Soon after students undertook the project and as soon as they submitted their articles the data was collected. The data was then categorized, codified and finally analyzed following the steps to analyze data proposed by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). During the data analysis process, the two sets of data (qualitative and quantitative) were categorized, codified and analyzed separately. Subsequently the results merged and then the researchers interpreted and combined them. As means to triangulate the findings, the researchers decided to corroborate them with the participants.

Findings

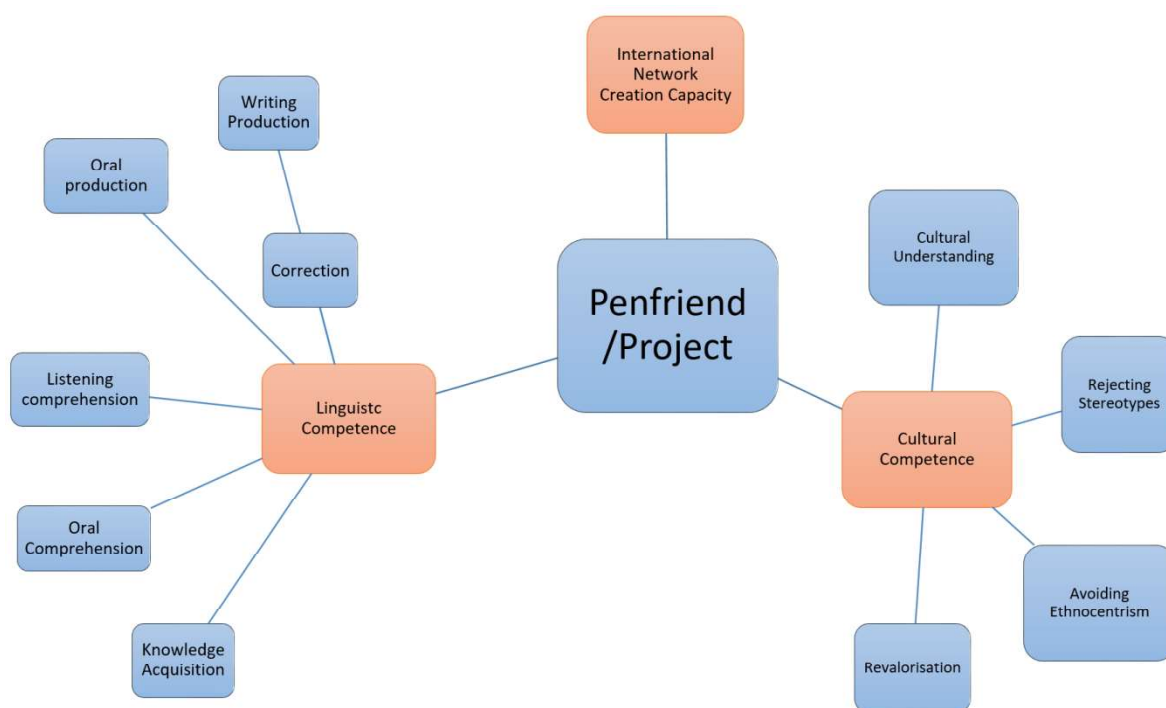


Figure 1: findings and implications of the creation of an international network and interaction with a pen-friend

This model points out a variety of positive implications behind implementing the project based on interactions with pen-friends. There are three mayor categories:

1. Students' Cultural competence is ameliorated while interacting with the pen-friend

The acquisition and development of cultural aspects is a continuous process, since culture is divided into a large number of characteristics that define each community. Although, the interaction did not occur personally but virtually, during the communication process there were various elements besides language that conveyed meaning. In this sense, the interaction with the international network allows the participants to share their ideologies, beliefs, understandings of the world and also the way they see people from the other culture but in order

to understand him/her, it was crucial to create and interpret the meaning and knowledge gained within a cultural framework.

When talking about culture, every person creates preconceptions and stereotypes about people from other cultures. They tend to classify and put people into boxes. The participants of this project were not excluded from being categorized and categorizing other people. In this sense, participants, throughout interaction, understood that people from other cultures (Anglo and Franco culture) are different from them but it does not mean that those differences can interfere in a conversation or relationship.

Participants' experiences and comments indicate that not only participants but also their pen-friends rejected stereotypes and understood the differences that characterize each culture. For instance, the pen-friends comprehended that Colombia is not a country where people are killing each other on a daily basis, where they all are drug dealers like Pablo Escobar. The participants expressed that France is a country where there is a mixture of cultures that come from other countries and that for example not all the Franco-Arabs are closed minded and intolerant. Participants expressed that they had conversations where they did two simultaneous activities, the first one was related to understanding and analyzing what his/her friend was saying and the second one was talking about specific cultural aspects and stereotypes because cultural understanding and rejecting stereotypes can be attainable through either reasoning or experiences gained.

When interaction is abundant, there is a rapid transition from rejecting stereotypes and cultural understanding to avoiding ethnocentrism. This means that participants stopped saying that certain aspects of their culture were better than those from the foreign culture. Interaction enacts the access to certain reasoning where ethnocentrism takes a second place to let the intercultural understanding appear.

Having a pen-friend leverages the value of the own culture. When there is an abundant interaction flow between two people, an important element is reflection about what has been said during the conversations. When the participants interacted with their friends, they shared ideas, opinions, and meaning, soon after the conversation was done, participants often reflected about topics treated. This means that students interiorized ideas and reflected upon their own culture. For instance, participant 4 expressed that “it is important to

value and appreciate what we have in Colombia; foreigners admire what Colombians do to improve the social contexts in the country, and that we should change some aspects in our country to make it better”.

2. Interacting with a pen-friend influences positively students' Linguistic competence

The underlying conditions of this project have improved significantly various aspects of students' linguistic competences. In this sense when participants create, internalize, preserve and use the information exchanged in the network flow, they could reinforce, apply and excel the knowledge gained.

Once participants interacted with their pen-friends, they undertook various processes related to reinforcing, acquiring and utilizing knowledge because they were exposed to oral and written input obtained from the information given by the pen-friend. This exposure to the target language means conducting, internalizing, and reasoning about the process since the information given was not static or passive, it demanded to be answered instantaneously or in the immediate future. Furthermore, since there was an input, participants needed to provide some written or oral output. Moreover, participants were exposed to the target language on a regular basis since they could contact their friends at any time. This implies acquiring and understanding knowledge.

Additionally, enhancing the linguistic competences depends on feeding information into the flow inherent to every interaction with the native speaker. One hundred percent of the participants stated that they used the target language with their pen-friends and that it helped them improve it every day. In contrast, 70% of the participants also stated that they used sometimes their native language (Spanish) in order to teach their friends certain topics. In this project a great number of the pen-friends learn Spanish as their second language. The ongoing giving and receiving process was exceeded thanks to a consented correcting practice.

Correcting was a central tenet of the project since participants knew they had difficulties while speaking or writing and they wanted to be corrected. That is the reason why they expressed to their pen-friends the desired to be corrected while speaking or writing.

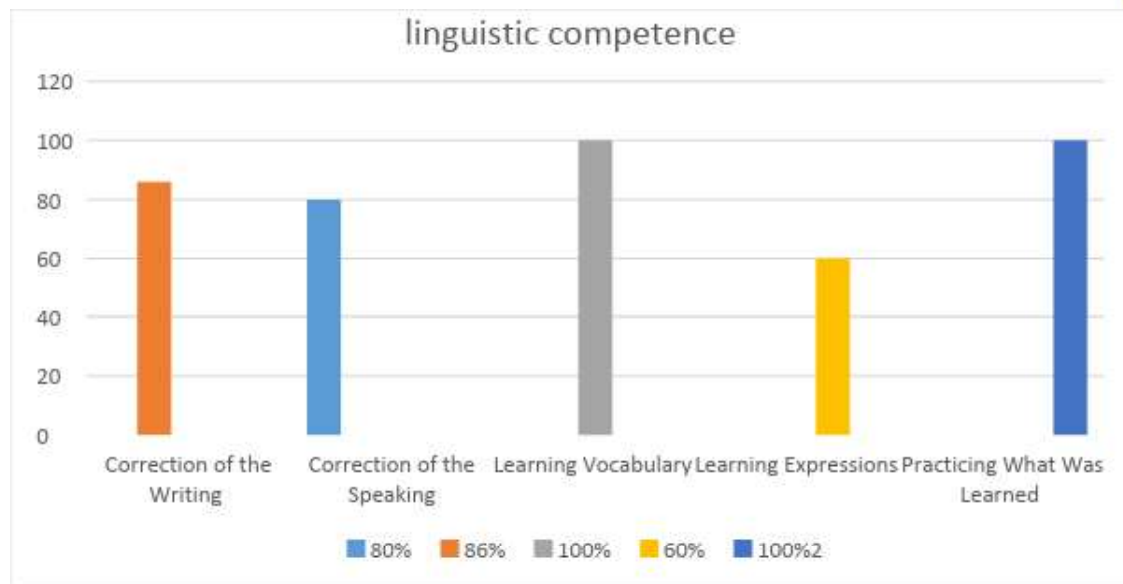


Figure. 2: Linguistic competences positively influenced by the interaction with the pen-friend

This graphic represents participants' answers about various aspects that helped them to improve their linguistic competence. As the bars show, the study had a positive impact on the linguistic competence. Eighty-six percent of the respondents said that their pen-friends corrected them when they wrote something on Facebook or Whats App. Eighty percent of them said that they were corrected when they were speaking.

Correction in this sense was seen as a positive element in the pen-friend interaction since participants know that they have been corrected by “the knowers” of the language. In addition, in the focus group participants agreed that they learnt from the teachers who knew the language but sometimes they made mistakes because they are not native speakers, so when participants were corrected by their pen-friends, they received the corrections in a positive way.

One hundred percent of the respondents agreed that they learned new vocabulary related to various topics, they practiced what they had learned and that this project was positive and had a great impact on them. Finally, 60 % expressed that they acquired new expressions.

The interactions with a native speaker underlined acquiring new language experiences and an authentic language practice. While practicing speaking and writing participants tended to gain knowledge of certain rules that guide the

language, vocabulary and pronunciation of different words. In this sense they manipulated that knowledge in a variety of contexts and they put it into practice.

Since the participants were in a university context where the presence or interaction with native speakers was almost non-existent due to the lack of natives in town, having a regular exposure to the native pen-friends provided students with the integration they needed, not only with the language but also with the culture. Students had a great academic experience; they were motivated to exchange their own thoughts with persons from different cultural backgrounds.

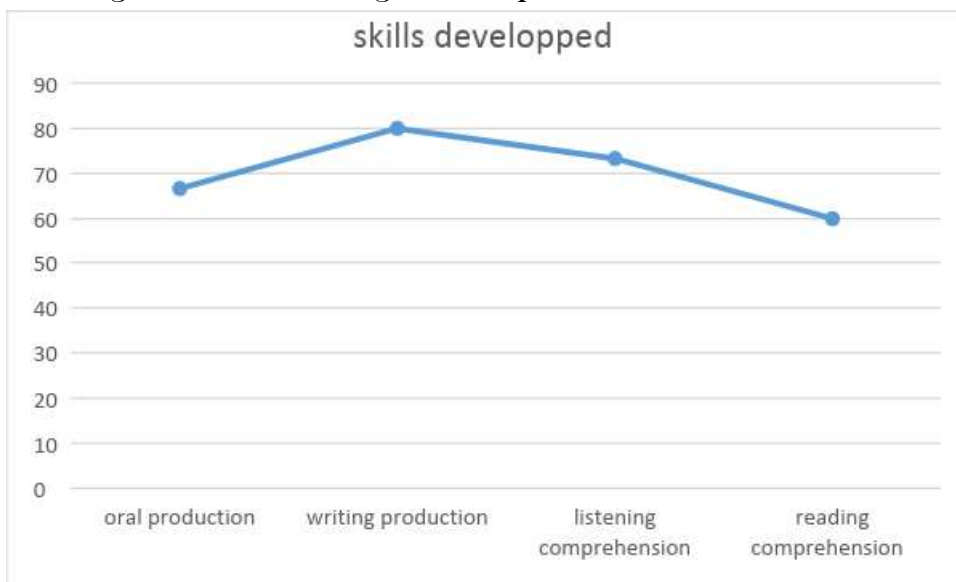


Fig. 3: skills developed thanks to the interaction in the international network

Participants' answers allow drawing this chart that exposes the different skills that were developed to a certain degree. Even though each participant learns in his own way, the pen-friend project had effectiveness and a positive impact on participants' learning and mastering language process. Every participant asserted that thanks to the interaction they could practice all of the language skills. Sixty-six percent of the participants indicated that they practiced the oral production.

Consequently, 86.6 % of the respondents practiced the written production and 73.3% expressed that they were able to practice the listening comprehension. Finally, 60% of them practiced the reading comprehension. These numbers vary according to participants' needs and motivation which means that at the very beginning participants established a "texting" communication since they contacted their friends through Facebook, Interpals, English baby, Lang_8,

Sharetalk.com, and My language exchange. Soon after if they felt comfortable, so they exchanged Whats App numbers or Facebook profiles. This means that that interaction evolved from a rigid encounter to a friendlier/closer interaction.

Participants' needs and motivations encouraged them to, not only, send text messages, but also to send podcasts and voice messages and even videos about themselves. That is how participants got the opportunity to develop, at a certain level, the four skills.

3. Development of an international network creation capacity

It refers to the capability to establish relationships with people who come from a different country. In this project 96% of the respondents expressed that the first stage of the project (contacting a native speaker) was the most difficult part because it implied "going out" and getting a friend. Although, they were given a set of websites to encounter people who wanted to learn Spanish, contacting people was not an easy task. Peter and Karla expressed that they sent various invitations to talk and to chat, but they did not get any answer which was discouraging. Thom and Charles give an explanation for not receiving an answer when they sent messages: "what happens is that there is not trust, foreigners do not trust when people send them messages out of the blues". Despite not starting the project as it was imagined, participants could eventually establish relationship with various pen-friends.

The International network creation capacity implies having a set of skills that sometimes participants do not possess. For instance, it is imperative to measure one's words: certain Colombians tend to be joyful and loving and they do the same when they talk to somebody from another country. Others talk about any topic without considering how sensitive it could be for a foreigner. One female participant 3 expressed that she sent a message saying "mi amor" (my love) to her female pen-friend which caused a misunderstanding that was soon after clarified. Participant 7 indicated that he knew he had to pay attention to what he was writing because his pen-friend was Arab.

It is necessary to have some tact: the interaction with a pen-friend also implied to have some tact because participants needed to obtain certain information from them. This included sending videos, audios, and podcasts to the pen-friends in order to get a response. Eighty percent of the respondents

expressed that it was difficult to ask their friends to send them a video or audio about a specific topic because they felt that the relationship was not as long as they would like it to be, so that trust was still on the process to be strengthened.

Another skill is to be consistent: in order to establish a healthy and long relationship, participants needed to send messages and to establish conversations on a regular basis. When participants did not care that much about their pen-friends, they stopped replying. Soon after, the relationship finished.

Respecting time was one of the drawbacks of the project since there is a time difference of 6 or 7 hours between Colombia and Europe. Participants expressed that they had to consider time when sending texts or a voices message because their pen-friend could be sleeping.

The final skill is to be autonomous; autonomy is a key factor of any project. Participants knew that it was up to them to contact the pen-friend, to send the videos, and podcasts, to maintain the relationship going, to have some tact and to show interest in the other person's activities. If autonomy was not present, the online interaction would not continue its course and it would affect the ongoing friendship.

Although, some participants had some difficulties while developing the project, it was evidenced that they acquired a set of skills related to international network creation. Everything began with contacting one friend, and it has now broadened to two or even more friends, which means, that the network is bigger and that they are now having contact with Anglo and Franco speakers.

Discussion

Interacting in an online environment with a pen-friend influences positively student's linguistic and cultural competences. Thanks to it, students gained new knowledge reinforcing their skills capacities. Gaining, developing, growing and understanding knowledge within international network is the cornerstone of this project due to the significant flow of online interaction; students perceive an evolution and an effective nurturing of information flow.

Having a pen-friend leverages the acquisition of cultural traits of the language under study, since exchanging with an international network implies

leaving behind stereotypes about the target culture. This is seen through an understanding process where participants internalize the other person's reasons and beliefs.

The ongoing process allows us to say that people cannot be placed into boxes to understand them but rather say that there are differences that make them unique, and those differences need to be considered to avoid misunderstandings and intercultural shocks. Language and culture are then interwoven: the understanding of one requires the understanding of the other. This is the cornerstone of underpinning further contacts with native speaker since participants will have gained an amount of cultural knowledge that will be considered during future conversations and decisions. That stock of information is reutilized and organized in order to have an effective intercultural interaction.

From the researchers' standpoint the project put in contact Anglo and Franco speakers with university students in a friendly exchange. The pen-friends complemented the teachers' effort and absence outside the learning settings (classroom). In this sense, there is management and increase of knowledge to achieve the desired outcome which is to help students enhance their linguistic and cultural competence. With this in mind, students created, maintained, internalized and utilized information thanks to the interaction within the international network. Communication occurred in a network context when participants were somehow forced to speak in the target language which exceeded the participants' linguistic competences due to there were various processes involved, for instance correcting what was written and said, ameliorating the pronunciation, acquiring expressions and vocabulary, using the knowledge gained, and internalizing how the natives wrote and spoke in a certain language register.

In the current context, the manner in which we acquire information is worth exploring since internet has opened the possibility to connect people from different countries without the necessity of being in the same place, just by having an internet connection. With this in mind, the interaction with an international network evidences the existence of a better intercultural understanding which helps avoiding the ethnocentrism. This is due to the great amount of ideas and opinions that arise naturally while the two participants communicated. Communication and interaction are in this sense a great vehicle to learn and

understand a culture. As Tseng (2002) expresses: “success in language learning is conditional upon the acquisition of cultural knowledge: language learners acquire cultural background knowledge in order to communicate, and to increase their comprehension in the target language” (p.13).

During the preparation and implementation of this study, the authors followed a series of procedures and protocols but every research is exposed to certain limitations, for example the time difference between Colombia and the countries where the pen-friends live represented a difficulty especially at the time to communicate.

For a future research the authors consider to take into account the pen-friends’ participation as part of the population for the research since it is important to contemplate their perceptions about the phenomenon under study which could maximize the impact and findings.

Conclusion

It is clear that interacting with the help of an international network is a great vehicle to learn and understand a culture, beliefs, values, and norms. Certain cultural aspects reflect concepts, and ideas that sometimes are difficult for students to understand, especially for those who are learning a language. Students need to build their own knowledge but that knowledge is somehow limited to what is provided by teacher, that is why having an international network complements and enhances the learning process which causes that various aspects related to language and culture be learnt from a different perspective, inspiring students to become confident in the culture and the language. With this in mind, interactions within an international network favor the tolerance and comprehension towards the target language and culture. This implies that differences and disparities related to traditions, moral, beliefs, philosophy, politics or religion begin to disappear.

With this project we, as teachers, understood that it is essential to implement all the tools and resources we have at our disposal to contribute to the development of students’ competences, especially those which we consider difficult like the cultural competence, since we are not native speakers.

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