Affordances of telecollaboration tools for English for Specific Purposes online learning

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Abstract

This paper explores students' perceptions of the affordances of different telecollaboration tools used in an innovation project for English for Specific Purposes online learning carried out between the University of Valencia (Spain) and Wofford College (South Carolina, United States) during the school year 2015-2016. Different tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication were used. The asynchronous tools included a discussion forum, a wiki, social networking websites and Google forms; while the tools used for synchronous communication were text, voice and video chat, videoconferencing tools and Google Drive. All the tools were accessible through the online platform used in the project, Google+. By using these tools, students from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean carried out a number of activities and tasks through online telecollaborative methods, involving both synchronous and asynchronous communication. The tasks completed by students through the use of the different tools were aimed at fostering distance online collaboration among American and Spanish students for the development of their linguistic, intercultural and digital literacies

Keywords: affordances, telecollaboration, online tools, synchronous communication, asynchronous communication

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1. Introduction

This paper explores students' perceptions of the affordances of different telecollaboration tools used in an innovation project for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) online learning supported by the Lifelong Learning and Educational Innovation Service from the University of Valencia, Spain: "Applying student-centered methodologies and flipped teaching strategies to foster active learning and motivation among students" (Ref. UV-SFPIE_RMD15-308327). The project was carried out between the University of Valencia (Spain) and Wofford College (South Carolina, United States) during the first semester of the school year 2015-2016, from October to December 2015. Different tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication were used for telecollaboration, which can be understood as a form of virtual mobility which is being increasingly adopted by university educators in Europe and elsewhere as a substitute or supplement for physical student mobility (O'Dowd, 2013). The tools included a Google+[*] discussion forum, a wiki for teacher coordination, social networking websites for interactions among students, and Google forms[†] for questionnaires and voting polls.

A case study was conducted with 47 students from both countries in order to examine their perceptions of the affordances of the different telecollaboration tools used. Among those, Google+ text, voice and video chat, videoconferencing tools such as Google Hangouts[‡], and Google Drive[§] for simultaneous edition of documents. All the tools were accessible through the online platform used in the project, Google+. A Google+ community[**] –named *Telecolabración Wofford-Valencia*- was also created so as to build up an adequate and safe learning environment on which students would feel comfortable sharing their opinions and disclosing information about themselves. At the same time, their feeling of belonging to an online learning community would be enhanced, this feeling being one of the key elements for success in online learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2004). Moreover, the similarities between the Google+ learning community used and other social networking websites students were more familiar with (e.g. Facebook) allowed them to quickly learn how to perform simple tasks on this platform, such as creating their digital profiles, posting their comments, etc. Furthermore, for the sake of organization different smaller communities were created within the overall community: one per group of students, each of the groups having as their members at least two students from the US together with at least 2 students from Spain.

By using the tools available within the Google+ community, students from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean were able to complete a number of telecollaborative tasks through online telecollaborative methods, involving both synchronous and asynchronous communication. The tasks completed by students through the use of the different tools were aimed at fostering distance online collaboration among American and Spanish students for the development of their linguistic (Guth & Helm, 2010; Kinginger & Belz, 2005; O'Rourke, 2007; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008), intercultural (Belz, 2003, 2007; Dooly, 2010; Dooly & Sadler, 2013; O'Dowd, 2006, 2010; O'Dowd & Waire, 2009; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012) and digital (Hauck, 2007; Guth & Helm, 2010) literacies.

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[*] Google+ is an interest-based social network that is owned and operated by Google Inc. For more information, see https://plus.google.com

[†] Google Forms is a Google feature to create online polls and surveys for free. For more information, see https://www.google.com/forms/about

[‡] Google Hangouts is a unified communications service that allows members to initiate and participate in text, voice or video chats, either one-on-one or in a group. Hangouts are built into Google+ and Gmail, and mobile apps are available for iOS and Android devices. For more information, see https://hangouts.google.com

[§] Google Drive is a cloud storage service that allows you to store your documents, photos, videos, etc. online. From Drive, you can also use Google Docs, Google Sheets, Google Forms, Google Slides and other applications to create and edit various types of files. For more information, see https://www.google.com/drive

[**] A Google+ Community is a feature which allows groups to form around particular interests. It is Google's version of a group or forum. For more information, see https://plus.google.com/communities

2. Context

2.1. Setting

The innovation project for ESP online learning, supported by the Lifelong Learning and Educational Innovation Service from the University of Valencia, was carried out between the University of Valencia (Spain) and Wofford College (South Carolina, United States) during the first semester of the school year 2015-2016, from October to December 2015. The tools for asynchronous communication used for completion of the different tasks of the project include the Google+ discussion forum (the Google+ Community), a wiki, social networking websites and Google forms for voting polls. The participants answered a Google Forms post-project questionnaire and took part in focus group interviews.

2.2. Participants

77 students from the United States and Spain aged between 18 and 25 participated in the project. Among those, the 52 Spanish participants were first-year students enrolled in a Business English compulsory course of the Degree in International Business at the University of Valencia, while the remaining 25 participants from the United States were enrolled in a Spanish coursed offered to students of different degrees at Wofford College. The qualitative and quantitative data was gathered from the responses of 47 students (N=47) from both institutions who took part in the case study and thus filled in the post-questionnaire about the project: 32 of them were from Wofford College while the remaining 15 were from the University of Valencia. The level of English of the Spanish students was upper-intermediate or B2+ of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, European Commission, 2001) whereas the level of Spanish of the American students oscillated between upper beginner (A2) and lower intermediate (B1), although a few of them were heritage speakers of Latin American descendant and therefore had a higher level of spoken Spanish, up to a C1 or advanced level of the CEFR.

2.3. Method

The participants were split in 10 groups of 4 to 5 students (at least 2 students from each country in every group) and a separate Google+ community was created for each group so that they could collaborate to complete the different assignments. In order to gather students' opinions and perceptions regarding the affordances of the different tools used in the project, they were asked to complete a post-project questionnaire and they also took part in focus group interviews. The data gathered corresponds to the responses of the 47 students (N=47) from both institutions who filled in the post-questionnaire about the project. The responses to the open-ended questions analysed in this paper are the ones which have to do with the main tools used in the project: the different tools available through the Google+ Community, Google Drive and other social networking websites used.

3. Asynchronous and Synchronous Tools

The main tools for asynchronous communication used in the project were a discussion forum, a wiki, social networking websites, and Google forms. The discussion forum was used for the whole-cass group of students from both the University of Valencia (UV) and Wofford College to discuss different topics such as stereotypes, differences in the higher education systems of both countries, and the process of student enrollment at both institutions. These discussion topics were integrated within the different telecollaboration tasks students were asked to complete. After considering different tools

and forum utilities for online discussion, it was decided that the discussion tool used would the Google+ Community interface itself (Figure 1). The main advantage of using the Google+ Community interface for forum-like debates was that students would not need to leave the platform to participate in the discussions. Additional advantages include the fact that the discussions could encourage participation and the sense of community, as everybody's opinions were valued and welcome.
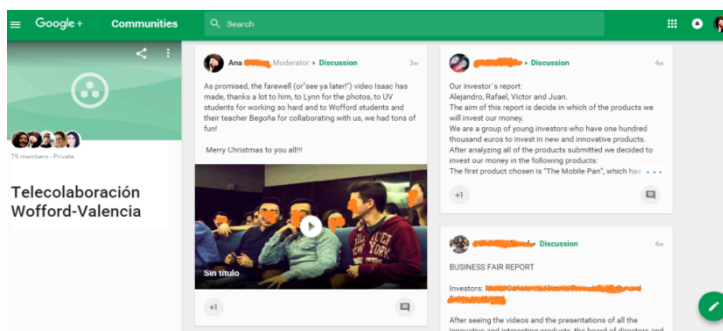

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Wofford-UV Telecollaboration Community on Google+

The wiki used was not visible to students: only the teachers could access this document created on Google Docs, which was created to keep track of the activities that were being done and their outcomes. It was an essential element of the project, as it helped the teachers stay in touch and coordinate. In this way, they could complete similar activities on similar dates while being a reference document for project assessment and research work once the project was completed.

The main social media platform used in the project was Google+. Students filled in their profiles, included photos and relevant information about themselves and the things they liked, etc. in a similar way as they would on other more popular platforms such as Facebook. The main difference was that students did not have a profile on Google+ prior to the project, which made it easier for them to disclose only the information they felt comfortable sharing, while avoiding distractions that might have been common in the case of social networking websites students used in their personal life on a regular basis. Another social networking site participants reported having used was Facebook: once they felt that they had become closer to their telecollaboration partners and that they could trust them, many students added them on Facebook to continue communicating outside the learning context of the project. In addition, the Google forms utility was mainly used to create voting polls which enabled students to vote for the projects they liked the most and also to have students complete online questionnaires regarding different aspects of the project.

As for synchronous communication, the main tools of this sort used in the project were Google+ text, voice and video chat, videoconferencing tools, and Google Drive. Each of these synchronous tools was used for a different purpose but all of them were accessible through the Google+ Community. Google Hangouts was the most widely used tool for synchronous videoconferencing, while Google Drive was employed for simultaneous edition of documents to be used by students in the different collaborative tasks within the project. Furthermore, students would turn to Google Hangouts text chat as a supplement to synchronous videoconferencing whenever live communication among students failed. The communication failures or delays were due to different reasons in every case, the most common reasons being slow internet access, linguistic difficulties (e.g. mispronunciation of words), poor sound or image quality and presence of background noise. By combining the use of videoconferencing tools with voice and text chat, students were capable of facing the aforementioned communication challenges. As for Google Drive, it was used by students in their collaborative writing assignments within the project: this tool enabled them to simultaneously edit, see and create different documents collaboratively.

5. Analysis of Students' Perceptions of the Tools

Data concerning students' perceptions regarding the affordances and level of utility of the different tools were gathered by means a post-intervention questionnaire, direct observation, field notes and interviews with focus groups. The questionnaire included questions regarding the different tools inquired about: a) the different synchronous and asynchronous tools available through the Google+ Community: the community itself, similar to a forum; Google Hangouts for videoconferencing; b) Google Drive, Docs, Sheets, Slides and Forms; and c) the social networking websites external to the project which were used by students for communication with their local and foreign partners in the project.

Regarding Google Hangouts, 40.4% of the participants in the study considered it one of the most useful tools, as it enabled them to have real-time online communication with their respective telecollaboration partners without needing to leave the platform. Moreover, 61.7% of the students said Hangouts was one of the tools they used regularly to communicate with their respective foreign partners, mainly through videoconferencing.

As for the forum-like Google+ Community, 53.2% of the participants considered it another really useful tool, and 59.6% said they accessed it regularly. When asked to give their opinion about the Google+ Community by completing the following statement: "The Google+ Community was…", 15 students were very enthusiastic about it, as shown by their comments: "the best thing of all", "a good place to know about Wofford culture", "a neat experience", "a great concept" , "very useful and gave us the opportunity to communicate with other people" and "a nice place to see work from others in Valencia". Nevertheless, 9 of the students were not as satisfied with the experience, as reflected in their comments: "hard to follow and confusing", "disappointing and frustrating", "not very useful because I did not know what I had to do or comment". These negative comments point out the importance of guiding students throughout the process so as to avoid their feeling lost or frustrated. Seemingly, participation and positive interdependence are essential so as to guarantee the success of the project, as not getting replies or feedback on their comments from their foreign partners was another commonly cited source of frustration.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper analyses students' perceptions of the affordances of different telecollaboration tools used in telecollaboration project for ESP online learning carried out between the University of Valencia (Spain) and Wofford College (South Carolina, United States). The tools used in the project, which were all accessible through Google+, permitted different ways of synchronous and asynchronous communication without the need of leaving the platform to complete the different tasks and activities of the project.

The results of the case study which was conducted to explore participants' perceptions of the affordances of the aforementioned tools showed students' positive attitudes toward the tools used in the project, as well as an awareness of the challenges implied in their use. Among those, the most commonly mentioned flaws had to do with insufficient guidance and help concerning the use of the online tools, as well as the disparity in the levels of commitment of the participants. These findings point out the need to provide additional support concerning how to use the different tools and reveal the importance of fostering active participation in telecollaboration exchanges, equal levels of student commitment from both the local students and their foreign partners and positive interdependence among all participants.

Acknowledgements

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