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Virtual exchange in teaching Polish as a foreign language at A1 level – a Polish-Italian case study

Summary

Key words: *computer assisted language learning, Polish glottodidactics, virtual exchange, telecollaboration, Polish as a foreign language, A1 level, key competences*

In today's globalized world, it is vital to teach not only basic skills, such as reading, writing, numeracy, technical abilities, or the knowledge of foreign languages, but also those of more complex nature, such as entrepreneurship, critical thinking, intercultural and civil competences, problem solving, learning to learn, as well as digital literacy. One of the key competences of the 21st century education is invariably the ability to communicate in foreign languages which, like any education field, is expected to respond to the current demands of the youth. Having in mind that their interactions occur not only in a direct manner, but frequently via the Internet, their education needs to take this factor into account as well.

Virtual exchanges – also referred to as telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange, e-tandem, or teletandem – are one of the types of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) that appear to be adequately addressing the needs of 21st century learners. Virtual exchanges are defined as an educational form involving the engagement of student groups in intercultural interaction and collaboration, which are conducted online with partners from different cultural backgrounds or geographic locations, under the leadership of teachers and/or expert facilitators. The academic research conducted over the past decades reports the numerous benefits derived from participation in such projects. Those include, but are not limited to, increased intercultural and language competences, the development of digital skills, the enhancement of teamwork skills, and the positive influence on learner autonomy.

The participants of most telecollaboration projects described in literature are students at an advanced or intermediate level of language proficiency, and the exchanged languages are

among the most commonly taught languages in Europe – predominantly English, often German, Spanish and French, and not uncommonly Italian. However, there exists very little research on the use of virtual exchanges in the didactics of less commonly taught languages (LCTL), and the sole example of telecollaboration, in which students spoke a Slavic language at the beginner level, are projects conducted by a Russian linguist, Ludmila Klimanova.

This dissertation attempts to continue research efforts to fill a gap in literature concerning the study of telecollaboration that involves the use of a less commonly taught language, in this case Polish, at the beginner level. The author aims at illustrating virtual exchanges as a modern form of the learning process that corresponds with the needs of contemporary education, as well as at presenting in detail their application in the didactics of Polish as a foreign language at the beginner level. The research objectives of this study, accomplished via an analysis of the lexical resources used by students during a project, were to ascertain which theories of learning/language acquisition are applicable in the teaching process conducted through virtual exchanges. The subsequent research objective – achieved through the analysis of the cultural content provided by the participants of the project – is to determine to what extent the curriculum recommendations for teaching culture in the didactics of Polish as a foreign language are relevant to the process of learning in an online environment. Then, the didactical aim of the dissertation is to verify the usefulness of a telecollaboration model which would be appropriate for those starting to learn Polish as a foreign language. The basis for the presented research are three Polish-Italian telecollaboration projects, carried out successively in 2018/2019, 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 between the students learning Polish at the University of Turin and the students of Italian at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University of Lublin at A1 level.

The following PhD dissertation consists of seven chapters. The first three chapters constitute the theoretical part of this thesis, while the subsequent three form the research part. The last chapter aims at concluding the dissertation. Chapter I outlines the theoretical basis of this diploma paper – it discusses the status of foreign language teaching and learning (glottodidactics) as a scientific discipline and how glottodidactics of the Polish language fits in it. The considerations presented in this dissertation are concentrated within that field. Next, the most important theories of language acquisition and learning that affect the current state of language didactics are briefly discussed.

Chapter II describes how the learning of foreign languages through the participation in virtual exchanges responds to the challenges of the 21st century education. A set of competences necessary for learners in the modern world is presented, with a focus on the

following skills: linguistic, digital, personal, social, learning to learn, as well as intercultural. Those are the skills that are developed through telecollaboration-based projects. The latter ones have also become a stimulus for reflecting on the didactics of culture in the process of teaching foreign languages, especially in the context of teaching Polish as a foreign language. The chapter raises the issue of the competences necessary for the 21st century teachers and the skill set needed for an effective coordination of virtual exchanges.

The aim of Chapter III is to present the role of virtual exchanges in computer-assisted learning. It outlines the history and definitions of that field, as well as its importance in the process of teaching Polish as a foreign language. The further part of the chapter focuses on issues directly related to telecollaboration – the definitions and chronology of its development, followed by the topic of designing virtual exchanges. The general typology of such projects, their various stages, and characteristic tasks along with the criteria for their creation are outlined as well. What is more, the attention is drawn to the small number of activities available for those learning foreign languages at the beginner level, amidst the materials aimed at teachers-coordinators of the telecollaboration. The set of frequently used tools in virtual exchange projects and the typology of challenges and problems that accompany its planning and implementation are also presented.

Chapter IV aims at introducing the research section of the study. It presents general information about the three Polish-Italian virtual exchange projects undertaken by the author and the research project that was based on them. It defines the aims of implementing telecollaboration in the process of teaching Polish as a foreign language at the University of Turin, as well as the objectives of the planned study accompanied by a review of the subject literature. It discusses the educational context of foreign language learning at the two involved universities, as well as the factors shaping its organization. In the last part of the chapter a general outline of the conducted Polish-Italian virtual exchange projects is presented, together with a justification for the choice of the case study as the main research method adopted in the paper.

Chapter V is devoted to a presentation of the results of the preliminary study based on data from the first edition of the Polish-Italian telecollaboration, which was carried out in the academic year of 2018/2019. The chapter outlines aspects directly related to the implementation of the project – the coordinators, the participants, the curriculum and the tools that were used – as well as those concerning the preliminary research design: the adopted methodology and the research questions aimed at assessing the adequacy of the difficulty degree of proposed tasks, in relation to the language level of the students

performing them, the assessment of the tools that were used, and the attempt to identify the root of the problems that emerged during the implementation of the telecollaboration. For this purpose, several research methods were used simultaneously, following the concept of data triangulation: observations performed by the author of the dissertation throughout the project, a post-project survey conducted amongst the Italian participants, and a quantitative-qualitative analysis of the linguistic material, which consisted of all the students' utterances collected during the virtual exchange.

The compilation of data obtained through the research methods mentioned above made a detailed evaluation for each exchange task possible and helped to provide answers to the previously posed research questions. As a result, it was determined that the digital tools were selected adequately to the performed activities, and that the problems that arose during the telecollaboration were caused by insufficient amount of time allocated to the project, as well as by deficiencies in the system of its coordination. What is more, two tasks proved to be overly challenging for the students in terms of language. Furthermore, it was stated that the students felt that their participation in the virtual exchange allowed them to learn new Polish vocabulary and contributed to an increase in their knowledge of the Polish culture and what it is like to live in Poland. The conclusions from the conducted analysis were utilized to improve the Polish-Italian telecollaboration project in its two subsequent editions. The most significant improvements included: extending the duration of the exchange, changing the project's coordination model, and removing and replacing certain tasks with new ones.

Chapter VI presents the second and third editions of the Polish-Italian telecollaboration, which were carried out in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, and the main conducted research which was based on them. Moreover, it verifies the cited students' opinions on the benefits gained from the virtual exchange, as well as analyses the lexical means used in the project and the cultural content included in the participants' utterances. The main goal of the research project was to determine which theories of language acquisition and learning can be applied to teaching through virtual exchanges, and to determine to what extent the existing curricula of teaching the culture of Polish as a foreign language are consistent with the cultural content shared by the partners in an online environment. In order to perform an analysis of the aforementioned issues, a quantitative-qualitative study was conducted, based on a language corpus created from student utterances collected during the Polish-Italian virtual exchange projects conducted in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. The generated frequency lists were compared with the vocabulary introduced during the university classes of Polish as a foreign language, which made it possible to determine which lexical means are being retained owing to the

participation in the virtual exchange, and which are considered new for the students. This also helped create a basis for determining the contribution of imitation and creation processes in vocabulary learning during telecollaboration at the beginner level. In the second part of the research, all excerpts of the participants' utterances containing cultural content were identified. Based on its quantitative-qualitative analysis, it was determined how often they occur in the students' interactions, what topics they relate to, and which tasks trigger them. Then, it was established to what extent they correspond to the curricula for teaching the culture of Polish as a foreign language, comparing them to the categories included within.

The results obtained made it possible to claim that during the process of vocabulary acquisition, learners use actions based on imitation of linguistic forms, as well as on creation, forming new utterances using previously unknown words or structures. The research results also provided an affirmative verification of the participants' perceptions about the linguistic and cultural benefits of the participation in a virtual exchange. Moreover, it was observed that the cultural topics tackled by the students largely refer to popular culture, which is predominantly absent from the curricular proposals for the teaching of culture of Polish as a foreign language.

Chapter VII provides a summary of the conducted research and reflects on the application of virtual exchanges in teaching Polish as a foreign language at A1 level. It confirms that virtual exchange can be a valuable form of learning for learners of Polish at the beginner level who, despite limited linguistic competence, are able to effectively perform the proposed tasks and gain various benefits, such as the development of intercultural competence (mainly in terms of factual knowledge), linguistic competence (by reinforcing the already known lexical and grammatical structures and learning new ones), and digital competence (by becoming familiar with new tools and their functions). It is also stated in the chapter that the complications that emerged during the Polish-Italian telecollaboration demonstrate that the language level of the participants does not influence the types of difficulties faced by their coordinators.

The summary of the dissertation includes comments on the limitations of the conducted study and the implications for the future.

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