

Identifying Factors which Promote Successful Online Collaboration Among Language Learners: a Project Involving 2 Distance Universities

Pauline Ernest¹, Sarah Heiser², Linda Murphy³

¹Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain), ²The Open University (United Kingdom)

pernest@uoc.edu, s.l.heiser@open.ac.uk, l.m.murphy@open.ac.uk

Abstract

Many language teachers working online are keen to promote collaboration and group work and to exploit the potential of Web 2.0 tools and virtual environments. However, their training or experience frequently fails to provide them with the skills to do this effectively. This paper describes a training project involving 20 teachers from two distance universities: The Open University UK (OU) and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), which aimed to do the following:

- train language teachers to support online group work.
- try out a series of activities which would highlight awareness of elements that promote successful collaborative online learning.
- give teachers the opportunity to experience online collaborative learning first-hand.
- identify key skills for teacher training courses in this area.

The project lasted for 6 weeks, with all communication taking place via a Moodle workspace. Participants used forums and wikis for asynchronous communication and the video-conferencing tool Elluminate for synchronous contact.

The paper will examine teachers' perceptions of the collaboration which took place during the project and discuss the points which emerged as being most significant in promoting effective online collaborative learning. These included the need for detailed planning of the different stages of collaboration; designing appropriate tasks and selecting relevant tools for each task; providing clear instructions; encouraging group formation which takes account of participants' availability; ensuring learners are familiar with the tools and negotiate their own ground rules for participation; implementing different styles of moderation.

We will discuss how projects of this sort, which require participants to 'learn-by-doing', to interact with each other in order to complete authentic tasks and to give feedback on their experience, can provide teachers and teacher trainers with important insights into the nature of collaboration and can become a sound basis for further teacher development programs.