

Language and technology skills development in cross-cultural virtual teams

Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk

State University of Applied Sciences in Konin, Poland. ORCID 0000-0002-6836-3321

Saveena (Chakrika) Veeramoothoo

University of Houston-Downtown, USA. ORCID 0000-0002-5358-8720

Abstract

The focus of the paper is the identification of cultural and linguistic aspects that affect the dynamics of online cross-cultural and cross-linguistic professional communication. The researched groups are TAPP-linked undergraduate students of writing courses at the University of Minnesota in USA and intermediate/advanced MA English language university students in Poland (State University of Applied Sciences in Konin). The thesis defended is that the development of students' technological awareness and professional skills is positively afforded by online collaborative contacts with peers of other languages and cultures.

Keywords: *Collaboration, Corpus data, Culture, Interculturality, Professional communication, L1/L2*

Introduction

The Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project (TAPP) began in response to the need for students to develop intercultural and international collaboration skills. The project was initiated in the 1999-2000 academic year by Bruce Maylath and Sonia Vandepitte and involves the collaboration of students taking classes in two or more universities in different countries. Over the years, TAPP has grown to include 41 universities in 19 countries (TAPP) and its main aim is "to share insights into collaborative writing across borders and cultures, and, in the course of this work, to gain knowledge of others' cultural bases." In technical and professional communication, Anawati and Craig (2006) use Powell, Picolli and Ives' (2004) definition of virtual teams "as groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks" (p. 7). In TAPP, these teams typically consist of pairs or groups of instructors, with US-based students in technical and professional writing classes creating documents and students abroad translating these. Oftentimes, the collaboration also involves students providing feedback on each other's work. The TAPP collaboration is an opportunity for students to practice intercultural collaboration. TAPP participants have

discussed various aspects of the collaborations, focusing on the collaboration, intercultural and translation aspects in particular (e.g., Maylath & Arnó Macià, 2013; Maylath et al., 2013). This paper focuses on the identification of cultural and linguistic aspects that affect the dynamics of online intercultural communication between students at the University of Minnesota and the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin.

Minnesota – Konin TAPP collaboration: structure and research methodology

The collaboration involved students at the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin and the University of Minnesota in the years 2018-2020. State University of Applied Sciences in Konin students (groups of 22 and 18) were MA students, studying Translation, and Media and Business while students of the University of Minnesota were upper-level undergraduate students, enrolled in either a Business and Professional Writing course or a Technical and Professional Writing course.

American students

The course, Business and Professional Writing, aims at teaching students business communication genres and rhetorical principles applicable to these various genres¹. For this course, 22 students collaborated with their TAPP partners for the Job Package assignment. This assignment involved students choosing a job advertisement. Then they composed a cover letter tailored to this position. They also created a resume and an online presence (which could either be a LinkedIn profile or a website). Finally, they wrote a memo to discuss the rhetorical choices they made in their job package materials.

In addition, students composed TAPP-specific assignments. These included a pre-learning report, weekly reflections and a post-learning report. The pre-learning report served as an introduction for TAPP partners to get to know each other. The weekly reflections provided students with a space in which they could reflect on their ongoing collaboration, helping them analyze the progress of the collaboration and their own roles as collaborators. The post-learning report served as a space where students could share insights about their collaboration at the end of the collaboration.

For the Technical and Professional Writing course, 21 students collaborated with their TAPP partners for the Instructions assignment. The Instructions assignment involved students writing a set of instructions (for example, about building a Lego model) for a particular audience of their choice. Students then conducted usability tests for these instructions and revised the instructions based on the feedback they received from the usability tests. Finally, they wrote a memo to discuss the rhetorical choices they made

¹ The timeline and specific tasks used in the collaboration period are specified in the Appendix.

in composing the instructions. Similar to students in the Business and Professional Writing course, students in the Technical and Professional Writing course also worked on a pre-learning report, weekly reflections and a post-learning report.

Polish students

Students from the Polish group are Polish by origin, native speakers of Polish, generally at the upper intermediate or advanced proficiency level of English. They were all MA students majoring either in Translation or in Foreign Languages in Media and Business. TAPP tasks were additional assignments for them, although they were aligned to their course requirements. The students collaborated with their US TAPP partners with regard to the Job Package assignment. This assignment involved students responding and commenting on the American students' cover letter written in response to their letters of job assignment.

The Polish students' activities involved two sets of tasks in particular academic terms. In the first year of collaboration, the tasks involved first writing an instruction to perform an activity, such as cooking a dish or making an origami figure. Then, students recorded this activity in a file, and sent the instruction and recording to one or two partners at the University of Minnesota. The number of US partners varied due to a smaller number of students at the Polish classes. The US students first reviewed the instructed texts and sent their comments to the Polish partners. As the next step they performed the activities according to the instructions (i.e. the students served as usability test participants). Then, the US students forwarded their feedback about the set of instructions to their Polish partners. The Polish students performed a similar set of tasks, reviewing, commenting and implementing the instructions in terms of practical activities.

In the first term of the second year of the collaboration, the Polish students wrote essays, referring to their MA thesis topics and forwarded them to the University of Minnesota students. The latter reviewed the essays and, after a series of elaboration and clarification questions and comments exchange, the Polish students finalised the texts and presented them to the US partners. Both the US and Polish lecturers were cc'd on each of the cooperation stages.

It should also be emphasized that the student collaboration resulted in additional online exchange types between the TAPP partners. This task was assigned to all of the Media and Business course students as part of their course work and it involved conducting an interview with a foreign, English-speaking person. Four of the Polish TAPP-engaged students invited their University of Minnesota TAPP partners to the interview. The topics focused on two themes: cultural specificity of the interactants' respective linguistic and cultural background and setting on the one hand, and the COVID-19 pandemic situation in the country of residence of the interlocutor on the other. The interviews were recorded by the students upon permission of the

interviewees and discussed at one of the MA seminars. The Polish students of Translation specialism were requested to translate all the TAPP tasks into Polish and in the case of the interview assignment, they wrote a reflective memo concerning the topics discussed.

Peer feedback which was an essential part of the collaboration involved the lecturers' engagement to prepare students for peer feedback making reference to previous in-class peer feedback. The students asked their partners for feedback and clarification with regard to required and expected task in each case. The tools used for feedback involved Google docs, Word documents with Track Changes as well as email exchange.

All copies of the exchanged texts as well as the official email copies were accessible to the lecturers from both universities. The communication structure from the perspective of its qualitative intercultural, professional and linguistic perspectives was analysed for their dynamics and development, together with the post-task reflective memos written at the end of the collaboration period.

Results and discussion of the collaboration impact

Essentially, the TAPP collaboration between the Polish and US students functioned as a peer review activity. Students at the University of Minnesota received feedback on their Job Package materials or instructions from their TAPP partners. They then revised their Job Package materials or instructions and submitted their revision for grading. Similarly, students at the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin received feedback on their essays from their TAPP partners.

Excerpts from the students' Reflective memos identify both positive (1, 3) and more negative (2, 4) sides of the cooperation:

- (1) Polish students: *as they are native speakers and without any doubt they are far more proficient in English, I had a perfect opportunity to learn from my new colleagues some new structures. It was also a chance to notice how important is being punctual, disciplined, and methodical. Yet another advantage is that I could have better insight into my partners' culture and mentality. In the case of such cooperation it is particularly essential to be broad-minded, well-mannered and amiable.*
- (2) Polish student B: *The issue that could have been improved in the collaboration is enhancing the contact with our partners. I mean that we and they should answer on almost every e-mail in order to confirm the receipt of e-mails. This should be done because of the fact that sometimes I sent the file, such as an instruction or a usability test and I did not get any information if my partners received these files.*
- (3) US student A: *[The collaboration] allowed me to open my eyes to the world and realize that our two worlds are very similar.*

(4) US student B: *Overall, I received mediocre feedback for my instructions. I was not able to make many changes because she only critiqued me on 2 of my steps out of a total of [...]*

Students usually shared feedback by email. Although instructors encouraged students to virtually meet through a video call, many students preferred written communication through email, at least in the first stage of the cooperation. Nevertheless, when asked by Polish students to arrange a video call and discuss both the TAPP tasks and the current pandemic situation in respective regions the students lived, most of the partners got involved in this activity and made the video recording of their discussions.

Students often used Google docs, PDFs and Word documents to provide feedback on each other's work, students did not report many technological issues during the collaboration and did not discuss their preference for written communication in the reflections. However, students often expressed in informal conversations that video calls were difficult to plan due to time difference between Poland and the US. They also expressed unease at face-to-face conversations with virtual strangers on video call platforms (that is, they did not know their partners enough to feel comfortable doing these video calls). We should note that these comments were made before the Covid-19 pandemic during which most classes and meetings moved online for the US-based students.

We should note that the Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted the TAPP collaboration. As classes moved online, many students at both the University of Minnesota and the State University in Konin left university housing and went home. This meant that some students did not have access to the same resources they would have had at their disposal if they still lived on campus (such as strong and reliable Wi-Fi connections, etc.). In addition, students had to cope with taking all their classes in an online setting, which often required a certain adjustment from students (e.g. in terms of dealing with more self-paced courses, etc.). These put added stress on students as they struggled to complete all assignments. Despite these difficulties, students were able to successfully complete the TAPP collaboration.

The students developed their collaborative skills respecting differences in their cultural and linguistic background, which was tested both in their inter- and post-task reports and in oral interviews. Since the collaboration involved a number of steps, both on the part of lecturers and students, it allowed students to develop project management skills. The students collaborated with task planning, negotiating collaboration deadlines, tools to use (writing, peer review, communication) and finding ways to deal with conflict (e.g. when to involve instructors if there is lack of participation from their partners).

Polish students developed their additional professional skills in terms of language corpus use, in particular Corpus of American English (COCA Davies) (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017) for the application to learn details concerning

meaning and use of American English professional terminology as well as to perform TAPP-related translation tasks.

Conclusion

As quoted in Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk & Slomski (2016), *collective intelligence and the wisdom of crowds* exceed those of an individual person (see also Surowiecki, 2021; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk & Bogucki, 2016). The student collaborative tasks are inspired by development in computer-mediated communication and language tools that have been accompanying these changes. In this sense, our study analyzes the collaborative tasks which combine the processes of conscious reflection with those of writing skill development. Furthermore, the students from both cultures developed their professional skills in the form of professional job application writing on the one hand and task-oriented exchange, as well as interviewing on the Polish part on the other. Both groups learned to consider different linguistic and cultural identities, which, on the part of US students, involved a more colloquial style of exchanges, and on the Polish part encompassed the introduction of this more friendly idiom, accompanying the students' concern about the grammatical rigor and structural correctness of written discourse.

An additional aspect of the study is the Polish students' development of translational competency and skill in the students of Translation and an interview communication practice for the Media and Business students.

What can be finally emphasized is that in both US and Polish groups it is interaction in discourse, as originally proposed in Long's *Interaction Hypothesis* (1991[1985]), that was observed to lead to professional development, fuller comprehension and mutual inter-cultural understanding.

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Appendix

1. List of student assignments

University of Minnesota students

- Resume
- Application letter
- Professional online presence
- Provide feedback to your TAPP partner on their work
- Writer's memo

TAPP-specific assignments

- Pre-Learning Report
- Weekly reflections
- Post-Learning Report

Job Package - Activities

- Revise **Job Package** based on TAPP partner's feedback
- Write weekly reflections
- Complete pre-learning report, post-learning report

State University of Applied Sciences in Konin students

TAPP-specific assignments

- Instruction in Polish to perform activities and construct an object
- Translation of instruction into English
- Regular comments on peer feedback
- Performing the task
- Reports on the activities – problems, advantages
- Recording the task performing

TAPP-related tasks:

Translation students – translate texts from each collaboration step into Polish

Media and Business students – plan and conduct an interview, make a recording, write a reflective memo

2. Student tasks_Timeline

	Konin, Poland	Minnesota, US
Tasks	First term: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Set of instructions Second term: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Essays based on students' MA theses 	Business & Professional Writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Job Package (cover letter, resume, online presence, reflective memo) Technical & Professional Writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Set of instructions, reflective memo
Common Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pre-learning report ● Translation Brief ● Post-learning report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pre-learning report ● Translation Brief ● Post-learning report
Technologies	Email, Google Docs, Word, video call	Email, Google Docs, Word, video call
Languages	English, Polish	English

Instruction details

Week #	Tasks
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fill out pre-collaboration worksheets (i.e. Pre-Learning report + translation brief), introducing themselves to each other ● Start working on their set of instructions/job packages (US); Start writing their set of instructions/essays (Polish)
2-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finish set of instructions/essays and set of instructions/job packages ● Send their work to their partners
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feedback/peer review
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Revise (including additional meetings between partners to go over feedback) based on feedback ● Submit revisions to instructors
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Complete post-collaboration worksheet (i.e. Post-Learning Report)

Multilingual academic and professional communication in a networked world

Proceedings of AELFE-TAPP 2021 (19th AELFE Conference, 2nd TAPP Conference)
 ARNÓ, E.; AGUILAR, M.; BORRÀS, J.; MANCHO, G.; MONCADA, B.; TATZL, D. (EDITORS)
 Vilanova i la Geltrú (Barcelona), 7-9 July 2021
 Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya
 ISBN: 978-84-9880-943-5



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