Oral Proficiency Assessment of Intercultural Online Collaborative Tasks

Eurocall Conference, Nottingham 2 September 2011

Sake Jager, University of Groningen
Steve Thorne, Portland State University / University of Groningen
Estelle Meima, University of Groningen
Why intercultural online collaborations?

- General recognition of need for “real” contact with culture and people as part of L2 learning process
- The use of internet communication tools to support dialogue, collaborative task completion, and social interaction between internationally dispersed groups of learners
- Articulates with shift from “linguistic” and “communicative” competence to “intercultural” and “plurilingual” competence
- Embeds L2 in development of meaningful relationships
- New linguistic repertoires afforded by interpersonal mediation (Thorne, 2003; Kinginger & Belz, 2003; Vyatkina, 2007)
Importance of assessment in CMC

- Assessment of CMC and online engagement often considered difficult and fuzzy → marginalization of online intercultural exchanges in institutional L2 contexts
- Assessment is a necessary condition in instructed learning contexts
  - Grades
  - Accountability – teachers and students
  - Articulation with other components of the curriculum
- Assessment affords data-driven improvements to task design and forms of online interaction
- Assessment may assist learners with developing critical language awareness
- Particular need for assessment of spoken interaction
Common European Framework of Reference at University of Groningen

- **Rationale:**
  - Linking TBLT to CEF beneficial, because it puts an outcome-based perspective on task-based work (Nunan 2004; Willis and Willis 2007)
  - Provides a starting point for designing a performance-based curriculum

- **Use of CEF in language courses (supported by Dialang, European Language Portfolio, etc.):**
  - Making students familiar with principles and levels of framework
  - Making them aware of own levels of proficiency
  - Setting personal learning objectives

- **Use of CEF in teacher training (supported by CEFTrain and WebCEF):**
  - Standardizing assessment, getting teachers ‘on the same page’

- **Primary skills assessed:**
  - Writing (written production)
  - Presentations (spoken production)

- **Less experience in assessment of interactive work (spoken interaction)**
- **No experience yet in assessment of online interactive work**
The Groningen-Padova project

- Collaboration between students in Groningen and Padova (teachers Estelle Meima and Gillian Davies)
- University students of English (mostly Dutch and Italian)
- Approx. 20 students on each side
- Collaboration through Skype
- Introduction in class, followed by three self-arranged online meetings
- Sessions were video recorded and uploaded to WebCEF
- Blackboard used for presenting the tasks, student journals, and additional information and communication
- Project period: May-June 2011
Primary objective

- Pilot project to examine if and how such online collaborative tasks can be integrated as a *structural* component in (some of) our language courses.
- CMC with Skype
  - How do students experience these exchanges? (motivation, language learning, intercultural communication)
  - Can we have students do these tasks on their own? (time management, management of technology)
- Assessment with WebCEF
  - How useful and useable is self-assessment in this context?
  - What combinations of self-assessment and other-assessment are useful?
  - Will there be differences in assessment by the same students across different tasks?
  - Will the annotations be specific and focused enough?
  - Will student assessment differ from teacher assessment?
  - How do student assess each other in relation to assessing themselves?
- Future uses:
  - Database for research on various aspects of online intercultural communication
  - Using these samples in standardization sessions with teachers
The tasks

- Guidelines from literature, e.g. O’Dowd and Ware (2009)
- Topics of mutual interest
- Clear objective / outcome of the task: speaking followed up by writing in Blackboard journal
- Tasks:
  - 1: Interviewing - written biography
  - 2: Comparing and contrasting cities – written report
  - 3: Role play (three topics, information gap) – reflection report
- Recordings in WebCEF for self-assessment
Annotations

☐ applies to entire sample

Range

- **C2**: Shows great flexibility reformulating ideas in differing linguistic forms to convey finer shades of meaning precisely, to give emphasis, to differentiate and to eliminate ambiguity. Also has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms.

- **C1**: Has a good command of a broad range of language allowing him/her to select a formulation to express him/her clearly in an appropriate style on a wide range of general, academic, professional or leisure topics without having to restrict what he/she wants to say.

- **B2**: Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints on most general topics, without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so.

- **B1**: Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel and current events.

- **A2**: Uses basic sentence patterns with memorised phrases, groups of a few words and formulae in order to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations.

- **A1**: Has a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations.

Summary

- Overall Spoken Interaction: B2
- Range
- Accuracy
- Fluency
- Interaction
- Coherence

clear selection
Results

- Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Journal entries</th>
<th>Recordings (VB, WebCEF)</th>
<th>Assessments (WebCEF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group introduction (18 IT, 18 NL)</td>
<td>7 IT, 7 NL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>13 IT, 13 NL</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare and contrast</td>
<td>6 IT, 11 NL</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role play</td>
<td>6 IT, 6 NL</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Significant decrease in number of recordings
- Little use of assessment
- Discussion results on basis of journals and student interviews (NL)
“On the whole, I believe this pilot is a very nice and friendly way to become familiar with the English language.”

“Positive reactions

“In general, my feeling about this International Collaboration Project is very positive. It is a good way to practice our oral skills, and, moreover, it has been a great way to put students from different cultures with the same language interest in contact with each other. This distinguishes it from practicing with a classmate.”

“It is very instructive to put our English language skills in practice in this way. Additionally, I think it is really nice to interact with someone with a different culture. I enjoy all the things I get to know about my partner and her culture during.”

“I would definitely participate in another collaboration programme like this, and I would recommend it to a friend. I find this to be a fun experience and I did pick up some new words here and there.”

“I absolutely recommended this experience to my peers and friends and I will probably (if I have time) participate to other collaborations, it's always beautiful talk with other people, interact and share feelings and emotions with people around the world!”

“Anyway I would absolutely participate in another collaboration, because I like to try my skills anytime I have the opportunity. I'm not shy to speak with a native speaker, on the contrary I can learn more words, expressions and I can improve my pronunciation. I would also recommend it to a friend!”

“Broadly speaking the Skype exchange helped me widen a bit my vocabulary, learn new ways to express what I think, feel more confident about my English abilities and it was also a very interesting and innovative way to practice English.”

“I absolutely recommended this experience to my peers and friends and I will probably (if I have time) participate to other collaborations, it's always beautiful talk with other people, interact and share feelings and emotions with people around the world!”
Negative reactions

“I would like to participate in another programme like this but I will not recommend it to a friend who wants to improve his/her English. I like this programme because it allows me to communicate with people from a different culture, but frankly it has done virtually nothing to improve my English.” (written by a C1/C2 student)

“As a final remark, I would like to add that the project added value to the course, however, it would add more value if the partner class would be on the same level of experience.”

“The Italians do not have the same level of English as we do and it is very difficult to use standard phrases with them because we cannot carry out formal conversations when one of the partner does not have sufficient skills for it.”
Intercultural online collaboration

- Collaboration went very well, in spite of technical problems
- Introductory group session problematic, but very useful
- Independent exchanges worked very well (apart from recording)
- Extended online exchanges (up to one hour); shows enthusiasm, but problematic for recording and assessment
- Most students enjoyed the project, they were pleasantly surprised by how much they liked the experience
- Opportunities for language development aspects also appreciated
- Strengthened students’ confidence in using the language
- Concern about insufficient ‘academic’ language, differences in proficiency with Groningen students
Tasks

- Overall clear and well-structured
- Opportunity for real conversation, improvising, intercultural and pragmatic aspects (not recognised as important elements by everyone)
- Too easy, not challenging enough for some students, should be time-restricted
- Some found it hard to relate the tasks to the language they had learned in the course
- Distinction between tasks 1 and 2 vs task 3 (role play):
  - “In my opinion, assignment 1 and 2 were particularly interesting because it involved discovering another culture…”
  - Role play (accommodations officer/student; airport official / traveller; music band / record company) did not draw on cultural backgrounds of participants
Skype and video recording

- **Skype:**
  - Very easy to use (in institution and at home)
  - Mix of audio and video conversations (video is important!)
  - Use of chat, web links, etc (not recorded in video)

- **Recording software (Vodburner):**
  - Recording worked well
  - Recordings were too long
  - Editing and uploading by students greatest problem
  - Conversion and uploading to WebCEF by technology coordinator: bottleneck
  - Recording tool only available in institution is too limiting
Self-assessment with WebCEF

- Used very infrequently
  - Recording problem
  - Too many tools at once
  - Time distance between performance and availability in WebCEF
  - Students could not upload the files themselves
- Journals used for reflection and self-assessment
- Positively rated by students who used it
- Self-assessment / annotations too general
- Important issue raised by one student:

  “In my opinion, WEBcef was not very helpful for self assessment. The overall idea was good; however, there could be done more with it. You easily forget to do this assessment, as you already know how your conversation went with your partner. I knew immediately after each Skype conversation what could be improved and, therefore, I believe that it did not added any value to this exercise….?”
Conclusions:

- Continue use of Skype between learners of one language from different countries.
- Focus on intercultural and pragmatic aspects, but do not ignore language aspects (vocabulary, grammar pronunciation).
- Aim for concrete task outcomes (e.g. journal entries, recordings).
- Make students do the tasks at their own time and place.
- Make all the software available independent of place and time; not easy for Skype and video recording -> look for future developments, e.g. SpeakApps (www.speakapps.org).
Conclusions (cont’d)

- Build intercultural elements into all the tasks (including the role play)
- Introduce students to WebCEF in non-interactive task (record themselves, upload to server)
- Have students upload the files to WebCEF themselves
- Do not follow up each task with self-assessment in WebCEF;
- Provide teacher assessment of the same task (e.g. for guidance at beginning of course; or last-minute feedback before an important test)
Thank you for your attention

- Questions?
- Further information:
  - Sake Jager, s.jager@rug.nl
  - Steve Thorne, stevenlthorne@gmail.com
  - Estelle Meima, e.j.meima@rug.nl
Links

- **Vodburner recording tool:**
  - [http://www.vodburner.com/](http://www.vodburner.com/)

- **WebCEF project:**
  - [http://www.webcefeu](http://www.webcefeu)

- **WebCEF tool:**

- **SpeakApps:**
  - [http://www.speakapps.eu](http://www.speakapps.eu)
“It is something I have never done before and it is definitely a good way to speak English outside class.”

“We were able to understand and complete the interesting tasks. I liked the fact that we had to talk first about ourselves, then about our cities because these topics permitted us to talk a lot, and do a lot of practice for our oral skills. This experience helped me because I don't always have the chance to practice my oral English, to improve my abilities in explaining something for a longtime in English.”

“Furthermore, I enjoyed the assignments. They were well structured, first you had to get to know each other during assignment one and continuing with assignment two, you were enabled to have some more profound discussions…”

“The tasks we had to do with our Italian partner were clear; nevertheless, I was not able to apply what I have learned so far in this course. I have noticed that the Italian students do not use academic language and they rarely use linking words… Furthermore, the writing assignments we had to do could be more academic. Maybe we could discuss an academic topic instead of talking about ourselves or our cities, which made these assignments informal.”

“Furthermore, the tasks were clear and could be done with relative ease. I did not really think they were interesting however. However, I found them quite challenging, due to the fact that sometimes it was very difficult to find the right words to say what you want while allowing your partner to understand you… Overall, I think I would like another collaboration, but in another format. I would like to focus on more personal subject to communicate about, instead of talking about the cities we live in. This allows to get more of a taste of the partners culture.”

“We were able to understand and complete the interesting tasks. I liked the fact that we had to talk first about ourselves, then about our cities because these topics permitted us to talk a lot, and do a lot of practice for our oral skills. This experience helped me because I don't always have the chance to practice my oral English, to improve my abilities in explaining something for a longtime in English.”

Furthermore, I enjoyed the assignments. They were well structured, first you had to get to know each other during assignment one and continuing with assignment two, you were enabled to have some more profound discussions…”