

Exploring ‘New Worlds’ through New Media in ELT classrooms

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Abstract

This article is based primarily on a shared virtual classroom of Macedonia, Europe and Nepal, Asia, and secondarily on a talk presented in Nepal English Language Teachers’ Association 19th International Conference 2014 held in Kathmandu, Nepal. It discusses how instructors and students had applied “New Media” in ELT classrooms with the aim of enhancing students’ English Language skills including 21st century literacies through a virtual cultural exchange session between Macedonian and Nepali classrooms. In other words, it explores how learning process can be optimized by using internet, computer, multimedia and mobile. Moreover, these tools can become a means to explore “New World(s)” which exists beyond one’s physical classroom.

Keywords: virtual classroom, New Media, ELT literacy, Macedonia, Nepal, New world

Introduction

The context of this project began in 2013 with E-Teacher Scholarship, which was a ten-week online professional development course from University of Oregon funded by the U.S. Department of State, Regional English Language Officer, U.S. Embassy. Both of the instructors (authors of this article) were awarded a course ‘Introduction to Pedagogy and Practices for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.’ There were 23 candidates from all around the world. They learned, shared and networked. During a discussion session, Julijana Zlatevska from Macedonia initiated the idea of connecting classrooms; both of

the instructors agreed immediately. Consequently, on 17th May 2013, one of the classes in Nepal, Asia, was successfully connected to one of classes in Macedonia, Europe, through the social networking site Skype.

The primary aim of this online class was to make online intercultural projects a productive way to improve the teaching and learning of English (Dart, 2015). Secondary goal of this class was to enable our students to explore new worlds along with learning English language.

At the beginning, the instructors had established a number of memorandum

understandings for the session. They are as follows:

- The students will be of a limited number – no more than ten students – who are at the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) intermediate level B1 (Council of Europe 2001).
- Participating learners will talk to their counterparts on a one-on-one basis, turn-by-turn in the form of online conversation.
- Once the session is started, students will occupy most of the session under the instructors' observation.

Methods

The idea of sharing culture is one of the teaching tools/methods which is widely practised in ELT classrooms. The classroom practices must go beyond the traditional practices, so the students will learn about cultural aspects all around the world though the students might not travel outside their country. However, the world has become a global village. By taking all these elements into account, the educators agreed that students can refine their understanding about their own culture by comparing it to each other's culture. Such type of exchange programs will definitely activate students' as well as teachers' cultural awareness. Every human being is different, and such type of activities will enhance students' interpersonal communication, social understanding, interpretive skills, and cultural literacy.

21st century Literacy and Language Learning

Most people widely believe that being "literate" means being competent in

reading and writing in target language. But the people who are "literate" in the context of Macedonia and Nepal are hardly aware that the definition of being "literate" has changed drastically, especially in the 21st century. According to NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English), a literate person must have the ability to:

- assist learners to gain proficiency with tools of technology with regular practice.
- develop relationships with others, and confront and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally.
- design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes.
- manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information.
- create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts.
- attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

To integrate these literacies, for instance, our participants analyzed and evaluated the web-based materials related to each other's countries and synthesized it in posters to show each other. In this ways, pictures or images also provide students an opportunity to interact with the phenomena from all around the world.

The teachers were all aware of the Chinese proverb 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' They could pass on various e-books and online articles to each other's students to learn about 'target cultures,' but the

instructors preferred pictures in the form of posters to integrate 21st century literacy – visual literacy. The first reason for using posters is that research shows that the human brain reads pictures quicker than the words. Another reason for using visual images is that learners of this modern age grew up in a world where using smart phones, laptops, and social media are part of everyday life (Prensky, 2001).

The Role of New Media

Bailey Socha and Barbara Eber-Schmid (n. d.) define new media as “new media is related to the internet and the interplay among technologies, images and sounds. In fact, the definition of new media changes daily and will continue to do so.” Being ELT practitioners, the educators believe that new media should be an integral part of our classroom for 21st century literacies. In addition, the trainers cannot ignore the fact that they need to incorporate sociocultural factors into their classrooms (Palmer and Sharifian, 2007).

Material development

One of the challenging tasks was to develop materials that could be used during the session. Instead of doing this task by teachers alone, which is the conventional way, the educators decided to encourage their students/ learners to do so with the help of teachers’ guidance.

Designing and sharing material are not easy tasks for students when they are not facilitated well. One of the advantages of involving learners in designing materials is that it helps teachers use their time in the best possible manner (Fisher & Frey, 2011). For this, the educators had to first believe in their learners’ ability. Then, they set

certain goals or activities as listed earlier. In addition, the instructors had to help their learners with certain examples. For example, the local dances of Macedonia and Nepal are *Oro* and *Deuda* respectively, and the national monuments of both countries had been named as listed in national/ world heritage sites. Next, the learners went through the process of making and remaking in order to use those materials during the session. Later, those materials were stored in the libraries or resource centers of the respective academic institutions.

Cultural exchange in ELT

During the session, the educators were aware that participants would receive each other with mindfulness. After deciding to apply new media in our classrooms to connect, the instructors started to explore each other’s target cultures, their differences and ways to improve cultural awareness.

But the question comes: What is culture? Anthropologist John H. Bodley (1994, p. 22) defines culture as “what people think, make, and do.” Another intriguing concept of culture comes from Edward T. Hall. According to Hall, culture is an “iceberg.” In other words, a culture has its deep culture under water with surface culture visible to everyone. The teachers tried to analyze the surface cultures as well as the deep cultures of Nepal and Macedonia. One example that the students shared was how they say their names in their local language. The ways are as follows:

- JAS SE VIKAM SACHITA.
(Macedonian)
(My name is Schita)
- MERO NAAM ANNA HO. (Nepali)

(My name is Anna)

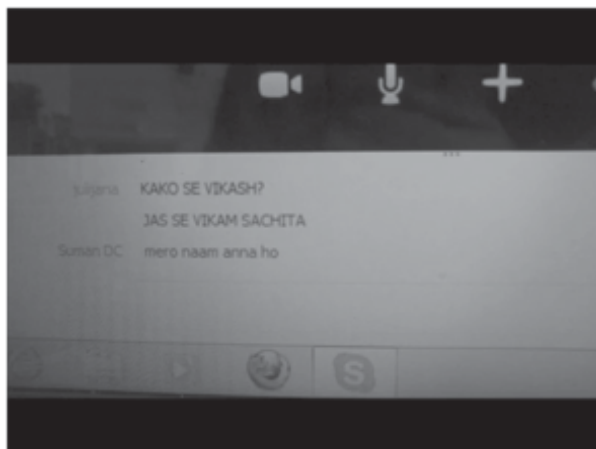


Figure 1. Sharing of names

According to the participants, one of the interesting parts of the session was the moment when the learners of Nepal and Macedonia performed their cultural dances: *Deuda* and *Oro* respectively.



Figure 2. Macedonian students who are performing Oro.

Along with this, the teachers had discussed a number of topics. Some of the topics are as follows:

- Landscapes
- Famous cities
- National dress
- Dance and music
- National Flag

- National Heroes
- Local languages
- Typical names of persons
- Mountains
- Religion

At the end of the session, the instructors had a short feedback session with students. The learners reported that they had learnt a lot about each other's countries and their cultures in spite of technical issues. The teachers also shared their views with each other and ended the session in a positive note. This has inspired the teachers to connect professionally.

Challenges

The class had been planned a week before all got connected. One of the biggest challenges the educators faced during the execution was technical issues. Though the session was planned for 90 minutes, the class lasted four hours due to a number of technical disturbances. Thanks to

everyone's patience and curiosity, they stayed with the class.

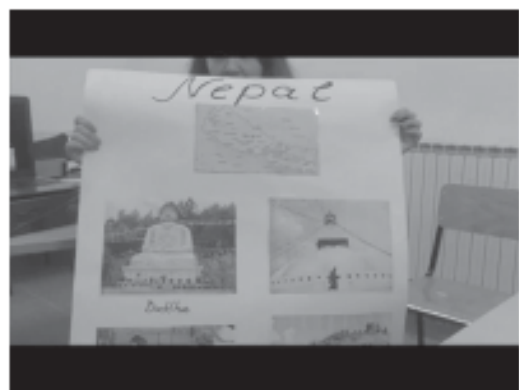
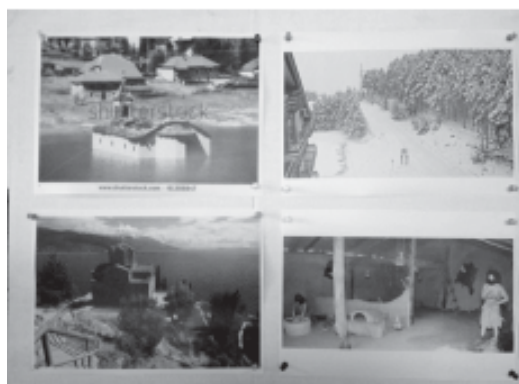
Moreover, it was very difficult to address cultural learning in an English language classroom because the students had a language barrier to some extent, and the learners had not been exposed to each other's cultures before. In this case, use of new media was not enough, and it was challenging as well.

Solution

The educators enhanced their own cultural awareness by talking to each other and researching the target culture through the internet. Then, they followed these steps:

The teachers had determined the topic they were going to discuss in their virtual classrooms, including national heroes,

dances, languages, religions, and so on. They had assigned their students to make posters and reports in their own way to show each other's classroom. Some of the posters made by students of Nepal and Macedonia are as follows:



Figures 3 and 4. Posters by students of Nepal and Macedonia

1. With the responsibility of the facilitators, the teachers observed students' activities and helped them find and organize the content. The teachers also suggested to their students a few web sites where they could conduct research about the target culture.
2. The instructors prepared the questionnaire to be discussed in the classroom about the topics mentioned earlier.
3. In the end, students were facilitated in the classrooms, and they performed accordingly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the instructors ended up with the notion of exploring new worlds and their cultures by exchanging information about cultures so students could reflect on both cultures in a communicative way as both are simultaneously the target cultures. In other words, students were talking to other students whose existences were not in their cognitive sphere. In addition, "learning to be intercultural involves much more than just knowing about another culture: it involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others" (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009).

After the completion of this session, the educators realized they can connect their classrooms beyond geographical boundaries by using internet and social networks. It not only helped to refine the learning process but also provided instructors with a platform to explore 'new worlds.' In this way, the teachers had

successfully connected their overseas classrooms –Macedonian and Nepal – to each other through the social network site Skype and helped their students to explore the cultures of Macedonia and Nepal.

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Contributors

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Ms Julijana Zlatevska has been working as an English teacher since 2005 when she graduated from the state university St. Clement of Ohrid in Skopje, Macedonia. She's been working in the private and the public sector, but has dedicated her MA studies to the contributions (impact) that new technologies have on the development of English language to the students of rural areas. She has done \online classes with schools from the U.S. for a couple of years, which has had tremendous success on her students' skills development. She was the recipient of E-Teacher Scholarships from the U.S. Department of State, RELO, U.S. Embassy. She can be contacted at georgievskajulijana@yahoo.com.