Collaborative foreign language learning practices and design principles for supporting effective collaboration in a blended learning environment

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Abstract
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Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/asshpapers/434
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Collaborative foreign language learning practices and design principles for supporting effective collaboration in a blended learning environment

This paper describes a research study that investigated foreign language students’ collaborative practice in a blended, authentic learning environment. A group of intermediate and advanced level students of Italian at an Australian university interacted and collaborated with each other and with a group of native speaker mentors through a web-based learning management system and in face-to-face mode. As part of the project, students were required to complete two authentic tasks designed according to an authentic learning framework. In order to complete these tasks, students assigned themselves into small collaborative groups and negotiated their roles and responsibilities with little or no intervention from the class teacher apart from the requirement that communication took place in the target language. This paper describes the different phases of the collaborative process and the strategies employed by learners to overcome some of the challenges and problems encountered. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for language educators seeking to support student collaboration and foreign language development in a blended language learning environment.

Keywords: collaborative learning; authentic learning; blended learning; design principles; design-based research

Introduction

Enabling foreign language learners to engage in collaborative dialogue and purposeful communicative practice with their peers and other competent target language speakers in meaning-focused authentic contexts has been recognised in second language acquisition (SLA) literature as crucial to successful foreign language development (e.g., Ellis, 2016; Nunan & Richards, 2015).

In recent years, SLA researchers influenced by Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) have applied its main tenets to second language acquisition and have emphasised the connection between the social context in which a second language is learned and linguistic development (e.g., Lantolf, Poehner & Swain, 2018; van Compernolle, 2015). According to
these researchers, second language acquisition is more likely to occur when learners engage in collaborative social interaction and dialogue with other learners and competent target language speakers and when they participate in communicative activities that are meaningful and goal oriented.

The pedagogical approach employed in this study integrated aspects of Vygotsky’s SCT applied to SLA and situated learning principles to develop a blended learning environment which combined web-based and face-to-face communication to support students’ interaction and collaboration in the target language. This paper describes the different phases of the collaborative process and the strategies employed by learners to overcome some of the challenges and problems encountered. The paper concludes with a set of design principles and guidelines to support the development of similar collaborative language learning environments in other educational contexts.

**Literature Review**

This literature review is structured to present two key theoretical contexts relevant to the study: key tenets of Vygotsky’s SCT applied to second and foreign language learning and the critical role of interaction and collaborative dialogue with more advanced speakers, and secondly, the theory of situated learning and its emphasis on developing learning environments that enable collaboration and cooperation through participation in authentic tasks.

**Sociocultural theory**

Social interaction and collaboration with other members of a community has been identified as a critical element of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT). Sociocultural theory was developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) as a general psychological theory aimed at understanding and explaining higher forms of human mental functioning. Unlike
traditional cognitive approaches to learning—which direct their attention to the cognitive processes of individuals in isolation from their learning environment—Vygotskian SCT sees cognitive development as socially situated, where cognitive development is the product of the overall sociocultural context of which an individual is part and occurs through a process of interaction and participation in collaborative socially mediated activities with others. Over the last 30 years, several researchers have applied Vygotsky’s SCT to SLA and have emphasised the interrelatedness of the structural aspects of language and SLA and the social and cultural context in which a second language is learned (Lantolf, Thorne & Poehner, 2015; Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2015). According to these researchers, cognitive and linguistic development occurs when learners have the opportunity to communicate and collaborate while completing purposeful, goal-oriented tasks and achieving a common goal.

The application of SCT supports the development of pedagogical approaches which focus on providing opportunities for meaningful social interaction and collaborative language practice with other target language speakers such as teachers, peers and native speakers, who can model correct and appropriate language use and assist learners to develop a higher level of linguistic proficiency (Poehner, 2018; Storch, 2017).

**Situated learning**

The situated learning model, originally introduced by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) to refer to the role of context in the learning of knowledge and skills, emphasises the role of collaboration and cooperation as critical elements of effective learning environments. Brown et al. (1989) analysed the common features of several effective learning situations and proposed a method of instruction that was based on the traditional model of learning and teaching through apprenticeship. Such “cognitive apprenticeships” involved enabling learners to observe experts, together with other learners of different skill levels, as they participate in

Collins et al. (1991) further developed the situated learning model and proposed a framework based on four critical dimensions: content, method, sequence, and sociology. The fourth and final dimension of this framework, sociology, is significant for this study because it involves supporting students’ collaboration and cooperation and encouraging them to work together in a way that fosters cooperative problem solving.

The situated learning framework can be effectively applied to a foreign language learning environment where learners are given the opportunity to complete tasks collaboratively with other more competent learners and target language speakers while observing how they communicate in the target language. Such an approach also enables them to examine a problem from a variety of different perspectives and reflect on their learning both individually and as a group (e.g., Ozverir, Herrington & Osam, 2016).

A study was conducted to investigate the process that foreign language students followed to collaborate in a blended learning environment and to shed light on the strategies employed by learners to overcome some of the problems encountered while completing two authentic, collaborative tasks.

**Methodology**

The research methodology for this study was structured within the four-phased design-based research (DBR) model proposed by Reeves (2006). This model enabled the researchers to progressively test and refine the collaborative learning environment developed through two successive iterative implementations and to develop a series of design principles to guide the development of similar collaborative learning environments in other foreign language learning contexts.
Context

The study consisted of two consecutive six-week iterative cycles in which 16 intermediate and advanced level students of Italian collaborated with each other and with a group of seven native speaker mentors (recruited prior to the start of the project) to complete two authentic tasks. The two tasks were designed and developed according to design guidelines for developing authentic tasks (Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010) including: real-world relevance, complexity, multiple perspectives and resources, opportunities for collaboration and reflection, integration and application across different subject areas, and integration with assessment. The tasks involved planning and developing a detailed itinerary and a comprehensive travel guide of firstly, a four-week trip to Australia and secondly, a four-week exchange trip to Italy. A description of each individual task was uploaded on the course website prior to the beginning of each iterative cycle. The Task 1 description is provided below.

Table 1. Description of Authentic Task 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TASK 1: Planning a trip to Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A group of Italian university students is coming to Australia for a four-week exchange trip. Plan and develop a detailed itinerary of the trip and create a comprehensive travel guide for the students. The travel guide can take the form of a web page or website, a video segment or a PowerPoint presentation, a guidebook or brochure, or a combination of any of these options, and needs to include specific information related to the trip such as transport, accommodation, activities and cost.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will need to assign yourself into collaborative groups and negotiate the division of the work as well as your roles and responsibilities within your group. A native speaker mentor will be allocated to each collaborative group to assist and support you as required, and you will be able to communicate and collaborate using the online communication resources and features of the course website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Week 7 of the semester you will present the final product of your collaborative work to the rest of the class and you will submit your travel guide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Task 2 used a similar pedagogical structure, requiring students to plan a trip to Italy—thereby providing many additional opportunities for students to learn more about the rich historical, cultural and culinary traditions of the country as they planned their travel itineraries. The tasks were designed to enable learners to engage and immerse themselves in purposeful and goal-oriented authentic interaction and collaboration with other learners and target language speakers to develop a tangible product that they could potentially benefit from in the future. The fact that the tasks involved planning and organising travel both in Australia and to Italy, ensured their relevance to students’ own life experiences and future plans, and enabled them to practice and apply the linguistic knowledge and skills that they had developed in the formal classroom context. The tasks were assigned to the students according to an increasing level of complexity to enable students to complete the linguistically and culturally easier task first and then progress to the more complex task.

In order to complete the assigned tasks, students were required to form small collaborative groups and to communicate and collaborate with each other through the web-based resources of a LMS and in face-to-face mode, both during and outside of the regular class time allocated to the project. For the first task, students self-selected into four groups of four. For the second task they assigned themselves into five groups of three (one student withdrew from the course after the conclusion of the first task). After the groups were formed, the teacher assigned one native speaker mentor to each group.

The collaboration took place both within and among the different groups in the class.

Data collection and analysis

During and after the course of the two iterative cycles, the researchers employed triangulation of data and facilitation for “thick description” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the analysis, as a way of determining the success of the design and achieving external validity. All data related
to this study were collected through: focus groups; individual interviews with students; individual interviews with mentors; messages contributed to online group discussion forums; chat discussion; email messages; the students’ reflective portfolios, and other documents and notes.

In order to consolidate the information gained from the researcher’s notes and observation of students’ participation in the assigned activities, and to corroborate the data gathered from an analysis of the documents and artefacts collected, four focus group interviews were conducted with each collaborative group of students at the conclusion of the first iteration. Each focus group was comprised of four students and lasted for 50-60 minutes each. After the conclusion of the second iteration, individual interviews of 45-60 minutes each were also conducted with the 16 participating students and the seven native speaker mentors.

Patton (2014) has discussed the value of interviewing in finding out information which cannot be directly observed, such as feelings, thoughts and intentions, and has presented a method of categorisation of interviews and surveys which is based on their purpose and structure. The interview technique adopted in this study used Patton’s *Standardized open-ended interview* category, in which the wording and sequence of questions were determined in advance in an open-ended format. This approach was chosen because of the flexibility of allowing the researchers to ask follow-up, in-depth questions to explore and clarify individual responses.

Techniques of qualitative analysis recommended by McCracken and Morgan (2009), Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2013) and Patton (2014), were used to analyse the data collected during students’ collaboration. The process of coding and analysing the data involved a combination of the template organising approach described in Crabtree and Miller (1999) and Miles et al. (2013), and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss,
The template organising approach allowed the researchers to identify and code different sections of text present in the data according to 10 *a priori* categories based on the design guidelines for developing authentic tasks identified from the literature, specifically: real-world relevance, ill-defined nature, complexity and sustained effort, multiple perspectives and resources, collaboration, reflection, integration and application across different subject areas, integration with assessment and development of polished products, competing solutions and diversity of outcomes. After developing the template, the constant comparative method was adopted to identify and code sections of text that related to collaboration and cooperation and to identify new emerging categories and themes within the collaboration code. After existing sub-categories were refined, and new codes and themes were identified, data was organised into displays. Observations and interpretation about the meaning of the data were then made and conclusions drawn. Analysis of the data shed light on the process that students followed to collaborate in the blended learning environment of this study and on the strategies that they employed to learn the language while completing the collaborative tasks.

In order to verify coding reliability and ensure that the representation of the data relating to the collaborative strategies used by the students was accurate, findings were validated against mentors’ notes, observations and documents (including messages posted to the discussion forums and students’ reflective portfolios).

**Findings and discussion**

**Phases of collaboration**

From an analysis of the transcripts of students’ online and class discussions, students’
reflective portfolios and the teacher’s class observations and interviews, seven phases of the collaborative process were identified for both the first and second task. These seven phases comprised: brainstorming ideas, forming collaborative groups, planning the individual itineraries, negotiating roles and responsibilities within each group, working independently, negotiating ideas and providing assistance and feedback to group members, and developing the final product. The first three phases of the collaborative process were common to all the groups. The fourth phase of the collaboration, which involved the negotiation of roles and responsibilities among group members, was carried out using two different processes. The majority of the collaborative groups opted for an equal distribution of the work among the group members while three groups preferred to allocate different tasks to individual group members in accordance with their skills and abilities. The collaborative process of the final three phases did not vary greatly between groups. From the analysis of data, observations were also made about the development of these collaborative phases during the first and second iteration. While the seven phases were the same for the two iterations, three major differences were identified, indicating that students effectively learned strategies that enabled better collaboration, and they were able to use them in the second implementation of the task. These differences are described below.

1. Duration and efficiency of the collaborative phases

During the first iteration, the brainstorming and group forming phases of the collaboration took considerably longer to be completed than during the second iteration. Students’ familiarity with the requirements of the first task encouraged them to start working on the second task earlier and in a much more focused and efficient way.
2. Students’ approach to collaboration

Students generally appeared to be more confident about expressing their ideas and making suggestions about the development of the second task than they did while collaborating on the first task. In reflecting on their approach to collaboration in the individual interviews, several students pointed out that during the second iteration they felt less frustrated when other students disagreed with what was proposed because they were aware of the fact that the activity would eventually allow a lot of freedom and that there would be room for individual and independent choices at some point during the development of the task. Students also appeared to be clearer about their ideas and choices in the negotiation of their roles and responsibilities within their groups. Students commented that, having reflected on their experience with the first activity and having reassessed each group member’s contribution to the task, they were able to make a more reasoned decision on how best to divide the collaborative work during the second iteration, and importantly, on how to make use of their individual strengths to assist and support each other while working on the task. These findings are in line with Bolton’s (2014) view that meaningful questioning and reflection leads to enhanced self-understanding and greater self-awareness, which in turn promotes a deeper approach to learning and generates positive collective change.

3. Students’ target language use

During the first iteration, the collaboration took place in both Italian and in English. Although the majority of the participants tried to communicate their ideas in Italian and only reverted to English sporadically when they had difficulties expressing themselves clearly, a few students with less developed target language skills communicated mostly in English. In the individual interviews with the researcher, some of these students explained that in the first weeks of the semester they did not yet feel confident about their linguistic abilities and preferred to
communicate in their native language. During the second iteration, students’ use of the target language increased substantially. An analysis of the data collected revealed that the students with a lower level of linguistic ability also tried to communicate in the target language and reverted to English less frequently than in the first iteration. These students commented that they had felt progressively more comfortable expressing their ideas in Italian. These findings are supported by research into the role of collaboration and interaction on the development of learners’ target language communicative skills. According to Vygotsky’s SCT applied to SLA, language learning occurs through meaningful social interaction and active participation in collaborative activities with other members of a speaking community (Lantolf, Thorne & Poehner, 2015; Swain, Kinneer & Steinman, 2015). In the context of this study, the regular communicative practice and interpersonal interaction facilitated by learners’ collaboration had a positive influence on student motivation and greatly contributed to their linguistic development.

When asked to comment on the overall collaborative experience, the majority of the students spoke very positively about working in groups and acknowledged its numerous benefits. Among these benefits, students mentioned the fact that collaborative work provided them with increased opportunities to communicate in the target language and to learn from peers who had a higher level of linguistic proficiency, were more competent in the use of technology or has superior organisational and time management skills. Collaboration also provided a context for developing effective teamwork skills (which students valued very highly) and promoted social relations and motivation by enabling interaction with other learners outside of the classroom context.

Nevertheless, despite acknowledging the benefits and advantages of collaborative work, several students also admitted that they found some aspects quite challenging and identified problems that needed to be solved before arriving at that positive outcome. The
pedagogical benefits and challenges identified in students’ responses have been highlighted in much of the literature on technology supported collaborative learning environments (Hammond, 2017; Palloff & Pratt, 2010; Robinson, Kilgore & Warren, 2017), and are all possible processes and outcomes of collaborative learning arrangements in blended learning environments (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010).

**Problems encountered and strategies used by the collaborative groups to overcome them**

According to Forman and Cazden (1985), true collaboration does not simply occur when participants work together, but when they collaboratively solve a problem or create a product which could not have been completed individually. In analysing the transcripts of students’ interviews and online discussions as well as students’ reflective portfolios, a number of problems were identified in relation to the collaborative work on the activities. These problems, which occurred during the first iteration, together with the strategies that students employed to overcome them are outlined below.

1. Unequal contribution of effort

Several students from the collaborative groups commented negatively about the fact that some of their group members did not appear to contribute substantially to the tasks or did not demonstrate a high level of commitment to the project. Other students, on the other hand, commented about the difficulties that they had in working to the same standard as other group members, who had a higher level of linguistic proficiency and higher expectations about how the task should be completed. Students’ comments are revealing of the fact that some collaborative groups did not seem to be able to find the right balance between the individual group members’ level of contribution to the tasks and the expectations of their peers.
To overcome this, after realising that some of the students in her group were not working on the task in a way that she considered satisfactory, one student posted a number of messages to the group forum to encourage those students to contribute more substantially to the task. All students then agreed to meet in person to discuss their issues or concerns and to come up with some ideas on how to move forward. The following entry in one student’s portfolio summarises the outcomes of the meeting (pseudonyms used):

… we started to think about a different way to split the work and we came up with the idea of dividing the project on the basis of our skills. Everyone was happy about this new arrangement. I think it’s good to make use of people’s skills because it’s more motivating to do something that we can do well. (Portfolio entry, Elise)

Students recognised that simply dividing the work into equal parts, as the group had originally done, prevented them from successfully completing the task and arrive at a positive outcome. The fact that students did not contribute equally to the task caused resentment and frustration both towards the group members who contributed less and towards those who expected more. The solution that the group collaboratively found involved dividing students’ roles and responsibilities according to their skills and preferences. This strategy not only made it possible for the group to complete the task but also had the effect of increasing students’ motivation and confidence in their abilities to provide valuable contributions to the project. The members of this group arrived at some valuable conclusions about the nature of group work and acknowledged the importance of keeping the focus on the main goal of completing the task and of employing a more flexible approach in order to allow all group members to contribute to the project.

2. Communication difficulties

Students from one of the groups, which was comprised of two second-year and three third-year students, reported that they had difficulties communicating in the target language within the group because of the different levels of target language proficiency of its members.
This was reflected in a number of comments by the second-year students in the group who spoke about the difficulties they had while interacting with students with a higher level of proficiency. Similarly, one of the third-year students in the group pointed out that the language barrier was the most challenging aspect of the collaboration on the task:

> The language skills of the second-year students were not that good and this made it hard to communicate with them sometimes. I think this was the most challenging part, working out how to put our ideas back and forth so that everyone could understand and participate in the project. (Interview, Diana)

The communication difficulties among the members of this collaborative group were also evident in some of the dialogue that students had in class while completing the first iteration and in the postings to the group discussion forum. The more proficient students communicated fluently in the target language whereas others did not always understand their comments and questions and were sometimes not able to provide an appropriate reply. The following section describes the strategies employed by this group to overcome the communication problems that were hindering the collaborative completion of the task.

After spending a two-hour face-to-face session to discuss a way to solve their communication problem, the group developed the following strategies:

> We decided to … spend some time trying to communicate our ideas as clearly as possible [and] to write everything down both in Italian and English so that everyone could understand what we needed to do. (Interview, Martina)

The importance both of allocating a sufficient amount of time to work together and discuss issues related to the tasks, and of allowing for the communication to take place in English as well as in Italian so that everyone in the group could fully understand what was discussed and planned, was also recognised by another student:
It was good that we took time to go over what wasn’t working and to help each other with the language. We translated things into English when it was needed and for some of us this was really helpful. (Interview, Julie)

The process of reaching the decision to communicate in English as well as in Italian was described in the students’ portfolio entries in which they reflected on the importance of ensuring that communication was ‘flowing in all directions’ and of allowing for some flexibility in relation to the use of Italian and English in order to enable all students to participate in the discussion and to contribute meaningfully to the completion of the task.

Although not ideal from a pedagogical perspective, speaking in English had the added benefit of allowing the more linguistically experienced students to support and mentor the less competent students in the group.

3. Disagreement among group members

Two of the three students in one group had conflicting views on how to develop the task and, for the first part of the first iteration, were unable to reach an agreement about the focus of the project. In the individual interviews with the researcher, one of the students expressed his frustration at the fact that, despite having brainstormed and discussed their ideas for several weeks, the group did not seem to be able to make a decision on how to structure the task. This student explained that the disagreement between group members prevented them from making any significant progress and greatly delayed their work, adding to more frustration and stress.

In the third week of the iteration, one of the three students decided that it was up to him to find a solution to the issues that were preventing his group from moving forward with the task and started to act as a mediator between the other group members to help them communicate and find a common ground. Nicholas’s entry in his reflective portfolio summarises his approach:
I had to mediate...there was no other way forward...I didn’t take sides, I just tried to be very careful and diplomatic so that nobody would get upset... (Portfolio entry, Nicholas)

When asked to comment about his approach, Nicholas explained that, despite agreeing more with one of the two group members, he decided not to take sides because he did not want to bring about more conflict and wanted to help his group members reach a compromise:

…I didn’t want to create even more conflict or tension…so I didn’t take sides, but I tried to help them to see the positives in the other person’s ideas and reach some sort of compromise. (Interview, Nicholas)

He concluded by commenting that he felt that his role was not to determine who was right and who was wrong or who had planned the best itinerary, but rather to ensure that the group could come to an agreement and that everyone was able to contribute some of their ideas to the project. His strategy proved to be successful as the group members ended up reaching a compromise on their ideas and developing a final itinerary based on both students’ plans.

Although neither student acknowledged the role played by Nicholas in helping them solve their disagreement, they both admitted that the end result was positive. One of the students added that she realised she had to be more open-minded:

I realised I had to be more open-minded about the ideas of other people, even if they were very different from my own ideas…it was unfair to disregard them completely without trying to see if there was something good in them. (Interview, Chloe)

This comment is significant as it reveals an important principle of collaboration which is the opportunity to observe and become more open-minded about the different perspectives and ideas of others and to appreciate the positive aspects of these ideas while negotiating differences in order to create a shared vision (Laurillard, 2013).

Discussion

The findings shed light on the process that students followed to collaborate on the assigned
tasks and the strategies that they used to solve the problems that arose during the collaboration. The findings show that all the collaborative groups approached the tasks systematically and appeared to follow a sequence of seven collaborative phases both during the first and second iteration: brainstorming ideas, forming the groups, planning the individual itineraries, negotiating roles and responsibilities, working independently, negotiating ideas and providing assistance and feedback, and developing the final product. Six of the seven collaborative phases were common to all groups. The fourth phase, however, in which students negotiated their roles and responsibilities within the individual groups, was carried out using two different processes. Six of the nine collaborative groups opted for an equal distribution of the work among the group members, while three groups preferred to allocate different tasks to individual group members depending on their skills and abilities. The findings show that, although the collaborative phases were common to all groups, several differences were identified in the development of these phases during the first and the second iteration. These differences related to the shorter duration of the initial phases of the collaboration and the higher level of efficiency and focus with which students worked on them during the second iteration compared to the first, the higher level of students’ confidence about expressing their ideas and opinions and the significantly lower level of frustration experienced when dealing with disagreement within the groups while working on the second task. A final difference related to students’ increased use of the target language during the second iteration and their greater level of confidence in their linguistic abilities.

Analysis of the data also shows that collaboration within the individual groups was not without its challenges. The findings suggest that the most significant issues encountered by the collaborative groups occurred during the first iteration, particularly involving the unequal contribution of individual group members to the task, difficulties communicating in the target language and disagreement among students who held opposing views about the
development of the task. The strategies that the groups employed collaboratively to solve these issues included re-negotiating students’ roles and responsibilities to reflect their skills and abilities, facilitating communication through discussion and mediation among group members and, in some cases, allowing for the communication to take place in English as well as in Italian to facilitate the discussion.

When asked during the focus group interviews held at the end of the first iteration to reflect and comment on their collaborative experience of completing the first tasks, students identified some key lessons and derived some general principles to be followed during the collaborative work on the second task. These included forming smaller collaborative groups and allocating sufficient time to collaborative work, identifying compatible group members and endeavouring to develop positive interpersonal relationships within the group, accepting that each group member had different skills and abilities and could bring a unique contribution to the task, keeping an open mind about other participants’ opinions and ideas and adopting a flexible approach to the development of the task.

The findings suggest that the collaborative process is one that improves with time and practice, as students had the opportunity to implement the strategies and principles derived from their reflections on the issues and challenges encountered during the collaboration on the first task and were able to benefit from their prior experience. The findings also show that the three initial phases of the collaboration described earlier were completed by the collaborative groups considerably more quickly and efficiently during the collaborative work on the second task. Students displayed a higher level of confidence, a markedly lower level of frustration in dealing with disagreement and an increased use of the target language when collaborating on the second task. They were also generally able to establish a more positive rapport with the other members of their individual groups, which facilitated the collaborative process and assisted the groups to complete the task successfully.
Design principles for supporting collaboration in an online community of foreign language learners

Table 2 presents a summary of the strategies for effective collaboration employed by the students and a series of design principles and recommendations for practice to assist language teachers who may wish to facilitate the collaborative process in similar learning environments.

Table 2. Strategies for effective collaboration and design principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of collaboration</th>
<th>Strategies for effective collaboration</th>
<th>Design principles for teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Brainstorming ideas</td>
<td>• communicate your ideas clearly</td>
<td>• provide advice on how to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• listen attentively and do not</td>
<td>successfully brainstorm and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• interrupt others</td>
<td>negotiate ideas as a class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• keep an open mind about other</td>
<td>• encourage all students to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participants’ ideas</td>
<td>integrate different perspectives and points of view and share their ideas with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• help to guide the conversation if needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Forming the groups</td>
<td>• identify compatible group members</td>
<td>• allow students to identify suitable group members but be available to assist and make suggestions if students have difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• form small collaborative groups</td>
<td>• encourage students to explore multiple collaborative options before making a final decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Planning the individual itineraries</td>
<td>• organise a preliminary meeting with the collaborative group to discuss the planning and development of the individual itineraries</td>
<td>• emphasise the importance of the initial planning phase of the tasks and remind students that it might take time to complete it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Element of collaboration</td>
<td>Strategies for effective collaboration</td>
<td>Design principles for teachers</td>
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</table>
| 4. Negotiating roles and responsibilities | • accept that each group member has different skills and abilities and can bring a unique contribution to the tasks  
• negotiate roles and responsibilities to reflect different skills and abilities | • raise awareness of the fact that each group member has a different set of abilities and skills and can bring a unique contribution to the group  
• raise awareness of the fact that there are different ways to allocate roles and divide responsibilities within a collaborative group and encourage students to maintain a flexible approach to the negotiation of roles  
• provide mentoring and assist students in this process if there are difficulties |
| 5. Working independently | • start working independently as soon as possible  
• set a timeframe for completion and make yourself accountable for deadlines  
• communicate your ideas to the other members of your group and inform them of the progress of your work | • encourage students to set and make themselves accountable for deadlines  
• highlight the importance of good time management and provide mentoring if needed  
• encourage students to make independent choices but also to communicate their ideas to the other group members |
| 6. Negotiating ideas and providing assistance and feedback | • allow sufficient time for collaborative discussion within the group  
• be open-minded about other participants’ opinions and ideas and be willing to negotiate differences and facilitate communication through discussion and mediation  
• be available to assist others  
• provide positive and constructive feedback | • encourage students to organise discussions within the group to enable collective reflection on lessons learned and future strategies  
• encourage students to be open-minded and willing to negotiate differences and facilitate communication through discussion and mediation  
• encourage students to be proactive in assisting others and to provide positive and constructive feedback |
| 7. Developing the final product | • recognise and make use of other students’ skills and abilities to develop the final product  
• aim for consistency of presentation when combining the different individual itineraries | • encourage students to make use of each other’s skills and abilities  
• provide opportunities for students to share or publish their polished final products |
Recommendations for research and practice

This research provided the opportunity to study in-depth a group of second language students as they interacted and collaborated in a blended learning environment to complete two authentic tasks with the support of selected native speaker mentors. The findings presented in this study suggest the following potential areas of further investigation:

• How specific guidelines and strategies to support student collaborative processes impact on the quality and quantity of interaction in a blended second language learning environment.

• How language teachers could effectively support the scaffolding role of participating native speaker mentors to facilitate student interaction and collaboration in a blended second language learning environment.

• How specific guidelines and strategies to effectively support student collaborative processes might be implemented in a fully online language learning environment.

Recommendations for practice for second language educators, including design principles and guidance on the creation of collaborative blended learning environments are provided in depth in Table 2.

Conclusion

This study investigated how university students learning Italian language collaborated in groups with other learners and native speaker mentors in a blended, authentic learning environment which combined web-based and face-to-face communication. This paper has described the phases of the collaborative process and the strategies employed by learners to overcome some of the challenges and problems encountered during the collaboration. The collaborative learning environment described in this study, and the design principles and guidelines that emerged from its implementation, may support other language educators in
the process of developing similar learning environments within their own educational contexts.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References:**


