Beyond the avatar: Using video cameras to achieve effective collaboration in an online second language classroom

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Abstract

In language learning, students learn through interaction with the teacher, the other students, and with the study material, to build language skills. What happens to interaction opportunities when learning goes online? In an online classroom, collaboration is difficult to achieve due to lack of physical proximity among the participants. This paper explores the problem of online collaboration between teachers and students in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom with the empirical focus on the role that video cameras play in online collaboration. We argue that cameras, although being contested as a pedagogical tool, should be seen as an important 'proximity tool' that helps foster collaboration by bringing learners and teachers 'closer'. We theorise 'collaboration' via the social constructivism lens and argue that collaboration as being 'close' echoes in the digital sense with 'being with' and is core for developing an ecology of virtual collaboration. We draw on the online survey data from foreign language students and language instructors in one Russian research-intensive university, who were asked how they use cameras online. Quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis have been used to identify key patterns and emerging themes. The key findings of the study are that 1) cameras could be an important aspect of fostering collaboration online; 2) there is a tension in relationships between students, teachers, and study materials; 3) students and teachers differently perceive the need to use cameras, which may limit opportunities for online collaboration; and 4) while students feel more comfortable when all the other participants turn their cameras on, many do not see turning cameras on for themselves to be important. The paper concludes with a discussion of how camera use can foster online collaboration between teachers and students.

Practitioner Notes

1. Transition to online learning is a challenge for teachers and students, which may disrupt their understanding of collaboration.
2. Collaboration online should be reconsidered with regard to the notion of 'being with others' (Nancy, 2000), where proximity in an online environment is different for all singular beings.
3. Teachers' and students' perceptions about the role of cameras in online collaboration can 'clash', which is not always transparent.
4. It may be useful to encourage students and teachers to seek ways for online collaboration, for example, by undergoing specially designed workshops that will help them recognise the importance of fully engaging online via technology and ways of doing this.
5. Teachers, *in collaboration* with students, should set up guidelines for camera use and develop specific strategies that will better create opportunities for collaborative learning.

Introduction

Collaboration is core to learning, yet, the question of what counts as 'collaboration' is problematic. Educators, teachers, researchers in the field of education often rely on a core assumption that collaboration means unity of individuals seeking to achieve common goals in education (e.g., Roselli, 2016). The educational experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic seem to offer an opportunity to learn about collaboration between students and teachers, which in many ways has been disrupted by a significant shift towards online learning. In our paper, we seek to reconsider and problematise the notion of community which is often seen as core to collaboration in online learning environments. By drawing on the "being with" idea introduced by Nancy (2000), we seek to articulate what we can learn about the pandemic experiences of collaboration from students and instructors, and what educators can do to create opportunities for collaboration even if they feel 'stuck.' The paper first briefly covers how the pandemic has transformed/diminished opportunities for collaboration and why for us as language educators, camera use is an important aspect of online collaboration. Second, we problematise the notion of 'collaboration' in order to arrive at a better understanding of what it means to collaborate in an online environment. Next, we present the results of our study and discuss them. Finally, the paper suggests three principles with respect to how instructors can improve opportunities for collaboration despite the constraints online learning presents.

Context: Why focus on video cameras in a study into collaboration?

The Covid-19 pandemic transformed education with a significant shift towards online learning. This abrupt shift forced teachers and students to engage differently with learning and teaching practices. In traditional language learning, students learn through direct interaction and collaboration with teachers, other students, and with study material to build language skills (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Salma, 2020). In the online language classroom, however, collaboration is difficult to achieve due to the lack of physical proximity between the participants (Hrastinski, 2009; Jaldemark, Lindberg and Olofsson, 2005; Tam, 2000).

One common tension that we have experienced as Higher Education (HE) educators and language instructors, which has also been signalled by many colleagues in everyday conversations, is that students turn their cameras off, while we, as teachers, expect students *to be present* via camera. We tend to pressurise students to turn their cameras on, forcing participation, though with little effect. Thus, the use of video cameras, especially under the recent shift to the digital classroom, has become a widely discussed topic not just in our university but also in online forums and at academic conferences. Recent studies signal a lack of understanding of how to use cameras effectively to facilitate students' and teachers' opportunities for collaboration. Although earlier studies have explored students' and teachers' perceptions of audio and visual modes/tools in various areas of learning (Cavaleri et al., 2019; Perez-Navarro et al., 2020; Rahmahani et al., 2020; Shoulders et al., 2018), fewer studies have looked at how video camera use is perceived by language instructors and students, and if/how cameras can become a tool to foster collaborative language learning.

While collaboration is key for any successful learning (Crook, 2000), it is a must for an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. In contrast to 'content courses', in an EFL classroom, which is the focus of our study, the main aim is not to transmit or create subject knowledge, but rather to develop the communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). This includes linguistic competence (in simple terms, knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling rules), strategic competence (knowledge of communication strategies), socio-cultural and

actional competence (aspects of register, politeness and style, knowledge of language functions and their use) and discourse competence (ability to build cohesive texts). These skills can only be developed when learners become active participants – and collaborate.

In a 'real' study environment, much of the information on the aspects of the communicative competence is conveyed through non-verbal means, such as gesture or facial expression, or through demonstration. For example, a language teacher may want to demonstrate lip movement to pronounce English sounds correctly. Or, while practicing in a role-play activity, students can 'read' non-verbal clues of politeness or style. For the teacher, it is also necessary to 'see' students to monitor their progress and provide feedback. Hence, in an EFL classroom it is essential for all the parties to be visible for learning to occur successfully.

Collaboration in an online classroom can be impeded because there is no shared physical space and thus a lack of visual contact (Churchill and Snowdon, 1998). As this paper demonstrates, cameras can enhance collaboration between the actors, especially when they are used as a 'proximity tool', helping learners and teachers to become 'closer' and work together in partnership. This appears particularly important for language learning where not only 'being heard' but also 'being seen' is important for successful learning.

Literature review: From 'successful collaboration' towards 'being with experience'

Collaboration is core to learning, and earlier studies have focused on various aspects of collaboration: for example, on participants, on the products of collaboration, or on processes in collaboration (e.g., Littleton et al., 2000). Collaboration is often defined as "a collective process from the beginning, where all of them [the participants] are jointly involved for task performance" (Roselli, 2016, p. 255), and this process has been associated with in-person teaching in which the teacher is guiding the students to achieve a common learning goal. One central problem of this is that of 'presence.' Students as well as teachers need to 'be there.' This raises the question, how to facilitate collaboration, especially when the teaching and learning happens online (Barkley et al., 2007; Melero Zabal and Fernández Berrocal, 1995; Roselli, 1999; Strijbos and Fischer, 2007).

Studies of collaboration have formed a subfield of 'collaborative learning', which mainly focuses on collaboration among students, usually in small groups, to increase interest among the participants and to foster critical thinking (Ashwell et al., 2014; Roselli, 2016; Salma, 2020). We argue, however, that in light of Vygotskian ideas (Vygotsky, 1978), teachers should be involved as collaborators as well so they not only provide guidance to students but also facilitate effective learning within their "zone of proximal development." Collaborative learning requires *engagement* of all participants, who must cooperate to achieve a particular goal.

The concept of *student engagement* comes from the traditional theories of engagement and includes cognitive, behaviour, and/or psychological processes within social frameworks (e.g., Brofenbrenner, 1977; Finn, 1993; Newmann, 1992). Students should be engaged both on intellectual and social levels (Dunleavy et al., 2012). Furthermore, there should be an ongoing interaction between students to foster learning (Kuh and Hu, 2001; Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004). In other words, students need to be active participants of the learning process rather than passive listeners (Hrastinski, 2009), and thus they are expected to actively participate in discussions, engage with material and build strategies to learn collaboratively. However, as argued earlier, teachers need also to be involved in the collaborative education process for learning to be successful.

Dillenbourg and Schneider (1995) outline three conditions of successful collaborative learning: 1) student groups should ideally be rather small; 2) the learning task should lend itself to be solved collaboratively; 3) effective communication media should be used for the collaborative task, ideally with voice and video. In relation to an EFL classroom, this condition is usually met, as teaching is mostly undertaken in small groups. This being said, in some contexts, groups are rather large (up to 30 and even 40 students), which may be an impediment for successful collaborative learning. Regarding the task itself, learning a second language is collaborative by nature; however, students may not view it as such, but rather expect it to be transactional, something 'transferred' to them. As far as the final criterion, effective communication, is concerned, it appears collaboration in the online language classroom needs to be reconsidered, especially the use of cameras. *How can cameras, rather than being a tool of surveillance and control, be used to foster collaborative language learning online?*

Another condition for successful collaborative learning consistently found across the literature is the need for the teacher to provide a safe environment and build a strong rapport with the students, which will foster interaction and increase student engagement (Carini et al., 2006; Hickey and Zuiker, 2005; Parsons and Taylor, 2011; Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005). Parsons and Taylor (2011) state that students wanted stronger, more positive relationships with the instructor and with each other. Additionally, students wanted teachers to know how they learn and provide space/time for exploration and collaboration in a safe, supportive environment.

So, to foster collaboration in a language classroom, recent literature suggests that teachers should develop tools and strategies to help them meet all these conditions. However, in an online language classroom, these conditions may be difficult to achieve due to the lack of physical proximity between the participants (Hrastinski, 2009; Jaldemark et al., 2005; Tam, 2000). So, how can language teachers enhance online learner participation and reduce the negative effect of the physical distance between participants? How can they create a collaborative virtual environment (CVE) (Churchill and Snowdon, 1998) and build strong relationships between the participants, which in turn will support creation of a strong online Community of Practice (Murillo, 2008; Wenger, 1998)? A Community of Practice is viewed as a group of people that interact regularly in pursuit of a common goal, usually to learn to do something better. Communities of Practice are essentially collaborative, as members of those communities share the same domain of interest and develop shared experiences and patterns of behaviour.

Problematising proximity in online language learning, we follow Nancy's (2000) perspective. The fundamental argument of Nancy (2000) is that being is always "being with," that "I" is not prior to "we," that existence is essentially co-existence. The notions of the 'other' and "self" are relevant to collaborative relationships. Nancy states that community can never be the "idealised fantasy of common-being, nor a unity of experience or perspective… [Community is] an imprecise collective of beings who have in common the experience of singular finitude" (Welch and Panelli, 2007, p. 350). Community is always shifting. Being in simultaneously singular and plural form involves continuous moving between 'self' and the non-self 'other', not as binaries but as an essential condition of co-existence. This notion of community as co-existence, which is opposed to sameness, and the idea that beings are linked but are not unified (Nancy, 2000), helps better understand the 'distant' collaboration context. "There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasises the distancing it opens up" (Nancy, 2000, p. 5). This perspective challenges previous understandings and conceptualisations of collaboration, which are seen as unity of group members seeking to achieve sameness – one common goal or outcome.

But how this co-existence is created by being-with-others, which appears central to online language learning, is still not clear. We suggest it is necessary to detail the relationships of distance and spacing which are created between self and others to gain a clearer picture of the online collaboration phenomenon. We believe that one of the theories of collaboration which can help better understand online collaboration is the intersubjectivity theory (Roselli, 2016), which stems from Vygotskian social constructivist ideas. In this model, students learn through interaction and collaboration with the teacher, the other students, and with the material. Learners are in a constant dialogue with each other, with the teacher, the material and the environment, as the environment cannot be separated from the individual's experience. In the section below, we introduce our empirical approach drawing on these theoretical notions.

Methodology of the study

Research context and questions

The study was conducted at one research intensive university in Russia. First year undergraduate students and foreign language instructors in 12 educational programmes (English medium programmes: International and Business Management, Economics, Political Science; Russian medium programmes: Logistics, Applied Mathematics, Law, State Management, Design, History, Sociology, Asian Studies and Literary Studies) were invited to participate in an online survey in 2020. In this paper, we examine teachers' and students' perception of camera use in online English lessons to understand how cameras impact collaboration in the online classroom. There were three questions:

- *How do EFL students perceive video camera use and why?*
- *How do EFL teachers perceive video camera use and why?*
- *What do these perceptions mean for collaboration opportunities in online learning?*

Data collection

In our study we developed two surveys to learn about students' and teachers' perceptions of camera use. An online student survey was conducted in June 2020, after the students had two months of language learning experience via Zoom. The survey was designed to explore student perceptions of camera use in the online classroom and included questions which targeted reasons for having a camera on/off, and preferences for camera use in an online environment. The survey was sent online to approximately 800 students (all 1st year students attending EFL classes), and we received 207 responses. The survey was administered in Russian.

An online teacher survey was also conducted at approximately the same time, which was designed to explore the teachers' perceptions of camera use. All campus English language instructors, who have taught at least five online classes via Zoom, were invited to participate in the survey. Survey responses were received from 96 teachers. The survey was administered in Russian[1].

The closed and open-ended questions in both surveys were designed in line with a) our understanding of collaboration online as problematic 'being with others', b) the collaborative learning paradigm (Roselli, 2016) and the paradigm of relational pedagogy (Adams, 2018; Hinsdale, 2016), c) our own experiences of collaborating online.

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[1] The survey instruments are available upon request.

Data analysis

We developed an analytical approach to trace camera use perceptions of teachers and students. To analyse our survey data, we developed a set of analytical categories which are based on the relationships that exist in a virtual learning environment (Churchill and Snowdon, 1998). Each educational situation has a purpose and sets a 'relationship type' between participants (e.g., when students are talking to each other; when they are listening to the teacher). There may be different relationships in each online context. Once issues of connectivity and bandwidth are resolved, the dominant relationship will determine the camera use: e.g., do I want to see the speakers or not? Do I want to be seen when speaking or not? In this context, we draw on the intersubjectivity theory model (Roselli, 2016), since in this model, students learn through interaction and collaboration with the teacher, the other students, and with the material (Figure 1). Learners are in a constant dialogue with each other, with the teacher, the material and the environment, which cannot be separated from the individual's experience (Nancy, 2000). We identified ten relationship types (Table 1), and the open questions data was coded according to them.

Closed question responses were statistically processed (yes/no questions, five-point Likert scale questions) and provide important contextual detail and patterns of camera use. The open-ended questions helped to identify the types of relationships between the participants in order to explore collaboration perceptions. The data was coded by three researchers, and sufficient interrater reliability was achieved (8.01).

Results

Student perceptions of camera use

Our first empirical question was how EFL students perceive video camera use. Students' responses have revealed that 70% of students turn on cameras when the teacher asks them to and would turn it off otherwise. Only 19% of students say they always have their cameras on, on a regular basis. Three major reasons for turning on their cameras are: teacher's request (60%), desire to have "real life" communication (56%), and 34% of students believe they better engage in learning.

When asked why they turn cameras off, students talk about their study environment: "I need to leave the study place" (64%), "I do not want others to see me" (60%), "I am not alone in the room" (45%). Importantly, 35% of students say that when their camera is turned off, they can concentrate better and get distracted less. This response might be connected with the feeling that the study environment factors do not influence them when their camera is off. 50% of students prefer to turn cameras off as they feel shy, and 47% of respondents say they feel uncomfortable when they are being watched by many others. Low English proficiency is a reason to turn off cameras for only for 8% of students. None of the students say that their culture and/or religion have any relation to their camera use.

Table 1: Coding heuristic for tracing relationships in online language learning

Type of relationship	Response description
Student-self (SSelf)	Responses that focus on the learner's personality (e.g., I am shy)
Student-student relationships (SS)	E.g., the atmosphere is similar to a real classroom
Student- teacher relationships (ST/TS)	Responses that focus on interaction between the teacher and the students (e.g., easier to listen to the teacher)
Student-content relationships (SC)	Responses that focus on the student interaction with the material (e.g., it is easier to understand)
Student-place relationship (SP)	Responses that focus on the interaction between the student and the physical space around them (e.g., they do not want to show what their dorm room looks like)
Student-virtual environment relationship (SVI)	Responses that focus on the interaction between the student and the virtual environment (e.g., that the teacher is not visible)
Teacher-content relationship(TC)	Responses that focus on the teacher interaction with the material (e.g., teacher projecting their screen)
Teacher-place relationship (TP)	Responses that focus on the interaction between the teacher and the physical space around them (e.g., they do not want to show what their apartment looks like)
Teacher-virtual environment relationship (TVI)	Responses that focus on the interaction between the teacher and the virtual environment
Teacher-self (TSelf)	Responses that focus on the teacher's personality (e.g., I don't want to be visible)

More than half of respondents (57%) prefer it when their teacher has their camera on. Unexpectedly, a substantial proportion of students say they prefer their teachers to turn off their camera when the students are doing some activities (57%) and when the teacher is sharing the screen (37%). Students say they feel more comfortable with their camera on when all the others turn their cameras on (72%). They also say they do not want to be pressured by teachers to turn on their cameras (55%).

When the open questions were coded, it turned out that student responses most frequently fall under 'Student-Content' (SC) relationships (47% of responses), but 'Student-Teacher' (ST) relationships are important for students as well (44% of responses). For example, quite unexpectedly, many students say that they can easily grasp information just by listening to the teacher and there is no need to see the teacher, as they can just focus on the content and the materials (SC relationship). At the same time many students mentioned that cameras are important for visual contact, for having a conversation or a discussion with the group, and just to see the teacher, as that helps to maintain a personal contact (ST relationship).

In the next section, we present results about how teachers perceive camera use.

Teacher perceptions of camera use

Our second empirical question was how second language teachers perceive video camera use. The majority of teachers (80%) prefer their students to have their cameras on during online classes. In contrast with the students' perceptions stated above, 60% teachers believe that these are the motivated students with good academic progress who prefer to turn their cameras on. 50% of teachers believe that modest/shy students tend to turn their cameras off. This result also does not match the perceptions of students, who say they turn their cameras off primarily because of the study environment factors.

Importantly, in line with students' perceptions, 70% teachers say that after some time students get used to studying with their cameras on. 65% of teachers believe that their students study better and engage with the material if their cameras are on. This response can be possibly related to teachers' desire to work with their cameras on, as they perceive this a better way to introduce the study material.

When the open questions were coded, contrary to the student results, there was a dominance of the 'Student-Teacher' (ST) relationships in the teacher responses (70% of responses). For example, teachers think that it is important for the teacher and for the students to work with cameras on because this improves visual contact and generates better interaction between the teacher and the students, but also allows for more control of what the students are doing.

These findings signal that teachers seek proximity, being close to students in the online learning environment: teachers thus feel more comfortable and believe students learn better this way. Yet, students' perceptions are different, more nuanced, and they do not rely so much on camera use in their online classroom learning.

Discussion: From perceptions of camera use towards understanding collaboration

There are *four* significant findings that emerged from our data analysis and provide possible insights into how to foster collaboration via camera use in online language learning and make camera usage meaningful.

The first significant finding is that for most teachers 'cameras on' are an important condition for collaboration and language learning, whilst it appears not to be for most students, who tend to turn off their cameras. This may signal that collaboration is seen as integral to learning for language teachers, while for many students, it is not so. Because teachers know (from their experience and theoretical study) that language learning is difficult without active interaction and collaboration, and close contact with the students is a condition for successful learning (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Salma, 2020), this finding may signal that they seek proximity, being (visually) close to students in the online learning environment: teachers thus believe students learn better with their cameras on. Yet, students' perceptions are different, and they do not necessarily rely on camera use when learning languages online, perhaps, due to the fact that they either do not realise the importance of studying with cameras on in a language lesson or are unwilling to enter partnerships where physical proximity is not possible. Teachers, therefore, should work towards a shared understanding of language learning.

These differences in students' and teachers' views on collaboration in online language classes may also indicate that while traditionally collaboration in a language classroom is realised by the teacher, who is seen as a leader guiding the students to achieve a common learning goal (Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, 1995), online language learning may transform the teacher's role into one being backgrounded. 'Being with' implies that teachers may need to develop an understanding of a different type of being with their students, which might be uncomfortable, new, yet, is a necessary condition for successful online teaching and learning. This potential change in the teacher's attitude and role should be investigated further, as teachers may have to adapt to this new environment and build techniques that will involve students even if they do not turn their cameras on.

As was mentioned earlier, most EFL students do not seem to be willing to actively collaborate in an online environment as a default, instead, processing learning content on their own. Such an attitude may be due to the nature of Russian university students coming to university with a particular attitude. In a face-to-face environment, students can directly communicate with each other, allowing for informal discussion and exchange, without the teacher having to be involved. This sort of socialising is limited in an online environment though, and we believe that, like teachers, students may need to adapt to this new environment. The use of cameras may help students to adapt to the online classroom and build connections. Many students and teachers, when asked to explain why they prefer working with a camera, responded that it creates live and 'more real' experiences, so we suggest further research is needed into what techniques may help teachers and students experience an authentic 'being with' that also allows for different sorts of collaborations. For example, teachers could set up online 'teacher-free' discussion times or give students more project work, done in groups, outside the regular class time.

It is also possible that students generally view online and face-to-face classes differently, the latter being perceived as more interactive and engaging than the online format. If during face-to-face instruction, students are willing to communicate with the teacher and their peers and work towards the goal of mastering language proficiency, an online environment creates a different setting, in

which students do not view themselves as active participants. They may feel more connected with the physical environment that surrounds them in their home than with the virtual learning environment created by the teacher. If this is so, then teachers should work towards motivating students to change this view. Perhaps, they could raise learners' awareness of the fact that successful language learning requires active 'being with others', no matter the class format, and that working with a camera on is an essential condition for their success; the teacher can also set up more interactive tasks and set rewards for active participants, for students to learn to work collaboratively; the virtual environment that the teachers create should definitely allow for different collaboration opportunities.

The next major finding is that there is a tension in collaboration online, which emerges from the relationships between students, teachers, and materials (Roselli, 2016). While teachers expect students to collaborate with them and each other, our survey responses data suggests that students focus more on study materials. Although the students see the tutor as important in constructing the study environment, in facilitating the learning session, and in delivering materials to them, the role of teacher seems to be backgrounded while students are being engaged with the materials. This conclusion is supported by the students' responses that they prefer to turn cameras off when new material is introduced and when they engage with activities. The students do not seek support from the teacher or their peers, but often prefer to 'google' the information if they need help, which again seems to indicate a somewhat individualistic approach to learning. Although in a content course this may be a feasible strategy, in a language classroom, lack of willingness to collaborate and seek support may have a negative effect on outcomes. This understanding requires rethinking the whole teaching approach and perhaps this indicates a need to explicitly teach students that learning is social, collaborative and interactive.

Another important finding is that there is a tension between teachers' and students' perceptions of why cameras are off during a class. Half of teachers believe that these are shy and less successful students who tend to turn their cameras off. This perception clashes with the perception of students, who say they turn their cameras off primarily because of study environment factors. This finding supports the idea that the environment is core to understanding collaborative learning online, including using cameras in learning, and more research is needed into how the environment shapes teaching and learning experiences in various educational settings. In a face-to-face environment, there is a designated physical learning space shared among the participants, and our observation is that learners are willing to collaborate more (even though sometimes they still resort to their passive 'listener mode'). In an online environment, when cameras are on, learners have to share their personal space, which can be perceived as an invasion of their privacy, and they are uncomfortable and stressed, especially when this space is shared with others. This is also true for teachers, but taking the leadership role, they are more willing to 'sacrifice' their privacy, or they set up a virtual background or a white screen at their workspace at home. If we are able to develop a 'learning zone' in which all the participants are comfortable and enjoy/experience/construct their own proximity, then students will be more willing to accept the fact that observers will be able to see their private space or their informal look, and they will be more willing to collaborate with their cameras on. This can probably be achieved through a discussion of the issue with all the participants at the start of class/semester. Teachers can also recommend the use of virtual backgrounds and teach students how to set them up. As already mentioned, we also believe that it is necessary to raise student awareness of the collaborative nature of language learning and, perhaps, to raise teachers' awareness of the reasons why students do not turn on their cameras.

The final key finding is that while students' responses clearly indicate that they feel more comfortable when all others (students and teachers) turn their cameras on during a class, they do not

see turning on cameras for themselves to be important. This creates a misunderstanding in relationships between teachers and their students, who want to see the teacher but do not want to go online with their own cameras on. Such a situation may impede collaboration among participants and lead to situations when, despite having a common goal (to teach/learn the language), there is disagreement among participants in terms of how this can be achieved. More research is needed to investigate this further.

Our findings demonstrate that, although language learning is collaborative in nature (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Salma, 2020), in an online environment there are a number of tensions and misunderstandings that impede collaboration. In a face-to-face environment students are more willing to collaborate, as they are not under pressure of sharing their private space via the use of cameras and they are able to see each other and interact without limitations, using both verbal and non-verbal clues. In an online environment, students may feel uncomfortable, turn their cameras off to concentrate and may focus more on materials than on the interaction and collaboration with the teacher and their peers. The 'being with' experience online is different from the traditional face-to-face experiences. To make the online learning environment more collaborative, teachers should set it up carefully, considering the tensions and making visible the problematic nature of 'being with others', both to themselves and their students. Hence, the study leads to a number of pedagogical implications, which we turn to in the next section.

Pedagogical implications

Collaboration in online language learning starts with uncovering the collaborative and interactive nature of learning itself and the need for visual cues for learning languages, including online. A number of pedagogical implications stem from our discussion, which we can summarise in three principles.

1. The principle of collaboration

The participants of an online Community of Practice should collaborate to achieve a common goal, i.e. to learn another language, and for the collaboration to be successful, the participants should be active and willing to engage with each other and classroom activities. It is the teacher's role as the class leader to motivate the learners and set up an environment that will foster collaboration. Camera use is an important aspect of successful collaboration online, and teachers should discuss this with their learners to raise awareness of the collaborative nature of language learning and create a shared understanding of camera use.

2. The principle of comfortable 'proximity'

For successful collaboration to occur, participants should share the learning space (Churchill and Snowdon, 1998). The use of cameras can help to simulate a shared physical space, supporting conditions for more effective collaboration in an online learning environment. So, participants should use their cameras when they want to be 'near', but they may turn them off when they want to be 'at a distance.' Teachers should set up a comfortable atmosphere for all the students and for themselves, so that the participants are willing to turn their cameras on when needing to be with each other. Virtual backgrounds can be used to reduce anxiety and create privacy. However, there is a need to discuss possible tensions to create a safe space where learners and teachers feel comfortable.

3.   The principle of active experimentation, not enforcement

Teachers should develop a system of motivators to encourage students rather than enforce camera use. For example, they may explain the need for use of a camera in an online language class and the fact that language learning is collaborative and assisted by some form of visual proximity. At the initial meeting, they may also discuss the rules for camera use, which all the participants will agree to. Additionally, teachers should accept that students sometimes learn better when they have their cameras turned off, especially when being engaged with new material. This means, new methods and methodologies for teaching and learning languages online need to be developed, together.

Although the study focused on camera use in an EFL class, we believe that these principles will apply to most seminar classes, especially those that aim to build skills rather than convey knowledge. We do think that principles of effective camera use may be different in lecture courses, and further research is needed to investigate camera use in other online educational settings.

Conclusion

In our study we sought to explore collaboration between teachers and students in online EFL classrooms facilitated by the use of cameras. The key findings which emerged have revealed existing tensions and misunderstandings, which might hinder collaboration in an online language learning classroom and are important for developing an ecology of virtual collaboration (Crook, 2000).

The video camera can be seen as a 'proximity tool' that fosters collaboration and helps learners and teachers to become 'closer.' Yet, 'being closer' digitally means different things for teachers and for students. While teachers seek/expect traditional face-to-face presence in online classrooms from their students, students may be more engaged with the study material rather than with the teacher. This finding signals the necessity to reconsider the teacher-student-material roles/relationships in an online classroom so that collaboration emerges and develops with time.

The results of our exploratory study into online language learning indicate that collaboration may be difficult to achieve due to the lack of physical proximity between the participants, and special efforts need to be made. By focusing on how cameras are used online, we made an attempt to make transparent the relationships between students, teachers, and materials as well as students' and teachers' perceptions of camera use. Taking into account the tensions and the important role of the study environment in online learning is one possible way to create collaboration.

This paper has outlined what pedagogical implications camera use in an online language class has. It has also outlined several important questions that need further investigation. First of all, learners' perceptions of effective language learning can be investigated further to better understand what causes learners' resistance to collaborate online and what can be done to build a more successful model of collaboration. Also, to enhance collaboration among participants, it may be useful to investigate what may help to encourage learners to be more open to camera use to 'be with others', and what strategies and tools (e.g., setting camera use rules or recommending the use of a virtual background) may help with this. It may also be useful to do more research on teachers' and learners' perception of collaboration and its value in facilitating meaningful active learning. With this, the research can explore whether the teacher's and students' roles should be conceptualised differently in an online language environment.

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