International Virtual Exchange: Task Design, Implementation and Assessment

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly acknowledged that language teachers need to equip students with more than just language skills in order to adequately prepare them for their lives as global citizens. In particular, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and information and communication technology (ICT) skills are essential if one is to actively participate on the world stage. International virtual exchange (also known as telecollaboration) offers an approach to language learning that promises many benefits in these two areas. This paper, by drawing on recent literature in the field, aims to provide practical suggestions on how to design, implement and assess a virtual exchange project in an EFL course. It is argued that clear goals, which lead students through information exchange, comparison and collaboration, are essential to good task design. The implementation of tasks is best done by activating students' prior knowledge of communication technologies, and having the teacher take an active and authoritative role in guiding and monitoring interactions. When assessing performance, it is important to have tasks formally integrated into the curriculum, and to take advantage of formative assessment practices, through such means as peer assessment and portfolio assessment.

Keywords: telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange, task design, intercultural communicative competence, global competences

1. Introduction

An increasing number of foreign language classrooms the world over are turning to virtual exchange (or telecollaboration) as a means of engaging students with the target language and culture. Through such media as email, video-conferencing, social networking sites, blogs, and wikis, learners of varying ages and from widely diverse backgrounds are able to come together to exchange ideas, model their native language use, explore notions of culture and identity, and learn from each other in multifaceted ways. This is particularly valuable in the post-COVID world, where the pandemic has curtailed the free physical movement of people. Yet while this watershed educational movement has been facilitated by a growth in technological innovation, it is this same technological innovation that can be so daunting when teachers consider bringing it into their classrooms. This, compounded with the fact that many institutions are so reticent to embrace change, means that there are still significant challenges to engaging in telecollaboration. The aim of this paper is to provide practical suggestions on how to design, implement and assess a telecollaboration project in a foreign language course. These suggestions are based on the most recent research, as well as the authors' own experiences of engaging in eight telecollaboration projects together over four years.

The impetus for virtual exchanges comes from the realities of the modern world which require a new set of skills by which students can prosper and be successful. These skills, known

as 21st century skills (Griffin et al., 2012), or transversal competencies (Care & Luo, 2016), include intercultural understanding, interpersonal communication, digital literacy, and the ability to collaborate and work together with people from various backgrounds, amongst others. Today's global knowledge society puts pressure on many teachers of foreign languages to address intercultural communicative competence in their language courses (Çiftçi & Savas, 2017; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012), while students and academics are expected to exhibit a high degree of sensitivity towards and understanding of foreign cultures (de Wit, 2016). In Japan in particular, it has been observed that there has been a "shift in EFL education from an integrative motivational orientation for English learning to an international posture regarding English as a part of learners' global outlook" (Ockert, 2015, p. 206). These modern realities are well-suited to the goals of telecollaboration, which are basically "to enrich language, digital literacy, and intercultural and intracultural learning" (Çiftçi & Savas, 2017, p. 2). The multifaceted nature of telecollaboration allows it to address such diverse aspects of learning in a comprehensive manner.

Of course, language and cultural exchanges are not new to foreign language learning. Ever since languages have been learned, people have travelled to foreign lands to immerse themselves in the culture, and for those not able to physically cross geographical boundaries themselves, pen pal exchanges have been popular for at least a century. However, with the advent and popular dissemination of new communication technologies, it is increasingly easier to interact with others all over the world, not only via written discourse, but orally, aurally, and visually. The ready availability of these communication technologies has precipitated a desire for the development of tasks and activities that allow learners to share ideas, collaborate, exchange opinions, and in other ways engage with and learn from each other in a way that prepares them for life in the globalized world (Dooly et al., 2018). Consequently, we can see that telecollaboration has begun to enter the mainstream of foreign language education, whereas once it was only for the most technology-savvy CALL practitioners (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). With increasing numbers of teachers becoming interested in telecollaboration, it is hoped that this article would provide a theoretical roadmap for planning a project that is engaging and challenging, while also avoiding some common pitfalls that have derailed projects in the past. Firstly, telecollaboration is defined, and the process of establishing a partnership and designing tasks is explained. Following that, project implementation is explored, looking at the role of the teacher and how to deal with problems when they inevitably arise. Finally, issues concerning assessment are addressed, such as how to assess telecollaborative tasks and the relationship to motivation.

2. Defining Telecollaboration

It is generally agreed that telecollaboration encompasses a number of specific characteristics. O'Dowd offers the following definition: "Telecollaboration, or 'virtual exchange', are terms used to refer to the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes" (2018, p. 1). The digital, online component is essential, as is the condition of cultural or geographical distance. While there are some learners who have volunteered their time and effort to be involved with intercultural exchanges in a self-regulated way, this cannot be termed telecollaboration, as telecollaboration requires the exchanges to be an integral part of the curriculum. Sadler and Dooly offer a complementary definition, stating that telecollaborative learning is "an embedded, dialogic

process that supports geographically distanced collaborative work through social interaction, involving a/synchronous communication technology so that participants co-produce mutual objective(s) and share knowledge-building" (2016, p. 402). They give prominence to the social interaction aspect, while also highlighting that the process can be synchronous or asynchronous.

Telecollaboration, also known as online intercultural exchange, or OIE (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016), has been effective in promoting both intercultural competence and linguistic skills, as reviews of the literature have shown (Avgousti, 2018; Carney, 2006; Çiftçi & Savas, 2017). Telecollaborative projects have helped to debunk myths and stereotypes (Furstenberg et al., 2001), increased student autonomy (Konishi, 2017), increased socio-pragmatic awareness (Martí & Fernández, 2016), and had a positive effect on motivation, international posture, and willingness to communicate (Ockert, 2015). These benefits may be present even when course objectives differ between partner groups (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016). While some may argue that intercultural competence and language skills may best be learned by immersion in the host culture, the reality is that many students simply don't have an opportunity to travel abroad or to engage with people from diverse backgrounds, and even more so since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) can provide that opportunity. In fact, the use of asynchronous CMC provides an affordance of time that allows learners to process input and craft output without the pressure of instant response, and so may result in a higher quality and quantity of language production when compared to face-to-face interactions (Chen et al., 2015).

3. Task Design

When seeking to embark on a telecollaborative project, the very first step is to find a partner with whom to engage. It is vital to find a partner teacher who can match your level of enthusiasm and commitment to the project (Azuma, 2010; Furstenberg et al., 2001), as without this basic ingredient the project will likely end in frustration. International conferences are a good place to meet teachers from all over the world, while there are also some groups with an online presence that aim to promote and support teachers engaging in telecollaboration, such as UNICollaboration (www.unicollaboration.org). One option is to find a partner class that shares the target language, such as two EFL classes. Another option is to pair up with a class that speaks the target language, such as a class in an English-speaking country learning Japanese and a class in Japan learning English.

Telecollaborative exchange, by its very nature, brings together groups of students from different backgrounds, often with very different proficiency levels, educational needs, and career trajectories. As these kinds of projects are usually instigated by individual teachers through personal or professional contacts, it is often the case that their respective aims and objectives do not completely align. Bueno-Alastuey and Kleban (2016) asserted, "Planning a project in terms of different students' goals may be considered as pivotal for its success because the objectives adopted at the onset will help to forecast both the success of the project and students' involvement and participation" (p. 149). Therefore, once a partner teacher has been found, the next step is to clearly clarify the goals of the different classes.

The two most common goals for telecollaboration are firstly for learners to increase their skills in using the language, and secondly to deepen their knowledge of the other culture. Language goals can be further broken down into skill areas such as speaking, writing, reading or listening, and/or functional goals such as giving instructions, negotiating, agreeing, disagreeing, and so on. It is important to make the goals of the exchange absolutely clear to the participants,

together with the methods of assessment. Muller-Hartmann and Kurek (2016) found that, "Task instructions which clearly communicated task goals generated much more intense collaboration than tasks providing detailed procedural steps yet failed to ensure goal clarity" (p. 145). Likewise, Sadler and Dooly (2016) found that a very clear set of expectations was crucial for success.

Once the goals have been set, tasks need to be constructed. Telecollaborative tasks must be designed in a way that is appropriate to the medium (Hampel, 2006). Simply taking an existing classroom activity and having students complete it online with a foreign partner will fail to take advantage of the many benefits afforded by computer-mediated communication. Different media, such as video, shared documents, comment-driven postings or collaborative gaming, will each lend themselves to different kinds of interaction. Choosing the medium intentionally will better enable the teacher to achieve their desired learning outcome. Hauk and Youngs (2008) noted, "Unless there are well-constructed tasks, simply participating in synchronous oral/aural exchanges does not necessarily lead to effective and motivated language and intercultural learning" (p. 102). Well-constructed tasks make the best use of the particular software or online platform being employed. For instance, email lends itself well to letter writing activities, video sharing tools work well with tasks that involve oral presentations, and live video chat software is suited to conversation and discussion. Collaborative media, on the other hand, such as shared documents or webpages, changes the relationship of content ownership and consequently the learning relationships of production around the assigned task.

A decision will also need to be made as to whether tasks will be synchronous or asynchronous. Avgousti (2018) reports that synchronous chats are more engaging, more likely to aid the development of ICC skills, and considered more suitable for intercultural negotiation. Asynchronous tasks, on the other hand, were favoured by some learners because of the flexibility and convenience they afforded, as well as providing more time to think about problems, and they were regarded as less linguistically challenging. Learning goals are an important consideration when deciding between synchronous and asynchronous tasks. More complex statements are likely to be produced when using asynchronous tools, while short and less formal statements are often produced with synchronous tools (Çiftçi & Savas, 2017). While Hauck and Youngs (2008) used both synchronous (audio-conferencing) and asynchronous (blogs) tasks, they found that the asynchronous tasks worked better to foster closer relationships between peers. Within the current literature, it seems that asynchronous tools are dominant, perhaps because of pragmatic considerations relating to different time zones.

Studies focused on telecollaboration have utilized a number of different task types, which have been categorized by O'Dowd and Ware (2009) into three main categories: information exchange, comparison, and collaboration. The first category refers to tasks where learners impart information to each other, usually personal, such as their hobbies, interests, family, school or neighbourhood. There is usually little negotiation of meaning in a linguistic or cultural sense, and these tasks are often used as ice-breakers or get-to-know-you activities. The second task type involves comparison and analysis and is, therefore, more demanding. These tasks require a deeper level of cognitive processing, as learners synthesize information in order to compare cultural and/or linguistic features of both cultures. The third category of task, collaboration, places the greatest demand on learners, as it requires them to work together in partnership to produce a joint outcome. This outcome could be a webpage or a blog, an essay or a digital story, or some such similar product. Although quite difficult to plan and coordinate, these collaborative

tasks produce a great deal of heightened interaction and negotiation of meaning, promising substantial cultural and linguistic learning gains.

Concerning these three task categories, O'Dowd (2016) wrote:

> It would appear that most telecollaborative exchanges never move on beyond the first and second task types as students present, exchange and compare information but rarely go that extra step to actually collaborate together to complete a document or project. I would argue that it would be very beneficial for telecollaboration practice to focus more on this third type of telecollaborative task type to exploit the learning potential of this activity to the maximum. (p. 279)

It is recommended, therefore, that tasks used in telecollaboration move through three phases based on these task categories. An opening, or introductory, phase could include basic interview questions that help partners get to know each other through exchanging information about likes and dislikes, family background, free time activities, and other such neutral topics. Following on from that, the second phase would include comparison and analysis of specific aspects of culture. For example, lower level learners could compare food eaten for breakfast or popular activities to do on the weekend, while higher level learners could compare recycling practices in both cultures or attitudes towards refugees. In the final phase, learners would be required to create a product or achieve an outcome in collaboration with one another. This inevitably raises a number of difficult issues concerning grading and assessment as learners divide the workload and provide feedback and support to each other, so that it may be unclear how much each contributed to the product and what they achieved individually. However, these issues can be adequately addressed through careful planning, such as having students discuss and decide the rules of group work themselves, and pre-emptive measures to deal with issues such as unequal contribution or technological failures. The many advantages of engaging in genuine collaboration make this investment of time and effort worthwhile.

This approach to task sequencing correlates well with the nature of telecollaboration as compared with traditional classroom work. Ware and O'Dowd (2008) speculated that online exchanges have students look forward towards the next message, rather than many classroom tasks which are often iterative in nature, requiring students to look backward to revise and prepare for assessment. "Therefore, we would suggest that teachers structure carefully sequenced tasks so that they build on the previous interaction" (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008, p. 54). When explaining these tasks to learners, it is important that task instructions be clear and repeated often (Sadler & Dooly, 2016). The extra cognitive load of using tools for computer-mediated communication places an added strain on learners, making it more likely that learners will misunderstand or get the wrong idea about the purpose of the activity. Table 1 from O'Dowd (2016) provides a concise summary to aid task design.

In addition to the above, language learning gains can be greatly improved "when tasks are carefully designed to require linguistic accuracy and when students are aware of their role as language expert or tutor" (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016, p. 55). A focus on form during either the pre-task or post-task stage would help encourage linguistic accuracy, while including grammar use as a criterion on the assessment rubric would give a boost to extrinsic motivation. To this end, peers are a valuable learning resource for each other. It appears that learners appreciate and want peer feedback on form, but only tend to offer this feedback when it is part of the task requirements.

Therefore, it is recommended that students are given some training in using feedback strategies (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008).

Table 1

Strong and weak approaches to telecollaborative task design

Strong approaches to telecollaborative task design	Weak approaches to telecollaborative task design
Tasks reflect themes of social justice and intercultural citizenship	Tasks focus on superficial communicative themes
Tasks engage students in active collaboration together	Tasks only require learners to present and report information
Tasks include reflection on the role of the medium in online communication	The role of the technology in the communication is taken for granted
Tasks include stages of cultural self-reflection and critical evaluation	No critical self-reflection is involved
Tasks avoid stereotyping and forced culture clash	Tasks often involve a focus on stereotyping and forced culture clash

Note. Table taken from O'Dowd, 2016, p. 287

4. Implementation

It is important for instructors and students to be familiar with the technology being used, as this plays a significant role in successful exchanges (Avgousti, 2018; Carney, 2006). This requires teachers to activate and integrate prior ICT knowledge (Sadler & Dooly, 2016) held by the learners, which could involve using smartphone apps which are currently popular, while also utilizing students themselves as instructional resources for each other. Two of the most popular apps with students at the time of writing were Instagram and Line. Other apps with which students can become instantly familiar are Flipgrid, VoiceThread, and Skype. The high degree of visuality of these media, including photos, videos and emoji, allows students to be creators and producers of knowledge, as opposed to merely a user or consumer.

When implementing learning tasks, it may be beneficial to allow some negotiation of the rules of interaction. Konishi (2017) used a method known as tandem language learning, or language exchange, where each person was studying their partner's language. In his project, two Japanese students studying English were paired with one Australian student studying Japanese for asynchronous online exchange. Each group of three was given freedom to negotiate amongst themselves the balance of Japanese and English language use. As participants were free to communicate in either the target language or their native language, the anxiety level of participants was lessened.

While asynchronous telecollaboration allows learners the time and mental space to plan and evaluate linguistic and cultural phenomena (Chen et al., 2015), synchronous telecollaboration by its very nature allows little time for this. Therefore, it is important that an opportunity for analysis and reflection be built into synchronous exchanges (Lewis et al., 2016; Martí & Fernández, 2016; Muller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016). This could take the form of self-evaluation sheets, group discussions, or short activity reports. Learners should be encouraged to reflect on those aspects of the interaction that were awkward or stressful, and where communication seemed to break down. The cultural fault lines in telecollaborative communities should be appreciated, rather than considered as something to be cleansed or avoided (Belz,

2002), while contradictions and tensions should be seen as opportunities for growth and intercultural learning (Priego & Liaw, 2017), and so value can be ascribed to their function as transformative agents (Helm, 2016).

In all of this, the role of the teacher cannot be underestimated. “In contrast to conventional face-to-face classroom-based learning, the teacher in telecollaboration must be educated to discern, identify, explain, and model culturally-contingent patterns of interaction in the absence of paralinguistic meaning signals” (Belz, 2003, conclusion section). Teachers have an important role in creating a safe and stimulating environment, and in monitoring and guiding interactions, so that their role in telecollaboration may even be more dominant than in classrooms without CMC (Çiftçi & Savas, 2017). Furstenberg et al. (2001) summarize as follows:

> The role of the teacher is to accompany students through the analysis and to ensure that they will avoid possible pitfalls such as interpreting too literally what is said or written, which would lead to a gross misinterpretation; making hasty generalizations and comparisons, coming up with comments such as “the French are … ,” “the Americans are …”; getting lost in details and losing track of what their question was, what hypothesis they were trying to verify or debunk, or stopping halfway and not pressing a question far enough; and discovering early on a valid interpretation, creating a new model once and for all, and applying it to every situation, trying to open every door with the same key, looking at everything from the same angle. (The specific role of the teacher)

This requires some skill and tact on the part of the teacher in navigating the potentially stormy waters of interpersonal and intercultural interaction, while also coordinating the technology in use during the exchange. All of this requires quite a large investment of time and effort, causing Sadler (2018) to give this advice: “Be ready for the workload” (p. 220).

5. Assessment

The issue of assessment is one of vital significance, which has not yet been adequately addressed in the field. Assessment exerts an overriding influence over all classroom endeavors, whether telecollaborative or not, working to focus student effort, guide learning paths, measure educational attainment and build motivation. While there may be a great deal of intrinsic motivation in engaging in meaningful communication with cross-cultural peers, this by itself is not enough to secure learner involvement. School administration and stakeholders will also desire some evidence of learning activity and attainment in order to justify any investment made in telecollaboration. This is most readily available through a comprehensive assessment scheme, based on the goals of the virtual exchange and decided by partner teachers together.

The first point to make is that telecollaborative tasks need to be mandatory, or else in some other way formally integrated into the curriculum, rather than left as an optional extra for learners. This is for the twin goals of ensuring learner participation (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016) and having a transformative effect on the educational systems within which they are implemented (Lewis et al., 2016). Concerning the first goal, it has often been the case that voluntary participation results in a low level of motivation that is unable to maintain learner interest in the exchange when challenges arise. The knowledge that a good grade for the class is contingent upon active involvement in the exchange provides that extra impetus to propel

learners onwards when they come up against obstacles. Such obstacles, which could be technological, cultural, or interpersonal, will undoubtedly arise, and learners will need to be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. Regarding the second goal, while it is encouraging and immensely satisfying to observe learner growth in linguistic and cultural competence as a result of telecollaboration, it would be regrettable if this remained at the classroom (micro) level. There is strong potential for this educational approach to extend its benefits to the institutional and societal (macro) level, which will only happen once it is officially integrated into the curriculum and accepted as a legitimate part of the learning program.

Concerning the actual assessment of students' work, there is still much to be researched. Many teachers and researchers are unsure how telecollaborative tasks should be assessed (O'Dowd, 2010). There has been a tendency to give learners a grade for their level of participation or, in other words, to evaluate the quantity of work that was done. While this may be expeditious for the teacher, it could be regarded as pedagogically unsound for a number of reasons, not least of which is the equating of participation with learning. It could be argued that language attainment can be assessed as it has always traditionally been, with grading rubrics that focus on grammar, lexis, expression, pronunciation, and so on. However, practical working knowledge and intercultural communicative competencies are not so easily evaluated. Care and Luo noted, "Assessing whether a student knows a fact is relatively simple. Assessing whether a student can identify how that fact can be used is complex" (2016, p. 5). It is clear that new forms of assessment are needed to evaluate the new forms of transversal competencies that are being taught.

One common trend has been towards peer assessment. Furstenberg et al. (2001) had learners send their final essays to a peer counterpart, rather than to the teacher. The peer, who was an expert speaker in the target language, would then comment on the accuracy of the observations. An advantage of this practice is that it shifts the mindset surrounding student mistakes, which no longer need to be hidden from the teacher. Instead, mistakes are brought to the attention of the teacher and other classmates in order to improve the essay before submitting it to the peer counterpart for assessment. Peer evaluation can also be done in groups. Sadler and Dooly (2016) had students collaborating online in a group project. At the beginning of the project, participants read and signed a telecollaborative activities contract, which then provided the foundation for peer and teacher evaluation throughout the course. This included descriptions of expected behaviour and attitudes. An online peer evaluation system was used to have students evaluate the other members of their group, and these evaluations helped to decide each learner's final grade. With Japanese students, some studies have shown that peer assessment can be a reliable indicator of student performance (Matsuno, 2009; Saito, 2008, 2012). When conducting peer evaluation across cultures, some training in the methods of giving feedback would arguably lead to increased benefits. At the very least, impressionistic comments like "good" and "nice work" should be avoided and encouragement given to provide constructive criticism.

The creation of learning portfolios is another promising method of assessment (Belz, 2002; O'Dowd, 2010; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). Portfolios can encourage students to reflect on their online interaction, as well as to study and record new linguistic structures and vocabulary. In essence, portfolio creation involves students collecting their own work, selecting those pieces which most exemplify their learning gains, and reflecting on their achievements (Howrey & Tanner, 2009). It has been suggested that portfolio assessment is viewed favourably by Japanese university students (Apple & Shimo, 2004), while also having positive effects on learner autonomy and motivation (O'Dwyer, 2009). In a telecollaborative project, a portfolio could

include any piece of work that was produced as part of the exchange, such as emails, wiki entries, blog posts, video presentations, or recording of live chats. An electronic portfolio would widen the scope of work that could be included.

6. Concluding Remarks

The last decade has seen much creative development in the theory and practice of telecollaboration. The year 2020 in particular, characterized as it was by lockdowns and remote learning caused by the spread of COVID-19, saw a dramatic acceleration in the development and adoption of computer-mediated communication. Although it is still a young field, there is a clear picture emerging of sound theoretical principles and good pedagogical practice. A number of pioneering educators and researchers have established techniques and guidelines for engaging in telecollaboration, which this paper has attempted to describe. Not only this, but technological advances in software and the diffusion of devices such as smartphones have meant that the barriers to engaging in online intercultural interaction are rapidly coming down. In order to effectively reap the many benefits of telecollaboration, tasks need to be carefully designed and clearly focused on the particular goals of the course. When implementing these tasks, the role of the teacher is to guide and monitor activity, not seeking to avoid cultural misunderstandings but taking advantage of them to raise student awareness of cultural differences. Treating students' lack of knowledge and shortfall in skills as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles to a higher grade improves the learning environment and is a great equalizer of students with different levels of competency. In evaluating student work, peer assessment and portfolios have so far shown themselves to be effective tools in encouraging and measuring achievement. Those educators who have witnessed firsthand the excitement and thrill of students as they interact with peers around the world know the transformative effect that telecollaboration can have on classrooms. It is hoped that as the practice becomes more widespread, an increasing number of students would strengthen their language skills and deepen their intercultural communicative competence, thus becoming sympathetic and enterprising global citizens.

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