

Why in the world would I want to talk to someone else about my culture?

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Abstract

This paper shares the work and observations from a task-based 6-week email exchange project between participants in Spain and the US. Though small in scale, the study offers insights for those interested in telecollaboration but face constraints on multiple fronts. Close examination of the exchanges reveal participants' engagement on multiple levels, including reflection on one's own culture.

Keywords: Telecollaboration; email exchange; task-based; intercultural communication; Web 1.0; foreign language.

1. Introduction

Technology has become an integral part of the modern day classroom. From animated graphics, to YouTube clips, to homework online, to distance learning, technology is not just a novelty in a classroom, but an essential tool, and often a defining measure of advancement. Yet, the vast array of technology has created a unique challenge. Since complex tasks are often associated with implementation of complex technology, people often hesitate before diving into tech-heavy pedagogies. Telecollaboration is such an example.

Telecollaboration creates a "virtual intercultural interaction and exchange with partner classes" for learners in "geographically distant locations" (UNICollaboration, n.d.). Telecollaboration frequently takes place in institutions with the means and the will to support such projects. As a teaching tool, it often involves entire classes of students. Many individual instructors, though interested in telecollaboration, feel daunted by the logistics of coordinating teams of students and having to navigate the technology maze.

For these reasons, insights gained through the study are worth sharing as this was the investigators' first foray into telecollaboration. For the investigators, the project was a success, largely due to the small sample and well-defined time frame – all a consequence of practical constraints and not research intent. But the project's moderate success bolsters the claim that a small-scale design is important for the successful planning and implementation of a telecollaborative project for the first time (Coffman, 2009).

2. Background

In the 21st Century, it is imperative that foreign language instruction promotes intercultural competence and language learning (Elola and Oskoz, 2008). Intercultural competence "involves the development of the learners' ability to interact with members of other culture while being aware of differences and similarities and preventing overemphasis on foreignness or stereotyping" (p.454).

It has been suggested that immersion offers best opportunities for enhancing cultural competence. Yet immersion is not available to all students; instructors alone cannot adequately address the nuance and diversity of a culture. This is when technology-mediated communication can allow students to “access updated, authentic cultural materials and . . . communicate with native speakers of the target language” (Elola and Oskoz, 2008, p. 455).

Indeed, virtual learning may be one of the positive outcomes of the Internet Revolution. As the Internet gains greater penetration, barriers to communication between peoples over vast geographic distances have all but disappeared. “As of 2007, more than 50% of the population in 35 countries had access to the Internet” (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2007). Email, one of the earliest utility tools, has become ubiquitous. Because of email’s availability and familiarity, telecollaboration via email, as a learning tool, can be set up quickly by instructors alone, and requires minimum additional institutional involvement.

Email-based telecollaboration has several additional unique advantages to second language (L2) learners. It allows direct encounters between L2 learners and native speakers, exposing L2 learners to authentic use of language. It allows time for reflection, introspection, and deliberate engagement – all key to critically learning and analyzing others’, as well as one’s own, cultures.

The idea of creating authentic virtual communication situations for language learning is not new. Durboraw (2002) set forth a practical model for establishing authentic communication situations with non-threatening atmospheres, in order to lower students’ affective filters and allow students to critically analyzed and discussed the practical aspects of learning a language and culture other than their own (2002). In their study, Klein and Solem (2008) analyzed online collaboration vis-à-vis students’ learning of geography and their appreciation for cross-cultural perspectives. The positive link their research found has significant implications to the teaching and learning of foreign languages and cultures.

LaJoie, Garcia, Berdugo, Márquez, Espíndola, and Nakamura (2006) demonstrated how a “community of inquiry” created in a virtual classroom had a positive effect on learning and critical thinking. Fernández Dobao and Palacios Martínez (2007) observed the key role communication strategies (CS) played in expressing and negotiating meaning in face-to-face interactions, highlighting the importance of social interaction in language learning. As “intercultural communicative competence” surpasses “communicative competence” in foreign language teaching, “engaging learners in collaborative project ... with members of other cultures has been identified as being an authentic and effective way of preparing learners for the complex yet enriching experience of foreign language and culture learning” (O’Dowd, 2007, p. 3).

In order to implement and build on these ideas, the present study sought to answer these research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: Is an email exchange an effective method to foster “the complex yet enriching experience of foreign language and culture learning” as O’Dowd (2007) predicted?
- RQ2: Can students learn how to critically analyse and discuss cultural aspects of a language other than their own (Klein & Solem, 2008) through an email exchange?
- RQ3: Do participants gain knowledge of another’s culture through the lens of a native speaker through an email exchange?

3. Procedure

A total of five participants made up three intercultural partnerships in the 6-week email exchange. Each partnership consisted of one L2 Spanish learner from a US institution and one L2 English learner from a Spanish institution. Participants received individualized weekly prompts from the investigator to complete a task in the target language (TL). The tasks were developed to be realistically doable (Coffman, 2009). The focus of the exchange was on task outcome, rather than accuracy of language forms.

Participants were instructed to always use their nicknames and copy the investigator in all emails. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, share personal anecdotes, and have fun. There were no other restrictions on the exchange. Partners alternated weekly in initiating the exchange. Before and after the 6-week email exchange, participants completed a survey. Participation in this study was conducted outside their normal classwork.

3.1. Participants

The two L2 Spanish learners were an average age of 21.5 years whereas the three L2 English learners were an average age of 21.7 years. One L2 Spanish learner partnered with two different L2 English learners.

3.2. Pre-survey

The pre-survey, completed on surveymonkey.com, consisted of 24 questions. Each participant noted prior knowledge and perceptions of the L2 culture and their expectations of the study.

3.2. Weekly topics

After completing the pre-survey, each L2 Spanish participant was partnered with an L2 English participant for the exchange. Participants then received weekly detailed instructions to discuss a specific cultural topic.

Table 1 below displays the weekly topics and the roles (initiator or responder) each L2 participant played over the course of the 6-week period.

	Topic	Participant A	Participant B
Week 1	Thanksgiving in Spain	L2 <i>Spanish</i> participant	L2 <i>English</i> participant
Week 2	Thanksgiving in the U.S.	L2 <i>English</i> participant	L2 <i>Spanish</i> participant
Week 3	Christmas in Spain	L2 <i>Spanish</i> participant	L2 <i>English</i> participant
Week 4	Christmas in the U.S.	L2 <i>English</i> participant	L2 <i>Spanish</i> participant
Week 5	New Year's Eve and New Year's Day in Spain	L2 <i>Spanish</i> participant	L2 <i>English</i> participant
Week 6	New Year's Eve and New Year's Day in the U.S.	L2 <i>English</i> participant	L2 <i>Spanish</i> participant

Table1. Weekly topics.

3.3. Post-survey

At the end of the 6-week exchange, participants completed the 31-question post-survey on surveymonkey.com, which fielded their newfound knowledge, changes in perceptions of the L2 culture, problems encountered, and reflections on the intercultural collaboration.

4. Observations

4.1. Pre-Survey observations

Participants made it clear they were aware of their lack of, and often inaccurate, knowledge of the L2 culture. They acknowledged “stereotypes” about the other culture and finger-pointed TV shows and movies as the culprits. Participants’ “blind spots” were also evident, such as the superficial cultural icons they conveniently associated with the L2 culture. L2 Spanish participants associated Spain with “drinking” and “drunk people”. L2 English participants associated Americans with food and drink, most notably “red plastic cups” (disposable cups used at parties). Notably, participants also expressed interest in going beyond their stereotypes and preconceptions and learn more about the L2 culture.

4.2. Weekly activity observations

Emails became more relaxed in tone over time. The frequency of the exchange also increased over time. Similarly, formality decreased with time, with participants using real names, despite instructions to the contrary. For a mere 6-week exchange, such rapid shift is significant. It appears, even in an email exchange, participants felt the need to drop their adopted persona (nickname), and establish an authentic connection with their partner. These unexpected behaviours are beyond the scope of the present study, but deserve further analysis.

4.3. Post-survey observations

Personal relationships developed during exchange and the interactions encouraged L2 learners to further explore the L2 culture. Participants gained new information and an enhanced awareness of the misrepresentations of cultural truths. Students became more mindful of the L2 culture, and through their partners’ lenses, participants made comparisons between the other culture and their own. There was also increased curiosity of culture and interest to know more.

5. Conclusion

The investigators concluded that telecollaboration, even a small-scale project, offers an invaluable opportunity for participants to effectively foster cultural learning (RQ1). They also deduced that email exchanges do afford students the opportunity to learn and exercise critical thinking skills in analysing and discussing cultural aspects of a language other than their own (RQ2) as seen by the enhanced awareness of the L2 culture through the exchange. Finally, the participants gained knowledge of another’s culture through the lens of a native speaker because of the telecollaborative encounter (RQ3). The mere contact with their partners allowed participants to gain a new perspective (Helm & Guth, 2010).

6. Classroom Implications

As per the investigators’ experience, there are key components for a successful email exchange and its successful implementation for the L2 classroom.

1. Telecollaboration can be set up for any level, with any number of students. As with all human activity, flexibility and an open mind are fundamental to a successful exchange. Much can be learned through “irregular” situations. The uneven number of participants in this project, for example, afforded

- investigators a unique look into the mind of one participant engaged in two exchanges simultaneously.
2. Despite the key role technology plays, the human interaction in telecollaboration is the most important piece. It is vital to leave plenty of space for the unexpected. One participant in the study gradually revealed her parents' Chinese heritage. This enlivened and enriched the exchange and served as a reminder of the complex, multicultural world in which we live.
 3. The role of the instructor(s) is important, both in introducing participants, giving instructions, and in maintaining the on-going exchange. After introductions, participants needed to be frequently reminded to initiate, respond, and to copy the instructors on their emails. Instructor's active involvement was particularly important at the beginning of the process, but remained necessary throughout the exchange.
 4. Instructions (and their timing) must be handled deliberately and judiciously so as to avoid interference. In the absence of face-to-face interaction, one must reserve judgment and do one's best to allow interactions to take place on participants' terms. The small scale made it possible for the investigators to make individual judgment calls on nudging or waiting when emails were not forthcoming. Delay in responses occurred for reasons other than lack of interest. This was evident, because when participants resumed writing, they apologized sincerely and warmly, which led to more spontaneous personal exchanges. A large number of participants would have put greater demand on the instructor on similar matters.
 5. Although a large sampling size is preferred for data analysis, starting small is key when first planning and implementing telecollaboration (Coffman, 2009). Technology integration aside, smaller scale projects make for better learning opportunities for instructors and students.

Answer to the title question, "Why in the world would I want to talk to someone else about my culture?" became clear when investigators saw evidence that learning took place on many different levels in this email exchange. Investigators were struck by the ease with which students took to the medium and opened up to their partners. However, seemingly straightforward exchanges via a straightforward medium are multi-layered, complex, rich, interesting and human, and impossible to be reduced to fit into existing theories. Therefore, it is critical for L2 educators to engage in telecollaborative efforts in and out of the classroom so that students understand the importance of talking to someone else about their culture.

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