

REVIEW OF *ONLINE INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE: AN INTRODUCTION FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS*

Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers

Robert O'Dowd (Ed.)

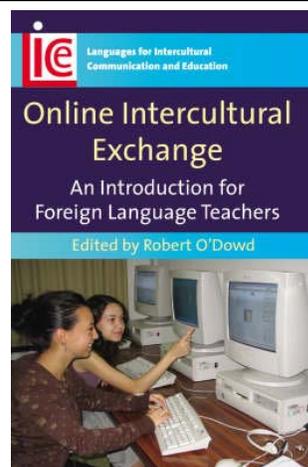
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Online cultural exchanges are becoming increasingly popular as technologies allow for more interaction, negotiation of meaning, and authentic communication with native speakers of a target language. Goals of these projects generally move beyond learning linguistic components of a language to developing students' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), often called intercultural competence (IC) as well. Networked technologies are seen as a primary means of accomplishing these goals, particularly as they allow learners to engage in projects with native speakers. Yet, more understanding about these online exchanges is needed, particularly regarding intercultural competence. Even three years after the publication of this collection, Dervin (2010) notes that in most language departments, intercultural competence is still often not understood by teachers or learners and is not being sufficiently developed in curricula. The need for integrating IC into language classes continues to be great, as neither simply having repeated contact with people from a country nor having a strong command of a foreign language is sufficient for its development (Zarate, 2003). Thus, telecollaborative exchanges focusing on this aspect of communication are crucial.

Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers, consisting of 18 chapters and edited by Robert O'Dowd (2007), aims to fill this need. As number 15 in the series *Languages for Intercultural Communication and Education* (edited by Michael Byram and Alison Phipps), this particular collection seeks to examine via research and practice what online intercultural exchange involves pedagogically as well as what promises and challenges it offers. As such, it will be of use for foreign language educators, teacher trainers, graduate students, and classroom researchers. This collection is overall very comprehensive and in general covers many aspects and topics that other sources fail to provide; given the difficulties of working within the page limitations of an edited collection, the chapters within this book do quite well in their topic coverage and examples.

There are four parts in the collection, moving from an introduction to the topic and models for online exchanges to examples of specific projects and technologies. In "Part 1: Introduction to this Volume and its Theme," O'Dowd defines online intercultural exchange (also referred to as telecollaboration) as "the activity of engaging language learners in interaction and collaborative project work with partners from other cultures through the use of online communication tools such as e-mail, videoconferencing and discussion forums" (p. 4). Chapter 1, "New Challenges in Foreign Language Education," includes a discussion on the origins of online exchange, current areas of research and debate, and issues that face

teachers in these projects. His reminders that project-based distance cultural exchanges have existed since the beginning of the 20th century and that contact alone is not sufficient in these exchanges are both worth keeping in mind today. In the second chapter, “Foreign Language Education and the Rise of Online Communication: A Review of Promises and Realities,” O’Dowd sets out to answer key questions about the role of CMC in foreign language education. He notes that educators must take their learners’ current online practices into account and consider the electronic literacies they may need. He very usefully encourages educators to allow students to use online spaces to engage in genuine intercultural dialogue in order to confront their prejudices and reminds us that online communication is most effective when teachers are willing to explore new ways of teaching that focus on the learners’ needs. O’Dowd’s call for a realistic approach to the use of technology in foreign language education, his acknowledgment of technology’s limitations, and his specific guidelines provide a useful starting point for educators engaged in online cultural exchanges.

“Part 2: Models of Online Intercultural Exchange” provides discussion on three telecollaboration models: eTandem, *Cultura*, and eTwinning. As Breffni O’Rourke notes, eTandem learning is built on the concepts of openness and learner autonomy and involves two native speakers reciprocally providing support and instruction. Many suggestions to decrease the likelihood of eTandem failures are included, but also useful would have been suggestions on how to structure eTandem projects for maximum student performance and discussions on possible teaching objectives and assessment possibilities. In their chapter, Jesús Suárez García and James Crapotta compare eTandem learning with *Cultura*, which is a highly-structured yet student-centered model in which students work in their native and target languages to analyze practices within a culture in order to develop intercultural competence. Discussions on the risks of the *Cultura* model (e.g., increased stereotyping) are very useful, but also raise the question of whether IC may be developed by other means (e.g., via students collaborating on real-world projects that allow them to perceive their own and the other culture more inductively). Part 2 closes with Antonia Domínguez Miguela’s chapter on eTwinning, which is a European network of primary and secondary schools in which students collaborate on cross-curricular international projects that develop a feeling of linguistic diversity within a European identity, promote pedagogic innovation, and integrate technology into education. In general, Part 2 includes an emphasis of the theories and practices of the three models over specific technologies, which leads to a more comprehensive guide for educators and a longer shelf life for the collection.

“Part 3: Issues and Questions in Online Intercultural Exchange” is the longest section and begins with Paige Ware and Maria Luisa Pérez Cañado’s chapter on integrating language form into authentic, contextualized telecollaboration projects. Their very practical recommendations regarding constructing the educational context with a language focus, identifying and meeting participants’ needs, guiding participants through giving peer language-related feedback, structuring interaction, and helping students maintain communication are very useful and would have been nicely supplemented with a discussion on how to help students interpret peer feedback. Julie Belz, in her chapter on telecollaborative partnerships that develop intercultural communicative competence, also provides suggestions for carefully structured tasks and student training. Focusing on intercultural communication in telecollaboration, her discussion on Byram’s intercultural communicative competence (ICC) framework is not only concise and clear, but also includes examples of student work. The examples are very useful, though it would have been beneficial to include a more complete discussion on what makes a particular piece of speech match one of Byram’s five ICC principles.

In Chapter 8, Andreas Müller-Hartmann discusses the crucial and central role of teachers in telecollaborative projects, including tips on establishing, organizing, and facilitating these projects across different contexts and on handling the challenges they present. More concrete information on assessment within these projects would be useful, given that often teachers and students bring different expectations and needs to the project. However, Müller-Hartmann points out one very important but often overlooked

fact, which is that in order for teachers to guide students through an IC project, they themselves must also possess this competence. Isabel Pérez Torres and Margarita Vinagre in Chapter 9 discuss using email for intercultural exchanges with secondary school-age learners. While many suggestions on structuring exchanges are offered, two rather important considerations would have benefited from discussion: obtaining parental or administrative permission and techniques to minimize inappropriate or bullying behavior that may arise in student communication. Choosing and integrating the appropriate communication tools for exchange projects is discussed by Melinda Dooly, with a discussion of needs analysis, questions to consider before implementing a telecollaborative project, and a reminder of the importance of efficiency with tool use. Part 3 proves to be quite extensive in what it covers, though including more research-based and data-driven information that might convince a reluctant administration or faculty that these projects are worth the time and resources that they require would be useful.

“Part 4: Practical Accounts and Experiences of Online Exchange” begins with a foreword by O’Dowd and moves to a collection of seven chapters on different telecollaborative projects from a variety of contexts. The Tandem Network project between English- and Spanish-speaking university students discussed by Margarita Vinagre provides useful assignments and guidelines for students; also interesting would be a discussion on how to move beyond what appears to be rather teacher-controlled autonomy and allow students to practice their emergent autonomy on their own (e.g., see Kessler, 2009, on students practicing autonomy in online environments). In Chapter 13, Mirjam Hauck and Tim Lewis outline a *Tridem* project which links learners from the UK, the US, and France, hoping that having three groups participate would broaden intercultural learning and reduce risks of stereotypes and confrontations.

In Chapter 14, Christopher Chase and Paul Alexander explain the Japan-Korea Culture Exchange Project, which provides an opportunity for participants to use English as a lingua franca in a project with many political and cultural ramifications. Project objectives place less priority on deep cultural or historical issues and center more on developing trust and friendship. This chapter touches on aspects which are very important to consider in exchanges involving non-Western cultures (e.g., the importance of sharing gifts in high-context cultures); it would have also been interesting if reflections had been included on the potential opportunities and challenges that Japanese and/or Korean instructors may have experienced in directing the project. This chapter reminds the reader of how important it is that international educators understand a variety of cultural perspectives. Alfred Markey’s chapter “Using the Moodle Platform in Online Exchanges” provides thoughts on structuring these exchanges and raises some interesting observations on factors determining success (e.g., partner compatibility regarding interests and personal character), though more on what is offered in terms of Moodle itself (e.g., its features, strengths, or weaknesses) would have been beneficial. The book closes with a chapter by Eva Wilden on using voice chats to help teachers explore IC via the model of the *ABC’s of Cultural Understanding and Communication*; a chapter by Christine Develotte, François Mangenot, and Katerina Zourou on “Le français en (première) ligne” Project, which paired pre-service teachers of French as a foreign language and learners of French as a foreign language in an online exchange mainly via discussion boards and course management systems; and a chapter by Lina Lee on the nuts and bolts of communicating via desktop videoconferencing.

This very practical collection succeeds in showing that, as Hauck and Lewis note in their chapter, “telecollaboration takes many forms” (p. 250). Many topics are covered in depth and with practical insights. Given the importance of this topic, perhaps a second volume could be written. It could include information such as the many forms of IC, as intercultural competence has models beyond that put forth by Byram (e.g., see Deardorff, 2006, p. 242, for a list of IC definitions). Also useful would be views that cause us to consider aspects of IC in today’s changing world (e.g., Zarate, 2003), that show us how technology can help move students away from the idea that culture is synonymous with country (e.g., Neuner, 2003), or that question some of the cultural assumptions that are often embedded in the Western concept of IC (e.g., Paramenter, 2003). A second volume could also include projects that take the

development of IC out of classroom-only contexts and place it into real-life practices (e.g., Jaeger, 1995a) that occur between learners of a foreign language and native speakers of that language who are interested in learning about intercultural competence more than about the foreign language (e.g., Bikowski, 2008), or that help make the learning of intercultural competence more interdisciplinary and intermethodological in nature (as called for by Jaeger, 1995b, or Söderberg, 1995). As it is, however, the collection is quite useful in what it provides to educators, particularly with its emphasis on the collaboration that is needed in online intercultural exchanges and the variety of contexts it presents to readers. It will be an asset to all who read it.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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