Telecollaboration as an approach to developing intercultural communication competence

Robert Godwin-Jones, Virginia Commonwealth University

Introduction

It has been repeatedly asserted in recent years that telecollaboration is such a powerful and effective tool for both second language acquisition (SLA) and fostering intercultural communication competence (ICC) that it should be regularly included in foreign language instruction (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016a; O'Dowd, 2016a; Thorne, 2016) and that its use be "normalized" into the language classroom (Bax, 2003). This perspective is reflected in the large number of studies on telecollaboration currently, as well as its prominence in professional conferences (for recent book compilations and journal special issues, see Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018a). A new *Journal of Virtual Exchange* is dedicated to the practice. At the same time, there have been voices questioning the value and effectiveness of telecollaboration, as normally implemented (Liddicoat, 2013; Train, 2006). As used in class-based exchanges, those concerns range from ineffective, peer-based error-correction (Lin, Warschauer, & Blake, 2016; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Tai, Lin, & Yang, 2015) to the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes (Flowers, Kelsen, & Cvitkovic, 2019; Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2012; Kirschner, 2015). One clear takeaway from the 20-year history of telecollaboration is that linguistic and intercultural gains are by no means automatic and that exchanges need to be set up with care as well as with an awareness of best practices. Context and goals will shape configuration and tools and services used, which will likely diverge significantly from one implementation to the next (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Thorne, 2006). While studies have pointed to the importance of "guided reflection" in collaboration (Helm, Guth, & Farrah, 2012) for developing intercultural communication competence, others have suggested that the access to informal resources today in online interest groups, social media, and digital entertainment (gaming, and music or video streaming) create opportunities for "intercultural communication in the wild" (Thorne, 2010, p. 144). In this column we will be looking at these different approaches (class-based and autonomous) as well as other evolving developments, such as telecollaboration in teaching education, the changing models and modalities of exchanges, and its cultural dimensions.

Telecollaboration Today

Also known under other terms, such as virtual exchange or online international exchange (OIE), telecollaboration is "generally understood to be internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (as defined by Byram, 1997) through structured tasks" (Guth & Helm, 2010, p. 14). There are recent surveys and meta-analyses touching on different dimensions of telecollaboration (Avgousti, 2018; Blyth, 2018; Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018a), as well as in advocacy pieces (Byram & Wagner, 2018; O'Dowd, 2019). Those and earlier studies point to commonalities in telecollaboration projects and areas of consensus among researchers. Most exchanges are "bilateral, bilingual, bicultural exchanges lasting more or less one semester" (Helm, 2015, p. 204) and most commonly involve North America and Europe and focus on European languages. Since 2004, the target language of 80% of such projects has been English

(Avgousti, 2018). In recent years, however, there has been a surge of interest in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016a). Results of almost all reported telecollaborative studies have been reported as positive (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018) with a majority of exchanges involving students beyond the elementary level (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018).

Traditionally, the two most widely used models for telecollaboration have been e-tandem and the blended intercultural model (Chun, 2015). In the former, speakers of two different languages are paired to engage in conversation (synchronously or asynchronously) with the time split evenly between the languages used. In the latter, the approach used most frequently is the *Cultura* model (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001), developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which involves more preparation and collaboration between classes and instructors, including having participants respond to culturally oriented questionnaires, engage in discussion forums, and discuss experiences both in-class and online (Chun, 2014; Furstenberg & English, 2016). While both of these models involve the use of both the participants' L1 and L2, another approach has developed in recent years in which participants use a lingua franca, almost always English (O'Dowd, 2016a, 2019; Helm, 2015). Typically, the focus in such exchanges is more on the development of cultural understanding rather than on language. The emphasis may also be content-based, with participants following a course of study other than foreign language, such as business, engineering, or tourism (O'Dowd, 2016a; Moore & Simon, 2015).

While such exchanges may be bilateral, there are also multilateral projects, such as the Soliya project, involving participants from Western cultures conversing with those from the Middle East (Helm et al., 2012; Helm, 2016). Similar projects have been introduced in recent years, such as the EU project on human rights in Italy and Guatemala" (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). A number of multilateral exchanges have been instituted through the Erasmus + Virtual Exchange Program, a pre-mobility program which is designed to develop cross-cultural understanding as preparation for students engaging in study abroad (Batardière, Giralt, Jeanneau, Le-Baron-Earle, & O'Regan, 2019). A recent program from that EU flagship project is "Newcomers and Nationalism: Exploring the Challenges of Belonging in Europe," which "invites refugee and non-refugee students from all over Europe and the Southern Mediterranean" (Newcomers and Nationalism, 2019).The model used in telecollaboration projects is determined by the context of exchange; its goals; available online tools and services; and the identities, roles, and needs of the participants and instructors.

In the introduction to *System's* special issue on telecollaboration, Lewis (2017) identifies as a positive trend in telecollaboration: "The increasing interest in its use as an arena for teacher development, particularly in online teaching skills" (p. 1). That interest is evident in this special issue of *LLT* in which the majority of the articles address the use of telecollaboration in teacher education. Given the increased role of digital technologies in learning at all levels and in all fields, it is understandable that teacher trainees gain hands-on experience with the use of online resources, including telecollaboration. There have been multiple calls for integrating telecollaboration into the curriculum of mainstream language teaching programs (O'Dowd, 2011a; Sadler & Dooly, 2016). Such approaches to teacher education "reject transmission models of teacher training and propose that teachers learn by being actively engaged in educational activity, forming part of communities of practice, and having opportunities to reflect and theorize based on their own learning" (O'Dowd, 2015, p. 65). A principal goal of such programs is to enable teachers to become "autonomous developers of intercultural contexts" (Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016, p. 133).

Having prospective or novice teachers themselves participate in telecollaboration and in designing telecollaboration tasks is a crucial part of that process (Fuchs, Snyder, Tung, & Han, 2017; Vinagre, 2017). This kind of experiential learning commonly includes opportunities for reflection on the experience (journals, diaries), peer exchanges (in class or online), and documenting the process (portfolios), as discussed in Müller-Hartmann and Schocker (2013). This might involve use of a design-based approach, such as the TPACK framework (Technological, Pedagogical, And Content Knowledge; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016). The KARDS model (Knowing, Analyzing, Recognizing, Doing, Seeing) has also been used in this context (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Sadler & Dooly, 2016). This experiential

modeling approach (O'Dowd, 2015) can support Thorne's (2016) vision of "scaling up OIE to become a routine and expected activity in world languages education" (p. x), as future teachers see firsthand its practice and its substantial benefits. Implementing telecollaboration from scratch, without previous experience, can be a daunting enterprise. That is particularly the case at the school level, as teachers already have a heavy workload. Participation in telecollaboration is more likely to become a reality if teachers engage in "participatory culture as professional development," the title of Kuhn and Stevens (2017). That article describes the creation of a MOOC for teacher training, which explores the use of Minecraft in language learning. This adds an additional dimension to experiential learning. As the teachers take on the role of telecollaborative participants, they also gain hands-on knowledge of a game platform popular among school-age students. Given the popularity of online gaming, it can be informative and pedagogically useful for teachers to gain participatory insights into that aspect of their students' world.

From Language Learning to Culturally Informed L2 Use

Initially, and continuing on to the present, bilateral exchanges have focused principally on linguistic development. Following the input-interactionist paradigm of SLA, learners engage with one another through text chat or audio-video conferencing with guidance from instructors on conversation topics or assigned tasks (Chun, 2015). In the process, they interpret utterances and negotiate meaning, using the L2 for real communicative purposes. That will typically involve requests for help or clarification, noticing and reusing partners' formulations, and engaging in self-repair as well as in recasts of partner speech. Ideally, this can lead to improvement in multiple L2 skills, as well as the development of strategic competence in the L2 (Akiyama, 2017). On the other hand, research has shown that students are sometimes reluctant to provide specific language feedback even when specifically instructed to do so (Belén Díez-Bedmar & Pérez-Parede, 2012; Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). Training students to provide feedback has yielded mixed results (Akiyama, 2017; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). Some studies have indicated that interacting and receiving feedback from peers, rather than from instructors, is more likely to lead to linguistic uptake (Helm, 2015; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016b). Since real communication with a meaningful partner is involved, users may pay more attention to form, accuracy, and appropriateness (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016a; Thorne, 2003). To reinforce uptake, telecollaboration projects have had students recycle lexico-grammatical items encountered in exchanges in email, learning diaries, or exercises (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Sauro, 2009; Vinagre & Muñoz, 2011). Language from exchanges can also be discussed with students as positive or negative examples. Helpful in that process is collecting exchange data in a database or corpus (Belz & Vyatkina, 2005). Belz (2006) discusses the advantages of drawing students' attention to samples from a learner corpus. She recommends teachers consider creating a small corpus, for use in their classes (see Godwin-Jones, 2017a).

The fact that students in telecollaboration are engaged in meaningful communication with their partners inevitably draws them into the need to go beyond vocabulary knowledge and grammatical accuracy to contextually appropriate language (i.e., to exhibit pragmatic competence; Chun, 2011). Early projects demonstrated how learners improved in their use of appropriate forms of second person address and formal or informal registers, through online exchanges (Belz, 2006; Thorne, 2003). Belz and Vyatkina's (2005) study showed how virtual exchanges improved the naturalness of the language of learners of Germans by increasing their use of modal particles. Telecollaborative projects have looked at issues such as starting conversation topics (Sanchez-Castron & Strambi, 2017) or specific speech acts such as leave-taking (Gonzales, 2013). Cunningham (2017) focuses on the use of requests, which because of its face-threatening nature is difficult for learners to use appropriately. These kinds of pragmatic abilities are difficult to develop as there are rarely hard and fast rules, but rather frequent patterns and contextual, unwritten scripts to follow. Therefore, they tend to be better learned in actual communicative situations and are less amenable to classroom instruction than other areas of SLA (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016b). Gaining pragmatic competence in the L2 has increasingly been seen as one of the most important outcomes of telecollaboration: "If there were no other justification for engaging in OIE, the opportunities it affords for developing intercultural pragmatic competence would suffice" (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016b, p. 51). Pragmatic competence in the L2

is an important component in developing metalinguistic knowledge, as it provides learners insight into the real-world nature of speech and its essentially contextual character. Various approaches have been used in analyzing pragmatic behavior in telecollaboration, including schema theory (Levak & Son, 2017) and conversation analysis (Gonzales, 2013). Engaging in close analysis of telecollaborative exchanges is a promising approach to understanding pragmatic behavior and in guiding students to reflect on real language use (McConachy, 2017; Sykes, 2018).

Pragmatics represents the intersection of language and culture. In that sense, focusing on pragmatic aspects of language use brings telecollaborative projects into the realm of intercultural communication competence (Godwin-Jones, 2013a). Breakdowns in communication may be the result of culturally inappropriate utterances, for example, not observing the typical opening or closing of conversations, not engaging in expected small talk, or being too direct (or indirect) in formulating requests, questions, or opinions. Such incidents can be awkward and embarrassing or even lead to conflict and confrontation. While proficient speakers of the L2 may be tolerant of grammatical or lexical errors—or even, for some languages, expect them from learners—pragmatic failure can be problematic: "If the L2 learner/user inadvertently violates some sociolinguistic or sociopragmatic rule in the L2, interlocutors might have more difficulty in hiding their irritation" (Dewaele, 2008, p. 261). Cunningham (2017) points, in particular, to the importance of L2 students learning—through explicit instruction or personal experience—the discourse norms of the target culture. Those include how to take the floor, appropriate turn taking, developing topics, or engaging in backchanneling. These aspects of communication are rarely a part of instructed language learning (Train, 2006), nor often discussed in textbooks. When pragmatics is incorporated into textbooks, the specific instances of pragmatic language use are often simplified (Sykes, 2018). Liddicoat (2017) shows how the complex contextual nature of pragmatic behavior in a French textbook is reduced to a set of simplistic rules.

Experiencing pragmatics directly offers learners the opportunity to add to their L2 repertoire the knowledge about expected norms in speech acts and acceptable discourse practices. This is important in being able to interpret partners' speech and in understanding reactions to violations of cultural speech norms. While learners are also able to use that knowledge in their own speech production, they may elect not to do so. That may be for personal, philosophical, or political reasons, as adopting native speaker-like behaviors "represents more than an instance of language use and engages questions of identity and self-image" (Liddicoat, 2017, p. 27). That might mean declining to take on a subordinate or submissive social role through not using customary politeness or honorific formulas that reinforce power relations, such as a lesser societal role for women. This is the "privilege of the non-native speaker" (Kramsch, 1997), namely to take on some aspects of an L2-related identity, while rejecting others. Liddicoat (2017) points out as well that native speakers may in fact find it inappropriate for foreigners to imitate all aspects of cultural language norms, as that may be perceived as a claim to an in-group identity, which may be inappropriate for an outsider. Complicating further the role of pragmatics in telecollaboration is the fact that many projects today are multicultural. Indeed, even bilateral exchanges inevitably include participants from co-cultures exhibiting different discourse practices.

Misunderstandings arising from failure or reluctance to follow pragmatic norms can illuminate significant linguistic and cultural practices, while the emotional toil that can accompany such an encounter may make a miscommunication memorable, aiding in retention of the incident and of the language constructions used. It is increasingly recognized in SLA research that emotions and physical response are crucial in language development (Barcelos, 2015; Oxford, 2016). Emotional responses within virtual exchanges may arise from a variety of causes, not just from pragmatic transfer or failure. There may be topics discussed that are sensitive, controversial, or politically polarizing; those might include nationalism, climate change activism, or sexual mores. Often exchanges have focused on "safe" topics such as school systems, food, music, or tourism. In fact, in her survey of teachers engaged in telecollaboration, Helm (2015) found that the majority expressed a desire to avoid topics that might be controversial or lead to conflict among participants.

Avoiding conflict in exchanges may, however, misrepresent the reality of intercultural encounters, in which there may well be significant and strongly expressed differences of opinion on a whole host of issues.

Consequently, in intercultural encounters, "communication and understanding are far from the inevitable outcomes given the complexity of global and local languages, cultures, communities, and identities" (Train, 2006, p. 270). Focusing solely on topics such as university life or families may lead to relatively shallow interactions (Kramsch, 2014) and to the "assumption of similarity" (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, p. 66), namely the sense that, despite different languages and cultures, we are all basically the same. In fact, since exchanges mostly involve age peers, there may be many similarities in terms of popular culture or favored leisure pursuits. That might lead to reactions, such as that cited in O'Dowd (2019), "I have realized that my partner and I aren't so different, in fact, we have similar hobbies and ways to spend our free time. Like I have said, the main differences I see between her country and mine are the timetable and the weather" (p. 11). Clearly, in an exchange involving students from the US and Spain, this conclusion does not reveal deep insights into the quite significant cultural differences between the two countries.

Not engaging beyond surface culture "while potentially helpful for saving face, can lead to 'missed' communication, or missed opportunities for approximating the kind of rich, meaningful intercultural learning that instructors often intend with telecollaborative projects" (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, p. 66). In fact, exploring the sources of a disagreement over serious issues—historical causes, long-held cultural traditions, religious beliefs, political/structural realities—can be revelatory, a cultural "rich point" (Agar, 1994; O'Dowd, 2011a), taking learners into deeper dimensions of cultural understanding. The objective in exposing students to potential conflict is not that in the end everyone agrees, "but rather to understand the origins of others' opinions" (Helm, 2016, p. 155). This can lead students to gain interpretive skills in analyzing discourse, the *symbolic competence* (Kramsch, 2009) "to interpret intentions behind the message, understand the use of symbolic systems and their social, historical and ideological significance and to imagine the influence of other languages on the way one thinks and communicates" (Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016, p. 132). In that sense, conflict can function as a "transforming agent" (Helm, 2013, p. 33). A dialogic approach to online exchanges, as in the Soliya model (Helm, 2013), uses conflicting views on issues such as religion as a "central and productive source for learning rather than a debilitative stumbling block to communication" (Schneider & Von der Emde, 2006, p. 179). This perspective is incorporated into *transformative learning theory*, which sees disorienting situations as "a catalyst for reflection and changes in viewpoint" (Crane, Fingerhuth, & Hünlich, 2017, p. 227). Projects using this constructivist approach to learning have found that "activities that extended dialogue and reflective time to examine one's assumptions in light of new viewpoints have been shown to contribute most to perspective transformation" (Crane et al., 2017, pp. 230-231). This accords with current research trends in ICC that call for learners to go beyond a simplistic understanding of cultural phenomena (Kramsch, 2014). Gaining the skills and habits of interpretive analysis of discourse and media not only allows learners deeper insights into other cultures, but also enables them to see deeper into developments within their own cultural backgrounds, building important citizenship skills. In that way, symbolic competence aligns with *critical literacy*, which emphasizes critical thinking, a contextual understanding of texts, and "being an active designer of social futures" (Warner & Dupuy, 2018, p. 124).

Tasks and Tools

Before engaging in sensitive or personal topics, participants in telecollaboration need to get to know one another and establish trust in the relationship. In fact, typically in exchanges the first task is to exchange basic information about one another. This getting acquainted phase is then followed by collaborative activities focusing on comparison and analysis (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009), which are typically "classroom-embedded, with a language teacher engaging a group of learners in the exploration of cultural differences/similarities" (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018, p. 56). The model for this activity is the Cultura approach (Furstenberg & English, 2016). Although these tasks may not delve deeply into cultural understanding, they can function as demonstrations of pragmatic language use. In Levak and Son (2017), greeting rituals are used as icebreakers, but also as examples of cultural scripts. This serves to "nurture ongoing reflection, triggered by tasks" (Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016, p. 147). A discussion of hobbies of French and Taiwanese students (Liaw & English, 2017) was used as a point of departure for illuminating

the role of leisure time activities in identity formation. Another approach to making these first activities more meaningful is to have participants reflect on their significance in the context of intercultural competence through reading and discussion of short research articles on ICC theory (Belz, 2002; Schneider & Von der Emde, 2006). This explicit instruction can help learners connect theory and practice.

The third phase, when present, deepens the collaboration by having partners work together in creating some kind of shareable product or artifact, such as a blog, wiki entry, webpage, website, digital story, or presentation. This third stage is frequently seen as a vital ingredient in making exchanges more meaningful, in that the collaboration needed for completing a project necessitates that partners negotiate both content and language. In the process, working together towards a common goal can build deeper relationships. However, this third task requires more effort for the student and logistical support from teachers. Time and schedule constraints sometimes make it difficult to integrate such projects into semester timetables. The demands may lead as well to grumbling from students, as such projects, in contrast to the getting acquainted and information exchange activities, may strike students as an added, artificial task, not congruent with the nature of the exchange (Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010).

How telecollaborative tasks are carried out has evolved, as more sophisticated tools have become available. Initially exchanges were almost exclusively text-based, with email being used most frequently, then followed by text chat, as it became more widely available. Texting offered the new option of synchronous communication, bringing to exchanges a dimension of real-time negotiation of meaning. Blogs and wikis, meanwhile, offered new options for asynchronous collaboration. Surveys have shown that, in fact, asynchronous tools are most often used in telecollaboration still today (Avgousti, 2018; Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018), "rather conservative choices," according to Lewis and O'Dowd (2016b, p. 48). Asynchronous collaboration has been shown to have distinct advantages, however, principally the possibility in written exchanges for the learners to have time to reflect on both language and content and to plan their interventions (Helm, 2015). This has also been shown to direct learners' conscious attention to language form (Zeng, 2017). Written media also leave behind records (logs, transcripts), which are important for research and assessment purposes.

A study of learners' experiences across a large number of telecollaboration projects found that text-based communication exchanges "lead to a feeling that their collaborations were depersonalized" (Baroni et al., 2019) and that they didn't have the sense of dealing with real people. Helm (2015) reported similarly that in written exchanges "the speakers are invisible" (p. 200). Exchange participants interviewed for the Evaluate survey (Baroni et al., 2019) indicated that they overcame that kind of depersonalization through using familiar digital communication tools, namely WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. This solution points to the major innovation in recent years in telecollaboration implementation, the use of synchronous audio or video communication tools. Video conferencing, using tools such as Skype or Zoom, "has rapidly evolved from expensive group to group equipment to desktop and, more recently, mobile applications" (Helm, 2015, p. 200). The direct, visual, and auditory contact between interlocuters can be highly motivating. It is convenient as well, enabling learners to connect easily through their mobile devices or home computers. At the same time, videoconferencing can be demanding on participants, necessitating, on the receptive side, paying attention and interpreting not only the meaning of utterances but also the significance of paralanguage, facial expressions, and gestures. On the productive side, it requires being able to think, respond, and articulate on the fly, while simultaneously observing the interlocutor's reception and reactions. Van der Zwaard & Bannink (2019; this issue) found that video exchanges sometimes hampered task performance, as the presence of a webcam proved to be face-threatening. Given the challenges and cognitive demands, Helm (2015) found it "surprising" that videoconferencing is the most popular synchronous tool (p. 206). In the few years since that study, it is perhaps less surprising today, given the current ease of use and popularity of audio and video communicative tools on mobile devices (Godwin-Jones, 2017b).

While learners may have the sense that in using video conferencing, they are engaging in the same phenomenon as face-to-face conversation, the reality is that "what one sees on the computer screen is a

highly mediated, filtered, and designed version of the world" (Kern, 2014, p. 34). The seemingly transparent medium of videoconferencing is not neutral at all but is affected by factors such as participants' physical surroundings, the lack of full body language, the absence of spatial proximity, and the differing levels of experience or comfort of the learners with the platform or tool. The computer or phone screen does not project objective reality, but provides a technological window or frame on the world (Malinowski & Kramsch, 2014). That may lead learners "to devote all their attention to the technology itself at the expense of deeper negotiation of social and cultural meanings, let alone worldviews" (p. 175). Developments in mobile and wearable technologies add new dimensions to video-based exchanges, such as sending data on physical or emotional status. Some of that capability is already present, for example, through the exchange of heartbeat rates on Apple watches, or is under development, through so-called emotion chips, from EMOSHAPE, among others. Still, long-distance encounters will remain largely disembodied and technology-mediated unless dreamed-of futures enable holographic doubles (Star Wars) or beaming (Star Trek).

Communication Styles and Cultures

Cultural aspects of learner autonomy are controversial, for example, the question of whether autonomy is a Western concept not applicable to Asian cultures, or whether it is universal and locally determined (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Similar issues arise in the discussion around implementations of telecollaboration. One of those issues is the question of national communicative styles. In an influential article, Kramsch and Thorne (2002) attributed a breakdown in exchanges between U.S. and French students to a clash of different approaches to written communication, as "two local genres engaged in global confrontation" (p. 99), the more objective, fact-oriented French and the more affective and personal U.S. styles. Depending on the partners in the exchange, other cultural influences on speech might include the level of directness, importance of nonverbal communication, or the frequency and context of use of humor and irony (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2016). Frequently, these are viewed as characteristics of a national culture. However, others have pointed out that this assumes the existence of monolithic national cultures (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009), a concept increasingly under attack in consideration of the diverse forces of online communication, mass migration, and modern transportation (Godwin-Jones, 2013a; Holliday, 2011). In fact, telecollaboration has been criticized for reinforcing the concept of homogeneous national cultures (Helm & Guth, 2010). While professional training in "intercultural competence" focuses on cultural differences based on Hofstede's (1980) cultural dichotomies and other theories that tend to essentialize cultures, it has been argued that telecollaboration should use a much more differentiated view of cultures, one that in fact corresponds better to the reality of today's world:

> Globalization, with its increasingly complex and hybrid identities as well as blurred boundaries, lends new urgency to our need to shift our understanding of culture away from specifiable, fixed boundaries; lists of traits ascribed to entire groups of people; and homogeneous identities (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 71).

O'Dowd (2011b) has expressed a nuanced view of cultural determinism, asserting that "the truth lies somewhere half-way between the one position that culture determines how people communicate and the other that suggests it is incorrect to say that members of a particular nationality exhibit a common communicative genre or style in online communication" (p. 7). It certainly is the case that among other influences in our early life, we are typically surrounded by a dominant culture which contributes at least some default beliefs and behaviors. Such "orientation points" (Palfreyman, 2003, p. 13) include cultural elements, such as symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews. While our national or ethnic background may contribute to a "core sense of self" (Mercer, 2016 p. 16), at some point we may well rebel against that culture (or aspects of it) or be equally influenced by a second culture (and language), either through family, surroundings, or migration. Such developments add further dimensions to our identity formation, as do our school and work environments, leisure-time activities, and online communities. Questions of identity have become complex, a situation echoed in SLA research generally, where the idea has become established that

identity is fluid and multifaceted (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Wagner, 2015). This is also reflected in the application of complexity theory to characterize the fractal nature of learner-user identities, with fractals understood as self-similar entities, replicated within one individual (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

Differences in communication styles have often been explored in telecollaboration projects. Studies point to local or national socio-institutional factors that may include communication styles, but also address issues such as educational standards and practices (the expectation of lecture-based instruction, for example), implementation parameters (exchanges as an optional or required activity), as well as availability of specific or common tools or services. More specifically, cultural issues come into play when the exchanges take place between Western and non-Western partners. One study indicated that Asian students were less likely to engage in significant self-disclosure, compared to Western students, and that they tended to belong to smaller and tighter networks (Cho, 2010). Flowers et al. (2019) suggested that the Japanese and Taiwanese students in their study, coming from Confucius-oriented cultures, valued "respect for interpersonal harmony, relational hierarchy, and traditional conservatism," which suggested that the telecollaboration projects involving such students "require different protocols for interaction than those from non-Confucian cultures." That meant, in this study, focusing first and foremost on friendship-building and avoiding discussion of topics that might lead to conflict (and away from group harmony). On the other hand, other studies' findings run counter to expectations. Liaw and English (2017) found that Taiwanese learners constructed more individualized identities in their exchanges in comparison to the more socially oriented French students.

A major caveat in national comparisons is a lumping together of very different cultures, whether that be linking Taiwan to China, or France to Germany. In both those cases, historical and political developments have resulted in markedly different cultural traditions, beliefs, and behaviors. Clearly, here too, facile, broad-brush characterizations and comparisons are belied by the complexity in personal identities, as well as by the growing multiculturalism in classrooms and online environments. It is also the case that the attribution of cultural characteristics to attitudes or behavior of exchange partners can often miss the mark. In a recent project involving Taiwanese and Japanese students, some Taiwanese students lamented that the Japanese demonstrated a lack of interest or curiosity about Taiwanese life and culture (Flowers et al., 2019). It turned out that the explanation was quite different, namely that the Japanese students, as seniors, were very busy at that time with preparing for midterm exams and searching for job opportunities after graduation. It is, in fact, often the case that the context in which the telecollaboration takes place can be quite different for each of the participants involved. Rather than attribute actions or statements to national characteristics, it can be useful to gather information about partners' academic context (calendar, role of exams, teaching practices, etc.).

Helpful in achieving a more nuanced understanding of cultural influences would be to see the telecollaboration project as a manifestation of culture in itself, a "small culture" (Holliday, 1999. p. 237), based on a common purpose, shared environment, and open communication. This conception defines culture as fluid and negotiated, rather than fixed and inherited:

> The most important implications of this definition for a post-essentialist understanding of culture in online groups lie in the absence of any requirement for the 'interacting group' to have a recognized existence independently of their interaction (e.g., through their individual membership of some larger 'cultural' grouping), and the emphasis on members' recognition of the role of experience-sharing in the construction of their online world. (Goodfellow, 2008, p. 555).

This places the participants in the role of creating their own mutually acceptable context for working and communicating together.

One of the recent trends in telecollaboration, which has cultural dimensions, is the rise of lingua franca exchanges, almost all carried out in English. This has been accompanied by a shift in how native speakers are viewed and valued. The idea of the native speaker as not only the linguistic model, but also as a model for cultural—the expert on a country, its people, and its everyday (and high) cultures—has long underpinned language instruction (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Kramsch (1997) traces this view back to the

fact that "the linguistic authority of the native speaker, derived from that of Chomsky's 'ideal speaker-listener,' had been extended beyond grammar to include social behavior and cultural knowledge as well" (p. 362). This has largely been the assumption in bilateral exchanges, with a native speaker as the ideal cultural and linguistic expert. Actual practice has shown the fallacy of this image of native speakers as standard speakers and cultural experts, capable and ready to offer informed comments on language use and on all and sundry cultural topics, from train schedules to classical poetry (Train, 2006). This ignores the complex diversity of human society. The emphasis on "native standard language" (NSL, Train, 2006, p. 254) frames linguistic diversity negatively: "The NSL construct supports the marginalization and devaluing of bilingual, multilingual, and intercultural discourse practices that have been shown to be basic to telecollaboration" (Train, 2006, p. 258). In fact, one of the benefits of telecollaboration is that it introduces students to colloquial speech patterns, possibly to regional language variations, and quite likely to the reality that assumed culturally homogeneous states are, in reality, quite diverse.

Viewing the native speaker as an ideal to be emulated places the learner in the position of a deficit speaker, trying to reach an unattainable goal of native-like fluency (Belz, 2007). A suggestive metaphor for that situation is that the student plays the role of the clueless apprentice (van der Zwaard & Bannick, 2018). Studies have shown that, in fact, there are advantages to having exchanges among non-native speakers. Learners tend to be less anxious in that situation (Guarda, 2013). That has the potential to increase the volume of speech as well as learner confidence, as neither partner is perceived to be the expert. Van der Zwaard & Bannick's study (2018; see also van der Zwaard & Bannick, 2019, this issue) shows how language output can shift when, in a task (such as telling culturally rich jokes), non-native speakers are placed in a position of control and authority vis-à-vis native speakers due to the former's greater cultural knowledge. Train (2006) points out that one of the ways to level the built-in power differential when native and non-native speakers are involved in telecollaboration is to focus on reading and discussion of texts for which neither group necessarily has interpretive expertise. Kennedy, Díaz, and Dasli (2017) introduced a short story for discussion, to be viewed from a "transnational perspective" (p. 169), with encounters not with "native speakers," but with "Italian speakers," which could include "Italians, Italian Australians, migrants in Italy, and other learners and Italophiles generally" (p. 168).

Another approach that can diminish the power position of native speakers is to emphasize multimodal communication, beyond videoconferencing. Liaw and English (2017) used integrated about-me-bags in an initial task in an exchange involving French and Taiwanese students. Participants created multimodal presentations of three objects from their past, present, and future, which were reviewed and discussed by participants on both sides. This use of multimodality can contribute to more balance in power positions. Integrating different modes of representation is seen as a key factor in a multiliteracies approach to language learning (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Warner & Dupuy, 2018).

Telecollaboration and Global Citizenship

While lingua franca exchanges may level the playing field in terms of native speaker and non-native speaker dynamics and power positions, there is, at the same time, a risk that this trend will help consolidate the dominance of English, as "global English now casts its hegemonic shadow over telecollaboration, much as it dominates the language learning landscape today" (Lewis, 2017, p. 1). This can be seen as "a move away from the promotion of plurilingualism and diversity" (Helm, 2015, p. 212), an unfortunate development that has been frequently explored in research on English in recent years (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Liddicoat, 2014). It is repeatedly emphasized in surveys on telecollaboration how few projects involve less commonly taught languages (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2015), a trend which seems likely to accelerate (O'Dowd, 2016a). This is aided by the fact that English is not just the language of choice in telecollaborative exchanges, it is also the lingua franca of global commerce and communication. If, as frequently maintained, one of the benefits of telecollaboration is that it prepares learners for work in the global marketplace in the 21st century (O'Dowd, 2016a; O'Dowd, 2019; Thorne, 2016), it is not surprising that ever more projects provide the experience for English learners to communicate and collaborate. While

we may understand the reasons for the choice of English in OIE, we should not lose sight of the critical importance of maintaining and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity. Part of that effort should be to provide better telecollaboration models for less commonly taught or endangered languages. For these languages, online learning and collaboration is not an optional add-on, but an inevitable survival strategy (Godwin-Jones, 2013b; Ward, 2018). Telecollaboration can offer an ideal vehicle for providing language learning and language maintenance for widely dispersed communities of speakers and learners. From that perspective, commercial services such as Livemocha or Babbel, while sometimes criticized for not incorporating best practices of SLA, do offer opportunities for building communities of L2 learners and users in a great variety of languages (Lin et al., 2016).

Whether exchanges are in English or in another language, it is important to keep in mind that the central aspect of telecollaboration is the "emphasis on language as a resource for building relationships of significance, and not a focus on 'language' in the abstract sense of units within a linguistic system" (Thorne, 2010, p. 141). The qualifier "of significance" in this description of the personal relationships points to the need to leverage intercultural friendships through participation in telecollaboration to achieve the larger goals of transnational understanding and peace building. Rather than having an exchange focus primarily on language development or on gaining knowledge about another culture, this view sees telecollaboration in a larger context, as something that can be useful in participants' lives, now and in the future, "as an education for developing their identity rather than as the learning of a code that can only be used in some restricted environments" (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 147). This is a significant evolving perspective on telecollaboration (Byram & Wagner, 2018; O'Dowd, 2019; Thorne, 2016). It joins recent calls in studies on intercultural communication to move beyond the traditional categories of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram, 1997; Rhodes, 2010) to a more personal engagement with global issues, reflecting Byram's addition of critical cultural awareness to his framework (Byram, 2012). In telecollaboration, this can mean including possibly controversial issues that explore historical or political dimensions of culture. Thorne (2016) suggests as a goal of telecollaboration "a critical understanding of histories of colonialism and imperialism as they relate to contemporary areas of cultural, political, and religious friction" (Thorne, 2016, pp. ix-x). Such topics may provide rich cultural learning opportunities, but particularly in bilateral exchanges, they may result in defensiveness or even "push learners towards an Us versus Them stance as the tasks and their partners' stereotypical images and questions lead them to assume an ambassadorial-style role in defense of their local cultural practices" (O'Dowd, 2019, p. 14). In fact, studies have indicated that such developments do occur (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) provide an example of an exchange in which a discussion topic on media coverage of the Pope turned into a divisive debate on religion.

The conflicts that can arise point to the need for guidance and reflection in telecollaboration, as differing opinions on substantive issues, if left unmonitored, may lead to unproductive retreats into nationalistic stances. Those tensions can be compounded by power differences caused by differing levels of language proficiency, familiarity with and reliability of tools and networks, or other extraneous exchange conditions. One practical tool used in the Soliya project to address both language and technology issues in synchronous video exchanges is for mediators to use text chat during video conferencing to summarize or repeat (Helm, 2016). That provides comprehension assistance in terms of language understanding as well as possible help for poor quality or inconsistent video streams. Studies have shown that frustration and tensions can frequently be eased through interventions and guided reflection (Helm et al., 2012; Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016). That guidance can come through the teachers or organizers of the exchanges or through other kinds of mediation. Providing opportunities for self-reflection through blogging or writing a learning diary can be effective as well (Lewis & O'Dowd 2016b).

An understanding of the many factors that influence an individual's cultural beliefs and behaviors can contribute to a greater understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity as well as to a mindset tolerant of difference. That is, in itself, important in view of recent political and social developments that promote intolerance, populism, and extreme nationalism (O'Dowd 2019; Ortega, 2017). Understanding and tolerance, however, may not suffice to reverse trends which threaten democracy, trust in government, the

just treatment of minorities, and the health of our planet. The concept of "global citizenship" entails a call for action in the form of active civil engagement in society (O'Dowd, 2019; De Wit, 2016). While telecollaboration typically situates learners "as passive observers and collectors of cultural information" (O'Dowd, 2019, p. 15), global citizenship treats students "as current and future contributors to global society" (Leask, 2015, p. 17). O'Dowd (2019) cautions that in finding an approach for this kind of transnational model, it is important not to impose Western values but to use an approach such as Byram's (2011) Framework of Intercultural Communication, which emphasizes local action and service to the community (see also Kramsch & Zhang, 2018) A framework in accord with this vision is *critical cosmopolitanism*, described by Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013 as "a deep appreciation for difference, the willingness to engage with cultural Others and be transformed by such experiences, kindness towards strangers, and the labor of the imagination to envision a world that aspires towards peace, possibilities and intercultural respect for those near and far" (p. 7). The concept of cosmopolitanism, originating in the field of sociology, has emerged as complementary to the concept of intercultural competence (Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2017).

Opportunities and Outlook

Moving telecollaboration in this direction places new demands on both students and teachers. It may, in fact, increase rather than diminish the teacher's role (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018), as the need is to be "monitoring, prompting, guiding, and communicating" (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018, p. 290). The goal should be to both model and encourage deeper reflection, with both teacher and learners provided with "longitudinal, ongoing and experiential reflective opportunities" (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018, p. 291). This calls for careful task design, continuous monitoring, and iterative task fine-tuning. This suggests the need for teachers to view telecollaboration from the perspective of action research, projects which explore practical solutions to challenging instructional issues (Müller-Hartmann, 2012; Nunan & Bailey, 2009). In this case, "participatory action research" is ideal, through active involvement of students in providing feedback on tasks, experiences, and learning (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002). Recent collections of telecollaborative case studies by teacher-researchers is helpful in that regard (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018b; Wagner, Perugini, & Byram, 2017). The projects discussed vary significantly in scope, focus, and context, from early childhood to immigrant communities, and can provide both inspiration and practical hints based on experience.

Also helpful in the design process are organizations such as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) or UNIcollaboration, which provide extensive guidance for practitioners. In the case of UNICollaboration, services extend to an exchange partner locator, a walk-through guide for getting started, a personal reflective diary, and multiple sample projects and case studies. Also included is a sample valuation grid. Assessment is one of the most difficult and variable aspects of telecollaboration, as goals and contexts vary extremely. While standard evaluation criteria for ICC have been used, such as the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000), Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence remains dominant (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016b). Byram's original model has been criticized for adherence to the concept of homogeneous national cultures, for placing language learners in privileged social positions (as tourists or sojourners), and for seeing ICC as a set of measurable skills (Belz, 2007; Kramsch & Zhang, 2018). The model also does not take into consideration online contexts (Helm & Guth, 2010). As result, many telecollaboration projects take Byram's model only as a starting point, making adjustments and additions as needed and as dictated by the nature of the project (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Lenkaitis, Calo, & Venegas Escobar, 2019; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016b).

While quantitative analyses can be part of the evaluative process, qualitative measures are more common. Student essays, journals and blog entries, transcripts, or portfolios provide content that can be examined and assessed according to the model and rubrics used (Helm, 2015). Belz (2007) recommends analyzing student work for evidence of the "the ability to situate and interpret L2 texts, artefacts, events, behaviors, storylines, and interactions within contextually appropriate frames of reference" (p. 127). She advocates

looking at artifacts and transcripts for the presence of "signposts of intercultural competence." She uses *appraisal theory* to look at linguistic signs of attitudes (views of partner comments) and graduation (intensity with which opinions are voiced). That entails looking at patterns of change over time, especially perspective shifts that signal a decrease in the use of negative judgments. Other markers could be the "tempering of one's emotional responses" to partner speech or a "gradual softening of the way in which one positions herself with respect to the 'absolute' truth of utterances" (p. 156). Oskoz and Pérez-Broncano (2016) also use appraisal theory as a useful framework for assessing intercultural competence. Analyzing linguistics aspects of telecollaborative texts for evidence of intercultural competence has also been done through the use of critical discourse analysis (McConachy, 2017; Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2011).

Whether teachers decide to engage in telecollaboration will depend on a variety of factors, including local support (technological, pedagogical, and practical) suitability based on course content and delivery and available partners. The rewards are likely to be personal, in terms of student motivation and learning potential, rather than professional, although that will vary according to institution and academic unit. Teachers should be clear-eyed about the time and energy commitment needed to organize a telecollaboration project effectively, as well as the effort involved in monitoring its implementation and assessing its outcomes. The decision will also depend on available online tools and services. While at the tertiary level, the main online tool for instructional delivery is likely a learning management system (LMS), that is unlikely to be a useful tool for telecollaboration. It may be difficult to facilitate its use by those outside the university community, who would in any case likely be unfamiliar with the user interface. An LMS is a generic product not designed to support telecollaboration (Flowers et al., 2019), nor is it available beyond the semester in which it is used. LMS's however have been implemented in conjunction with other tools. Hung (2007) used Blackboard in addition to texting tools and a wiki; Müller-Hartmann & Kurek (2016) used Canvas, along with the collaboration tool Etherpad and a website builder (Weebly). Whatever tools and services are used, one important consideration is that they be mobile-friendly, as that is likely to be an important practical consideration for students (Godwin-Jones, 2017b).

It is impossible to foretell what developments will emerge for use in telecollaboration. However, we are likely to see more experimentation with immersive technologies (Blyth, 2018). There have been interesting projects using Second Life (Carter, 2010; Levak & Son, 2017; Liou, 2011; Schwienhorst, 2002), and, given intense interest and ongoing technical development, there will surely be more experimentation with emerging virtual reality (VR) platforms. Augmented reality is likely to figure also in future telecollaboration projects, as that capability becomes more widely supported on mobile devices (Godwin-Jones, 2016). Avgousti and Hadjistassou (2019) reported on a project combining AR with telecollaboration between groups of students in Cyprus and the UK, in which augmented views of artifacts functioned as a basis for identifying and discussing cultural landmarks. An interesting approach might be to create AR-enhanced walking tours of neighborhoods, campuses, or city centers. Depending on the nature of the exchange, those could be narrated in the L1 or L2 and provide commentary on cultural aspects of the scenes. That could lead to learners in reflecting on their own cultural backgrounds.

An interesting direction which combines virtual exchanges with VR are *global simulations*, in which students take on roles and discourse patterns of a particular character taken from the everyday life of the target culture (Blyth, 2018; Michelson & Dupuy, 2014). Global simulations provide an example of "structured unpredictability" (Little & Thorne, 2017) for intercultural communication, in that initial content and structure are provided by the instructor, but students explore their cultural roles through online research and personal encounters. Thus, a global simulation "includes a balance of strategically placed incidents and room for emergent happenings and resources for familiarizing learners with the social and community conventions of the community" (Michelson & Petit, 2017, p. 139). This provides a dynamic option for integrating formal instruction with online cultural resources. That is the case as well for AR projects such as Mentira (Holden & Sykes, 2011), a mystery-solving game which connects Spanish learners with local culture and language in a technology-assisted environment. The game offers an intriguing example of using immersive learning connected to a local environment. In this case, Spanish students in the US interact with a Spanish-speaking community in their city, gaining communicative and pragmatic experiences by

engaging in Spanish with both non-playing game characters and with community members.

Teachers who elect not to participate directly in exchanges can still render an important service to their students by sending them out to engage in ICC "in the wild" (Thorne, 2010). That means encouraging their participation in online L2 communities. It has been argued that independent engagement in online L2 exchanges and activities may lead to more L2 exposure, greater motivation to use the language, and deeper cultural insights, in contrast to the kind of proctored authenticity of class-based exchanges (Hanna & de Nooy, 2009; Ware, & Kramsch, 2005). Recent studies have documented gains in both receptive and productive L2 skills for independent use of informal L2 resources (Kusyk, 2017; Sockett, 2014; Scholz & Schulze, 2017), as well as the development of ICC and learner autonomy (Godwin-Jones, 2019). While independent online L2 use does not provide the opportunity for in-class reflective opportunities, there are nevertheless opportunities for receiving feedback and encouragement likely to have positive effects in terms of motivation and cultural learning. Fanfiction sites, for example, have been shown to offer that kind of support (Sauro, 2017; Thorne, 2010). Gaming and other online communities of interest are likely to supply that as well. A recent study (Flowers et al., 2019) compared experiences of students engaged in monitored telecollaboration to autonomous learners with interesting results. There were more gains in respect for cultural differences for the classroom-based group, but the autonomous group showed gains in confidence and in learning efficiency. As more students engage in informal language learning independently, it will be helpful to have more studies of that kind.

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