

Research paper

Telecollaboration insights: learning from exchanges that fail

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Abstract

The article describes action research into a telecollaborative exchange between the Pädagogische Hochschule in Freiburg, Germany and the Pedagogical University in Krakow, Poland, which took place between October 2014 and January 2015. Both groups followed CALL teacher training study programmes and consisted of 16 students. The study aimed at evaluating the telecollaboration with regard to its effectiveness in the attainment of the planned objective which was training the students in designing CALL tasks with focus on intercultural communicative competence (the German group) or *politisches Bildung* (the Polish group). The article presents the exchange itself (the tasks, the timeline) and, as well, discusses the research data collected by means of surveys and observation in the course of the telecollaboration and upon its completion.

Keywords: Action research, telecollaboration, teacher training.

1. Introduction

Intercultural online exchanges, known and implemented for almost 20 years now, have grown in popularity in the last decade, powered by the development of Web 2.0, its practices and tools (Guth and Thomas 2011; Guth et al. 2012). The said ten years of practice have resulted in publications so numerous that it is virtually impossible to give credit to all the efforts, pedagogical and academic. To mention just a few, they include: Ware and Kramsch (2005), Darhower (2007), Fratter and Helm (2010), Guth and Helm (2010), Chun (2011), Dooly (2011), Guth and Helm (2012), Hauck et al. (2012), Dooly and Sadler (2015). These books, chapters and papers are stories of effective design of the exchanges overall as well as descriptions of tasks that have been proved successful. Reading about them is educational in a number of ways: as a point of departure for reflection on such practices; as a source of pedagogical models of telecollaboration, from the very idea and exemplary procedures to task design (1).

The very act of carrying out an intercultural online exchange is an educational experience in itself, as pointed out in many of the works cited above. From the teacher's perspective, one can experientially learn to telecollaborate as well as reflectively confront this experience with one's teaching style and other relevant individual characteristics. This article describes such an experience. Yet, unlike most of the above-quoted publications, this one is a story of failure. The telecollaboration described did not go as planned, resulting in considerable frustration on both cooperating sides. This story

is being told in the belief that reflection on such exchanges can be as insightful and educational as the analysis of successful attempts of this kind. A special focus is given to the role of teaching presence (Anderson et al. 2001), in the belief that the success (or failure) of an exchange is largely determined by the quality of the mediation – managerial (organisational), social and pedagogical (intellectual, technical) – offered by both / all telecollaborating tutors/instructors.

The article opens with the description of the background of the exchange. This covers both the review of literature locating this article in the research context as well as the account of the setting of the exchange described. What follows is a report on the course of the telecollaboration and the analysis of different aspects of the process, with special regard to student perceptions of teaching presence, defined based on the three-partite classification of teacher roles in computer conferencing proposed by Anderson et al. (2001). Several events of the exchange, including critical incidents as well as the post-hoc course evaluation are then subject to a cross-sectional analysis and discussion. The text closes with conclusions and teaching implications which the authors see as important to their own exchange as well as – potentially – educational in a broader telecollaborative context.

1. Background

In this part the two authors of the text define their own perspectives and objectives. This is to sensitise the reader to the fact that each of the telecollaborating instructors departs from a different cultural and institutional context.

1.1. The German perspective

The awareness that learning a foreign language is inevitably connected to learning about other cultures has been present in German language teaching since modern foreign languages were taught in secondary classrooms. Deriving from the classical languages, traditional cultural learning emphasis was on translating literature of the target culture and only in the 20th century the emphasis shifted to knowledge about cultural practices and pragmatic language use. During the past two decades, the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become the overall goal of foreign language teaching and this marked the latest shift in foreign language education when the cultural dimension of language learning is concerned. As Michael Byram points out, the ICC approach looks at a new role model for the foreign language speaker: the INTERCULTURAL speaker, not the NATIVE speaker (Byram 1997: 32). The main reason for this shift is that speakers of English as a foreign language nowadays need their language competences to speak to other L2 speakers of English and they use their language skills to negotiate meaning in diverse multicultural settings. Consequently, learners of English need to acquire intercultural competences of communicating in multiple cultural contexts, which go far beyond the cultural settings of the traditional English speaking target countries.

Awareness of cultural differences, positive attitudes towards otherness, knowledge of their own and of other cultures, skills of interaction and negotiation in diverse cultural contexts are some of the manifold competences the intercultural speaker needs to master for successful communication in the foreign language. In the Common European Framework (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001), language learning is depicted in the context of a culturally diverse Europe with multilingual and multicultural societies. According to CEFR, the main goals of learning foreign languages are to raise awareness of other cultural identities and to support the encounter of cultures as an enriching experience to the foreign language speaker. Consequently, the CEFR is related to ICC as a core competence in foreign language education (Council of Europe 2001: 43). With this approach, teaching and learning foreign languages is closely connected with

political education. This connection is also central to Byram: he places *politische Bildung* at the centre of his model and defines it as *critical cultural awareness* (Byram 1997: 53).

In the school curricula of all German states ICC has been included as the overall goal of foreign language learning in secondary schools. This shows that learning a foreign language in German schools is seen as an integral part of civic education and that learners should be enabled to successfully participate as citizens in diverse multicultural settings.

The significance of ICC as an overall language learning goal can also be seen in the academic discourse in the fields of foreign language methodology and of foreign language teacher education in the past decade (Sercu 2005; Hu 2009). One of the major challenges was to find ways of practically adapting the ICC concept to the foreign language classroom. This is done, among others, by means of teaching L2 literature and film (Bredella 2002) as well as computer-assisted language learning (O'Dowd 2007). In recent years, more general approaches of integrating ICC in teaching languages with textbooks have been introduced as well (Müller-Hartmann; Schocker 2013).

1.2. The German objective

One of the most promising methods of implementing ICC learning at school are telecollaborative projects. They provide opportunities for authentic encounters with other learners of English or with native speakers all over the world. Therefore, the two main objectives of the course taught to the German teacher trainees were (i) to instruct them in the use of digital media for telecollaboration and (ii) to support their ICC development. In the latter case it had been assumed that in the process of the intercultural online encounters, by reflecting on their own learning processes during and after the interaction with the partners, and by discussing critical incidents, the students would become more aware of their own cultural identity as well as with the cultural identity of the other (Bredella 2000). This was to lead to ICC development in all four of its aspects: the knowledge about own and other cultures; the awareness of the tendency to value own culture and relativize the other; skills of interpreting and relating; and skills of discovering and interacting, all leading to critical cultural awareness (Byram 1997: 34). As these four ICC dimensions can be found in most models and standards implemented in state school curricula in Germany, their development is an inevitable part of teacher training. Additionally, by interacting with their telecollaborative partners online, using different tools, the German students would reflect on how this could be transferred to their future teaching contexts in school, preferably in the form of task-based language teaching with the use of ICT.

1.3. The Polish perspective

In the global age, teacher training (TT) in Poland is facing new challenges. First of all, prospective teachers have to be prepared for handling the growing multiculturalism of classrooms. This means that TT programmes should increasingly focus on intercultural communicative competence (Byram 2008) with its various subcompetences. The most important seem to be the ones Kramsch (2006) ascribes to symbolic competence: rendering various subtleties and complexities of meaning, also by culturally appropriate form-meaning mappings; and tolerance of ambiguity, understood in intercultural rather than psycholinguistic terms. Secondly, in the connected world of today, Polish schools need to combine content education with raising awareness about the responsibilities of the global citizen. This involves training for online citizenship, with special regard to teaching various digital literacies (Pegrum 2009 and 2014) which enable one to find, evaluate and use relevant information in cooperation with others and for mutual benefit.

If school has to teach this to its students, it is only logical that teachers themselves should be given such expertise in teacher training courses at universities.

Obviously, embracing multiculturalism and global citizenship in education are worldwide challenges. Yet, in Poland they pose a number of local problems that teacher training needs to acknowledge and tackle. To begin with, the country is fairly homogeneous in terms of its population. As a result, openness to otherness and intercultural awareness are not developed naturally, in the course of primary or secondary socialisation – they need to be explicitly taught. Additionally, and even more importantly, education for global citizenship has to start on the level of regular civic attitudes and practices, which in Poland are in great need of amelioration. As noted by the Polish Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), involvement in current affairs, voluntary work (including NGO activities), responsibility for the common property as well as social trust (confirmed based on a recent study by the Polish Polling Institute (2)) are far from satisfactory. This results in a very low level of social capital, an asset necessary for any kind of civic development.

When thinking of potential solutions to these problems to be implemented in teacher training, Poland needs to develop its own complex proposal. Yet, alongside such locally devised and applicable measures, it seems appropriate to consider and adapt routines which work in countries whose citizens show high levels of social involvement and eagerly assume civic responsibilities. According to Byram (2008: 158), such a model can be found in Germany, whose *politische Bildung* – with its attention to political education going back several decades – is both effective and devoid of the sense of indoctrination that education for citizenship may have in other countries (including the Anglophone world). Byram's appreciation of the German civic education is shared by Siellawa-Kolbowska et al. (2008) in their report from a project entitled *Civic Education in Poland – an attempt to adapt selected elements of the German experience*, carried out by the already-mentioned Institute for Public Affairs in the years 2007-2008 (3). The authors analyse the idea of *politische Bildung*, single out the mainstays of its effectiveness – the acquisition, rather than learning, of social attitudes; informal civic education – and consider the plausibility of transplanting the idea into Polish soil.

1.4. The Polish objective

Seen from the Polish perspective and motivated by the two challenges defined earlier, the objective of the Polish course, carried out as part of the ELT TT programme, was two-fold. First of all, the class was planned as telecollaborative *per se*, in order to give the trainees an opportunity to “develop their foreign language [teaching] skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work”, something O'Dowd (2011: 342) sees as the essence of intercultural exchanges online. Simultaneously, when in search of a telecollaborative partner, priority was given to German universities, based on an assumption similar to the one adopted by Siellawa-Kolbowska et al. (2008): that in the area of good citizenship there is a lot to be learned from *politische Bildung* and those who have been exposed to it. Consequently, the hope behind such a course design was that in an exchange with their German partners, the Polish teacher trainees would be exposed to civic attitudes which they may note, reflect upon and critically compare to their own.

For the two-fold objective to be accomplished, the telecollaboration was designed in terms of both task form and chronology as well as content. On the one hand, the Polish students were supposed to get involved in an intercultural dialogue with their German partners whose aim was to meet and get to know the other. The context for the dialogue was to be provided for in a number of telecollaborative assignments, following a typical sequence of activities of differing levels of cognitive difficulty (O'Dowd and Ware 2009). Equally importantly, these tasks were planned to revolve around civic

issues, social obligations and involvement in public affairs, so as to allow both parties to be exposed to each other's ideas in the area, which was of particular interest to the Polish side of the exchange. As a result of such a design of the exchange, it was expected that the Polish prospective language teachers will embrace intercultural citizenship both implicitly / in action as well as explicitly, when carrying out relevant tasks and reflecting upon them.

2. The exchange

The telecollaborative exchange between the Pädagogische Hochschule in Freiburg, Germany and the Pedagogical University in Krakow, Poland took place between October 2014 and January 2015. The participants were a group of German second-year students of primary and secondary teacher education and a group of Polish MA students, prospective teachers of EFL and participants of the CALL TT programme. The Freiburg group consisted of 13 German and 3 Erasmus students from Croatia, Sweden and the Czech Republic, 13 women and 3 men, whose age was approximately 24. The Krakow group consisted of 16 Polish students, 12 women and 4 men, all of whom were approximately 23 years of age.

With the objectives of both partners in mind, the telecollaboration revolved around the topic of civic education and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). It followed the model delineated by O'Dowd and Ware (2009) with regard to task types and the growing cognitive difficulty of activities. It started with an introductory activity, in which the students from both national groups were asked to make short videos about themselves and share them with their partners. In addition to talking about themselves, the students were asked to present a compatriot they admired the most (the civic education element). The second task was based on the results of a survey which the students of both groups were asked to complete. In this survey, which concerned the respondents' beliefs about citizenship, the students were supposed to give their associations with a number of notions (e.g. hometown, Europe, etc.), rank and order statements such as *Good citizenship is about the future: whatever is done should be done with the next generations in mind* as well as finish sentences like *A good citizen is someone, who...* When collected, the results of the survey were put together and the students, working in international groups of 5-6, were asked to collaboratively produce mind maps showing intercultural similarities and differences. The tool used in this task was *Mindomo*, which allowed for both synchronous (chat) as well as asynchronous (notes and comments) mind mapping. The third and last assignment in the exchange involved preparing a task for the partners. Working in small (3-4) national groups, the students, based on task criteria by Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-v. Ditzfurth (2011), were asked to produce tasks for language learning with elements of civic education (Polish students) or aimed at increasing ICC (German students). When the tasks were ready, they were presented to the small partner groups for feedback. At the end of the exchange a wrap-up survey was carried out, in which the students reflected on their telecollaborative experience. The tasks and the timeline are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The timeline of the exchange.

TASK	TASK TYPE*	DEADLINE	TOOLS	WORKING MODE
Introductory video: present yourself and then talk about	Presentation	12 Nov 2014	Screencastomatic (pl) Doceri (ger) Wikispaces	Individual

the compatriot you admire.				
In class 14-18 Nov. 2014: watching the presentations and talking about them.				
Mind mapping, stage 1: survey completion	Compare-and-analyse	19 Nov 2014	SurveyMonkey Wikispaces	Individual
In class 21-25 Nov.: discussion of the survey results.				
Mind mapping, stage 2: collaborative creation of mind maps	Compare-and-analyse	2 Dec 2014	Mindomo	Small international groups
In class 5-7 Dec. 2014: discussion of the mind mapping process				
Task creation	Create	19 Dec 2014	Wikispaces	Small national groups
Holiday 20 Dec. 2014 - 9 Jan 2015				
Task completion / analysis and feedback	Create	10-17 Jan 2015	Wikispaces	Small national groups / task product
In class: 17-20 Jan. 2015: sum up of telecollaboration				

*(Based on O'Dowd and Ware, 2009).

The telecollaborative VLE was a wiki started for the exchange at *Wikispaces*, where all the tasks were given by the teachers and submitted by the students. All other materials – introductory videos, survey results, mind maps, feedback – used in or produced in the course of the tasks – were also published on the wiki. For small-group tasks, both local and international, the project mode was used. It guaranteed that, until privacy settings were changed, the material produced within a given group was visible to its members alone.

3. The study

The study was carried out as action research throughout the whole exchange. Its aim was collecting material for the post-hoc analysis of the telecollaboration with regard to its effectiveness in the attainment of the planned objectives, which, translated into class syllabi, were: giving the students the experience of (i) designing tasks for language teaching and developing ICC (German students) / *politische Bildung* (Polish

students); (ii) incorporating new technologies into the TBL process; (iii) carrying out the process in the intercultural setting. Following from this, three research questions were asked:

1. *Will the students be able to design and evaluate language learning tasks with elements of ICC / civic education?*
2. *Will the students broaden their repertoire of ICT tools?*
3. *Will the telecollaborative setting be educational and motivating in achieving these objectives?*

The main research tool was the survey. Two different surveys were carried out in the course of the exchange: (i) the post-mind mapping survey, originally not planned, carried out after the second task; and (ii) end-of telecollaboration survey, to show what the students learned and how they evaluated their experience, including their perception of the teaching presence. All the surveys were created in and implemented via *Survey Monkey*.

The results obtained by the surveys were confronted with data continuously coming from two other sources: (i) informal in-class discussions of the telecollaborative process; and (ii) observation of the student groups in action including the analysis of task completion, both as process and in terms of product.

3.1. The onset of the exchange

Based on the in-class observations of both teachers, the telecollaboration started with considerable enthusiasm of both parties involved. The introductions were made, uploaded to *Wikispaces*, watched and discussed in class. The questions of intercultural interest raised at this point were addressed, on both sides, in the comment section of *the Introductions* subpage of the telecollaboration wiki.

However, at the stage of Task 2 (the collaborative mind mapping) the level of involvement of the German students went rapidly down. As a result, with the exception of one small international group, there was hardly any dialogue between the telecollaborating parties. When the incident – seen as critical to the exchange – was discussed in class, Polish students expressed their concern about communication problems and what they described as inertia of the German partners. German students, in turn, declared that to them the purpose of the task had been unclear. Furthermore, they were not aware of the expectations of their partners in terms of frequency and amount of turn-taking in their discussion feeds. Apart from that, they also found it hard to personally identify with their own teams and their partner teams for a couple of reasons. First, in their own national group, they had not known each other before the course and only saw each other once a week. Secondly, they claimed that they could not establish a relationship to their partner teams because the team combinations did not stay the same and they could not even identify the names of their partners on the wiki.

3.2. Collaborative mind mapping as a critical incident

In order to try to pinpoint the problem signalled in both classrooms, a post-task survey was carried out, in which the students were asked to rank the experience in 8 different categories as well as describe it briefly, in an open-ended question, naming their main concerns, the things they learned, etc. The results are presented in Figure 1 and Table 2 below.

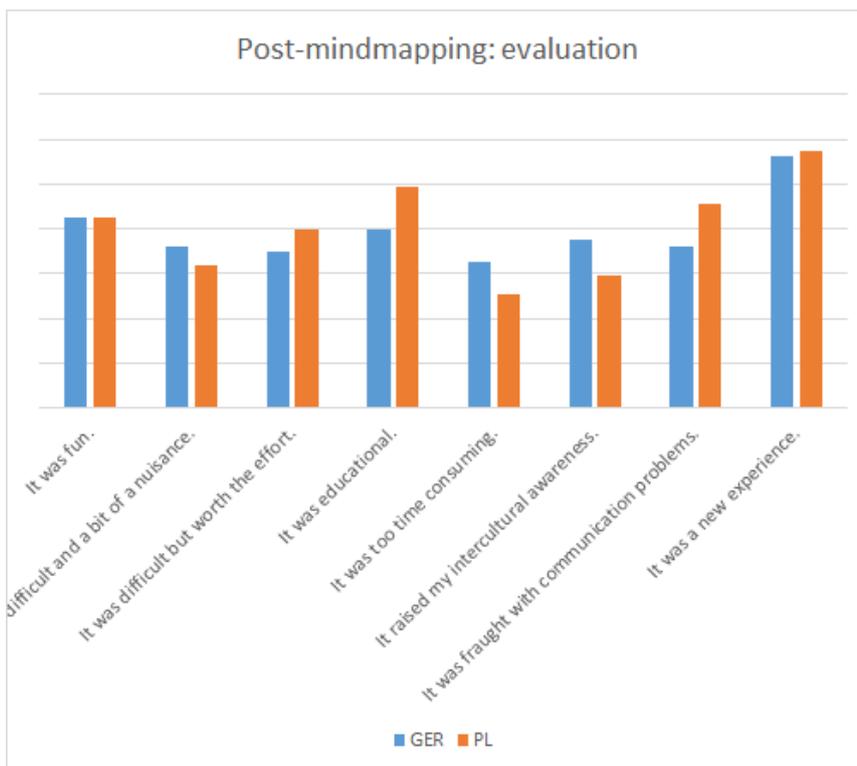


Figure 1. Post-mind mapping reflections by German and Polish students.

Table 2. Post-mind mapping reflections by German and Polish (GER / PL) students in numbers.

	Not very much	I don't know	Very much so	Weighted average	χ^2	p
It was fun.	3 / 2	5 / 9	3 / 3	2.13 / 2.13	0.997	0.61
It was difficult and a bit of a nuisance.	3 / 8	7 / 3	1 / 3	1.81 / 1.6	4.58	0.1
It was difficult but worth the effort.	4 / 4	4 / 5	3 / 5	1.75 / 2.00	0.25	0.88
It was educational.	3 / 1	4 / 4	4 / 9	2.00 / 2.47	2.6	0.27
It was too time consuming.	7 / 12	1 / 0	3 / 2	1.63 / 1.27	2.18	0.33
It raised my intercultural awareness.	5 / 2	2 / 4	4 / 8	1.88 / 1.47	2.96	0.22

It was fraught with communication problems.	4 / 4	6 / 3	1 / 7	1.81 / 2.27	5.21	0.07
It was a new experience.	0 / 1	2 / 0	9 / 13	2.81 / 2.87	3.41	0.18

In both national groups attitudes towards the activity were very individual, with more uniformity visible in the Polish answers. While German students generally agreed only on the last statement – collaborative mind mapping was a new experience for them – Polish responses show that the experience was by and large perceived as new, rather educational, and quite effective in intercultural awareness-raising. Yet, as demonstrated by χ^2 and p values, the differences between the two groups turn out to be statistically insignificant (Table 3).

The answers to the open-ended question, inviting reflection on the experience, add some new insights in both groups. The German students, in addition to occasional comments on time pressure, quite frequently (5 out of 9 comments) mentioned low motivational value of the task. Polish students, in turn, generally (11 out of 14) confirmed what they stated in class: the task was fraught with communication problems. Comments pertaining to intercultural awareness raising were scarce. One German student noted that, as a result of this activity, s/he learned that Polish people are patriotic and conservative, which shows that, on occasion, the activity might have reinforced stereotypes.

3.3. The tasks

Towards the end of the exchange, in December 2014 / January 2015 the language tasks with the focus on ICC / civic education were completed and evaluated by both the two teachers and the partnering groups. The evaluation was based on the 5 criteria enumerated by Müller-Hartmann & Ditzfurth (2011):

1. Does the task have the potential to motivate learners to get involved? Does it have relevant, meaningful content? Does it activate learner resources? Does it have a clear communicative purpose and audience?
2. Is the task complex? Do learners have a choice? Are there rich resources? Is the task process-oriented?
3. Does the task integrate focus on form?
4. Is there interaction between learners based on real-life problem solving?
5. Is the task sequenced and does it balance demands and support?

Additionally, two criteria pertaining to the theme of the exchange were set:

1. Are competences of civic education / intercultural communication supported with the task? Are these competences well balanced with language learning goals?
2. How would the task work with Polish / German learners? Would its content and the problem to be solved be considered meaningful and relevant to real-life? Would the learners be familiar with the task format? Is the focus on form introduced in a way familiar to / preferred by the learners? Is the support offered typical of the Polish / German classroom? What - if any changes - would need to be introduced to make it work?

Both teachers as well as partner evaluators decided that the tasks devised by students from the German and Polish groups complied with criteria 1-6. Criterion 7, which was

Table 4. German and Polish (GER / PL) students: comments on the design of the exchange in numbers.

	Not at all			Very much so	Weighted average	χ^2	p
The overall aim of the exchange was clear to me.	3 / 0	9 / 1	0 / 4	0 / 9	1.75 / 3.57	22.37	0.00005
In individual tasks I always knew what is expected of me.	0 / 0	6 / 0	3 / 9	3 / 5	2.75 / 3.36	9.4	0.009
The timing of individual tasks was appropriate (enough time to complete; clear deadlines etc.).	1 / 0	2 / 0	7 / 1	2 / 13	2.83 / 3.93	15.5	0.001
The digital tools used in the exchange were usually appropriate.	0 / 0	3 / 1	3 / 4	6 / 9	3.25 / 3.57	1.59	0.44
I got clear guidelines as to the etiquette of this exchange.	1 / 0	10 / 0	1 / 3	0 / 11	2.00 / 3.79	22.98	0.00004

When it comes to the students' evaluation of the design, the Polish scores are generally much higher (Figure 5; Table 4). When the between-group comparison is carried out for individual descriptors, the German / Polish differences in how the students rated teaching presence in the area of design are statistically significant (cf. χ^2 and p values), with the exception of the perception of the tool usefulness.

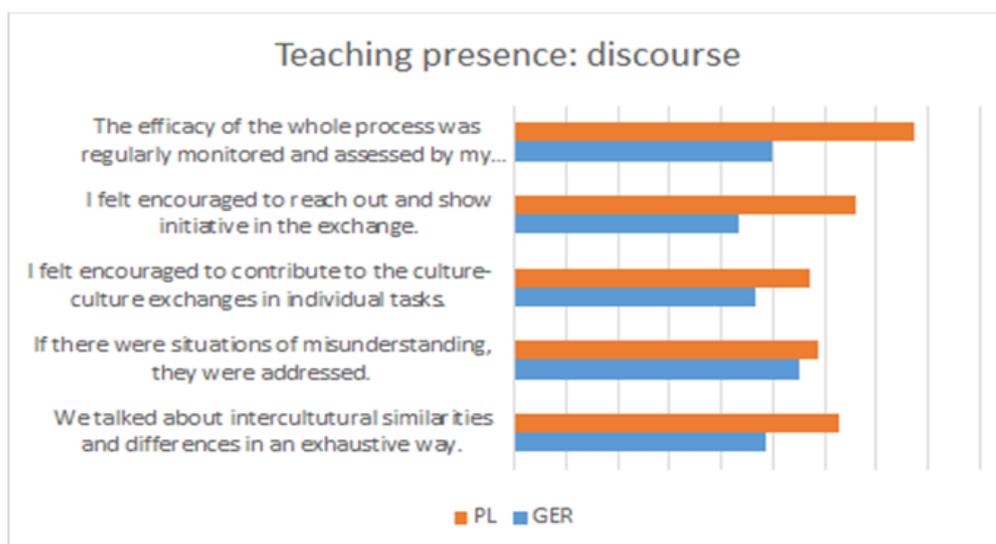


Figure 6. German and Polish students on the discourse of the exchange.

Table 5. German and Polish (GER / PL) students: comments on the discourse of the exchange in numbers.

	Not at all			Very much so	Weighted average	χ^2	p
We talked about intercultural similarities and differences in an exhaustive way.	1 / 1	7 / 2	2 / 5	2 / 6	2.42 / 3.14	5.94	0.11
If there were situations of misunderstanding, they were addressed.	0 / 1	5 / 1	5 / 10	2 / 2	2.75 / 2.93	5.21	0.15
I felt encouraged to contribute to the culture-culture exchanges in individual tasks.	2 / 1	5 / 2	4 / 9	1 / 2	2.33 / 2.86	3.74	0.29
I felt encouraged to reach out and show initiative in the exchange.	1 / 0	8 / 3	3 / 4	0 / 7	2.17 / 3.29	10.32	0.01
The efficacy of the whole process was regularly monitored and assessed by my tutor.	0 / 0	8 / 0	2 / 2	2 / 12	2.50 / 3.86	15.07	0.0005

In the area of the teaching presence / discourse, the Polish scores are again higher than those of their German partners (Figure 6, Table 5). Yet, the between-group comparison for the distribution of the answers to individual descriptors shows – based on χ^2 and p values – that the differences are statistically significant only in the last two: the perceived encouragement to reach out to partners as well as teacher monitoring and assessment.

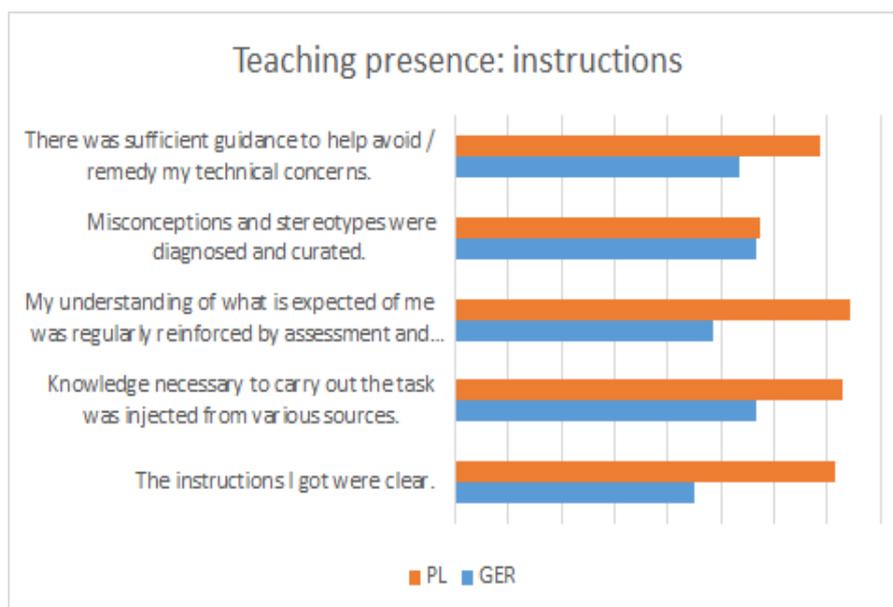


Figure 7. German and Polish students on the instructions of the exchange.

Table 6. German and Polish (GER / PL) students: comments on the instructions of the exchange in numbers.

	Not at all			Very much so	Weighted average	χ^2	p
The instructions I got were clear.	0 / 0	9 / 0	3 / 6	0 / 8	2.25 / 3.57	17.95	0.0001
Knowledge necessary to carry out the task was injected from various sources.	0 / 0	4 / 0	6 / 5	2 / 9	2.83 / 3.64	8.44	0.01
My understanding of what is expected of me was regularly reinforced by assessment and feedback from my tutor.	0 / 0	8 / 0	3 / 4	1 / 10	2.42 / 3.71	15.44	0.0004
Misconceptions and stereotypes were diagnosed and curated.	1 / 2	2 / 2	7 / 6	2 / 4	2.83 / 2.86	0.82	0.91
There was sufficient guidance to help avoid / remedy my technical concerns.	0 / 0	6 / 1	4 / 6	2 / 7	2.67 / 3.43	6.63	0.03

Similarly to the other two measures of teaching presence, the Polish average scores for the teaching presence in instructions top the German ones (Figure 7, Table 6). When it comes to the comparison between the groups regarding the distribution of answers for each descriptor, all are statistically significant (χ^2 and p values), with the exception of the German and Polish perception of how effectively the misconceptions and stereotypes were diagnosed and dealt with.

3.4.3. Students' perceptions of the critical incidents in the exchange

When addressing the critical incidents (events which changed their perceptions and attitudes in the course of the exchange), the German group made four comments. Two of them referred to aspects of the partner culture and the idea of telecollaboration. The other two were about problems the students encountered, one technical and one in terms of the exchange management.

As for the Polish group, the comments were more numerous (14) and extensive. They all referred to different incidents related to on-task interactions, which had determined the quality of the exchange, mostly the task proper (6 comments), and the mind mapping activity (4). Most of the remarks show the already-noted (cf. the post-mind

mapping survey) disappointment with the communication problems and the low level of engagement in the partner group. Most Polish comments express this in one way or another: the word *disappoint* and its derivatives are used in 4 comments; different ways of commenting on the partners' lack of motivation can be found in 8 comments.

4. Discussion

When it comes to the answers to the research questions, the first – *Will the students be able to design and evaluate language learning tasks with elements of ICC / civic education?* – can be answered affirmatively. Each small group completed their tasks successfully, as proved by the positive evaluation by both the teachers and the partner groups. Additionally – and even more importantly – task design was the competence most frequently mentioned in what the students thought they had learned as prospective teachers (Figure 2). This shows that not only was the competence satisfactorily acquired but also that the students raised their awareness of TBL as a teaching method. The latter factor seems particularly important in reinforcing teacher autonomy and the propensity for reflective education.

As for Question 2 – *Will the students broaden their repertoire of ICT tools?* – the answer is another *yes*, this time, however, with a few reservations. Most importantly, as the students noted themselves (Figure 3), the exchange had resulted in them learning selected tools, with special regard to *Wikispaces*, which was used as the VLE for the telecollaboration. Such experiential learning of ICT is valuable in at least two ways. Firstly, the fact that the tools used were a means to a telecollaborative end gave the students a chance to perceive ICT correctly: as always second to pedagogy and not the central element in the classroom. Secondly, as Cutrim-Schmidt (2014) points out, learning to use digital tools by watching an experienced teacher doing so is potentially the only pedagogically effective way of CALL teacher training. And this, it seems, is what happened in the course of the exchange described. Nevertheless, alongside the advantages, there are points that may pose concerns for both teachers in this telecollaborative exchange. It is notable that when reflecting on what they learned ICTwise, Polish students concentrated on specific tools while the German group made comments pertaining to the usefulness of new technologies as such. This may indicate that the group from Krakow could have used more reflection on the pedagogical – and not only the practical – level. Another, and likely, explanation is that the comments of the German students were rather general due to their lack of experience with the tools (the *Mindomo*-based activity was far from successful on the Freiburg side) as well as the perception that there was not sufficient guidance to help avoid / remedy their technical concerns (Figure 7; Table 8) on the part of their teacher. This may show that had more teacher assistance been offered, the answers offered by Freiburg students could have been more specific.

The answer to the final question – *Will the telecollaborative setting be educational and motivating, and help in achieving these objectives?* – is far from optimistic. While it is unquestionable that the exchange provided the experiential setting for the learning of digital tools by both groups, its motivational value is rather questionable. The German group – based on their self-reported attitudes as well as noted by their Krakow partners in both surveys – seemed uninvolved in the telecollaborative tasks. The Polish group, in turn, showed (surveys, in-class discussions) growing frustration and the resulting motivation decrease, resulting from what one of the Krakow students called *the whatever attitude* demonstrated by the partners in both collaborative activities. As a result, the tasks designed in the course of the telecollaboration did not have the intended real audience, and the culture-focused feedback and reflection were limited and rather superficial. Additionally, the shallowness of the German-Polish interaction resulted in the lack of an in-depth reflection on similarities and differences as regards

attitudes to ICC / *politische Bildung*; it even seemed to have occasionally reinforced stereotypes, resulting in comments as the one made by a German student in the post-mind mapping survey. All this seems to be seriously problematic and, consequently, a significant drawback of the exchange. As such, it will be discussed at greater length than the two previous issues.

Based on the results of the final survey (Figures 5-7; Tables 4-9), it seems that the blame for the shortcoming described above can be, at least partly, put on the insufficient teaching presence on the German side. The perceptions of the Freiburg students of their teacher's support in all three areas – design, discourse and instruction – were notably less favourable than those made by their Krakow partners, and most of the differences are statistically significant (Tables 5, 7 and 9). However, when considered more profoundly and in a broader context, the diagnosis seems too simplistic. First of all, it has to be taken into account that both teachers operated in significantly different educational settings. Polish universities are quite traditional and impose on their students a system of considerable control (participation in class is obligatory; course completion depends on the quality of the task[s] submitted). In German higher education institutions, which value learner autonomy, course credit is based on exam results, class participation being treated much more leniently than in Poland. All this considered, the German teacher has to rely on intrinsic motivation only, whereas in Poland external motivators can be used if needed. It was not necessarily the case of the Krakow group, who were motivated and had a clear sense of direction (Figure 5; Table 4). But with the Freiburg students complaining about the low interest of the task (post-mind mapping survey) and their lack of understanding of the overall aim of the exchange (Figure 5; Table 4), it has to be said that the German teacher could not do much to influence the level of engagement of his students.

As for the overall objective of the exchange being unclear to the German students, one may argue that this was, in fact, a failure on the part of their teacher. Yet, the answer here, again, is much more complex than it appears. It is true that the Polish objective – raising the students' awareness of the importance of *politische Bildung* – had not been discussed in the German class until the results of the post-mind mapping survey were known. However, it is also the case that until this critical incident both teachers operated on the false assumption of the-same-objective. In this sense the exchange was flawed from its very origin. When, during the design phase, the teachers talked about the theme of the telecollaboration – ICC / German; *politische Bildung* / Polish – they always assumed, based on Byram (2008), that these two were related. And on the general level, they were; in details, however, the understanding of the two teachers was different. The Freiburg focus was more on the communication between cultures, preferably in the course of telecollaborative language learning and Polish students were seen as exchange partners; Krakow, in turn, concentrated more on civic duties, hoping for role modelling on the German side.

In addition to these mismatched objectives, there is also a question of the lack of balance in the telecollaborative exchange described here, which needs addressing. Two manifestations of this lack of equality between the telecollaborating parties were already mentioned above. There was more external (institutional, teacher) pressure on the Polish students to carry out the tasks; in the German class external motivators were not an option. Moreover, while the German students were supposed to look at their telecollaborators as equals (exchange partners), the Krakow teacher put her group in a situation – the role-model setting – in which the students had to receive more than they were expected to give. These two inequalities were reinforced by another lack of balance: the one in the cooperation between the two teachers. The Polish tutor turned out to be more effective in carrying out her agenda, whereas the German teacher

followed the lead. This resulted in the German students dealing – excessively, from their perspective – with the *politische Bildung* issues, which were of low interest and unclear purpose to them. This also, and considerably, affected the quality of teaching presence. It was, in fact, the Polish teacher – especially through her task design and her instructions – who was PRESENT in both classrooms. No wonder, this presence was felt as weak on the German side, with the Krakow instructor not physically present and the Freiburg tutor only moderately engaged in moderating activities that only partly fulfilled his own objectives. It takes two to tango, as an old adage has it, which proved true for the exchange described, both on the level of students and their teachers. And the most important observation that follows is that it is impossible to give a good performance if the partners are not equals, in their roles or their involvement.

Finally, there is word to be said for exchanges with a very tight focus – or very tight foci, as was the case of the telecollaboration between Freiburg and Krakow. When strictly following one's own agenda it is very easy to neglect what is the core of intercultural exchanges online: raising the awareness of culture, of one's own and of the other, and going beyond stereotypes. Such awareness raising is best done in settings offering opportunities for smooth, truly bilateral communication. This is a very important lesson to be learned from the exchange described, by both the German and the Polish teachers. Based on their students, perceptions of how misconceptions and stereotypes were diagnosed and dealt with (Figure 7; Tables 8, 9) – and here, unlike on many other points, both groups agree – neither of the teachers addressed the issue in a way that could be called outstanding. It is a considerable drawback, especially in the light of Helm and Guth's (2010) observation: if the culture-related – or context-related, as was the case of the current exchange – problems are not handled carefully by the teacher(s), stereotypes are reinforced rather than dealt with in telecollaboration.

5. Conclusions

Telecollaboration is a learning mode offering promising opportunities for language learning and – increasingly – language teacher training. Yet, the potential, to be taken full advantage of, has to rest on balance between the collaborating parties: balance of agendas, of involvement, of expectations; and of teaching presence. This can be achieved on condition that (i) the design process is truly collaborative, with both (all) teachers fully supportive of the common agenda; (ii) the telecollaborating parties are on the same page – cognitively and affectively – and these two kinds of synchronicity are continuously monitored by the teacher; (iii) the teachers and the groups are a match for each other in terms of engagement; and (iv) teaching presence on both sides is both strong and flexible enough, to keep the exchange on track as well as to be able to apply remedial action if needed. These are the teaching implications learned from the failure of the intercultural online exchange described in this article.

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Notes

[1] Descriptions of a large number of tasks used in the past telecollaborative exchanges can be found here: http://uni-collaboration.eu/?q=tasks_list.

[2] http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_029_14.PDF

[3] <http://www.isp.org.pl/files/16591128070516130001227604007.pdf>
