This book explores how telecollaboration and other forms of Network-based Language Teaching (NBLT) can contribute to the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and to culture learning in university foreign language learners.

The term 'telecollaboration' refers to the use of on-line communication tools such as e-mail, videoconferencing, message boards “to connect language learners in different countries for the development of collaborative project work and intercultural exchange” (p. 9), while 'ICC' is defined as "the ability to interact effectively in a foreign language with members of cultures different to our own" (p. 9). Thus, O'Dowd deals with a number of useful and growing areas of activity for teachers of languages or communication.

The book was originally written as a PhD thesis and this seems to me to be its main failing. As a doctoral thesis, the study (as O'Dowd refers to it) may have been very good, but as a book – and therefore aimed at a completely different audience and having a different purpose – it would have been more effective and more readable had either the author or the editors shown more consideration towards potential readers. In fact, it is probably the publishing company (Langenscheidt) who are at fault here; they, I believe, should have made more effort to identify a market and ensure the final product was appropriate to it.

This is a great pity, because throughout the book O'Dowd makes many pertinent and useful observations and the discussion in the first two Chapters, though somewhat stodgy at times, is enlightening.

The book is divided into seven Chapters. The first, entitled 'Culture in Foreign Language Education' examines three main issues; (i) How the role of culture in foreign language learning has changed over the past few decades and the emergence of the so-called 'intercultural speaker'; (ii) What the terms intercultural learning and intercultural communicative competence refer to, including the leaning objectives they may entail and some of the practical consequences they may have for foreign language teaching and learning; (iii) How intercultural communicative competence is being developed in foreign language education. In this section O'Dowd reviews the role of textbooks and other traditional sources of culture learning materials and then explores some of the practical applications, in an on-line context, of adopting an approach to teaching which has the development of ICC as its central aim.

In Chapter 2 O'Dowd investigates two interrelated issues. The first is how the cultural dimension of foreign language learning has been represented up to now in CALL materials and in Network-Based Language Teaching. In the second, he identifies some
of the characteristics of on-line technologies (such as the fact that they encourage interaction and reflection, allow more equal levels of participation, enable the learner to engage in authentic communication, facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge or facilitate contact with the target culture) and explores how telecollaboration can contribute to achieving the goals of intercultural language learning. On the way he discusses some aspects of what skills and knowledge learners will need in order to develop their intercultural competence on-line.

As mentioned above, this book was “originally written as a Ph.D.thesis” (p. 3) and in Chapter 3 O’Dowd states the main research question which he was interested in; namely, “In what ways can Network-Based Language Teaching, and in particular telecollaboration, contribute to the development of learners’ ICC?”. As he points out (p.98) this implies many related questions. The ones he mentions are:

1. What should the role of the teacher be in order to support intercultural learning in the networked classroom?
2. Do different communication tools support the development of ICC in different ways?
3. Are there particular characteristics in on-line cultural relationships between learners which particularly support the development of intercultural understanding?

He also describes the research methods used in the study and the methods of data collection; a section which anyone considering carrying out qualitative classroom action research will find interesting.

These issues are then discussed in Chapters 4-6, each of which describes a different case study exploring how different combinations of on-line technologies can contribute to the development of learners' ICC. The study in Chapter 4 was carried out in the context of a general foreign language course and focusses on e-mail and web-based intercultural exchanges between two groups of university students in Germany and the USA. The approach reported in Chapter 5 used students from the same German university as in the previous study, but this time the focus was on how a web-based course and an on-line discussion forum (message board) with Irish students was used to support a specialised course in Irish Cultural Studies. The third case study, reported in Chapter 6, again used students from the same German university on an advanced language course who engaged in ethnographic interviews (the techniques of ethnographic interviewing were taught previously) with North American university students through e-mail and videoconferencing exchanges.

These three Chapters are structured in more or less similar ways: they provide an introduction to the technologies employed, give some background on the particular project, describe how the exchanges were set up and present the research findings, and it is in these Chapters that the book suffers most from an excessive number of unnecessary and tedious details of how the author carried out his research. The two short examples I give here (from Chapters 4 and 6) are from his descriptions of how he set up the on-line exchanges:

In the week from the 18 until the 26 January students in both classes were given the URL of the on-line questionnaire and asked to complete it in their mother tongue. The results were then compiled by the technical staff at the University of Michigan and placed on-line on the 28 January ... (p.134).

Sheida’s class in Communication Studies was made up of 21 American students and was due to run from 31 March until 7 June 2003. The class was to meet twice a week. My class of advanced EFL learners (Integrated Language Course) had 25 learners and our term was to last from 14 April until 29 July 2003 ... (p.195).

My other main complaints, now that we have touched on them, include the fact that although O’Dowd several times mentions the questionnaires he gives to his students and discusses the results, we never get to see examples of them ourselves. Their omission renders the results and corresponding discussions less meaningful. Secondly, as O’Dowd himself points out, the research for the book was carried out in Germany. I have no problem with that, of course. What is irritating is that he has not supplied his
non-German reading readers with translations of the relatively lengthy quotes from German writers (those on pages 35, 36 and 185, for example). There is even a definition of intercultural competence (on p. 13) which is not translated (and incidentally, I could not find the reference given in the Bibliography. Not that I checked all the references, but in this case I wanted to go to the original source to see if I could find an English version). Were these instances individual words or proper names one could, I suppose, use a dictionary, unfortunately they are not, and the paraphrases which I assume O'Dowd provides us with are not satisfying enough. Nor does he need to justify his research approach or try to convince the general reader of the value of the work quite so blatantly.

Despite these negative comments I would like to end on a positive note. There is much of interest in this book and in the final Chapter (Chapter 7) O'Dowd presents his conclusions about what teachers and students need to know and to do in order to fully benefit from these sorts of on-line activities. In these pages he reviews how on-line intercultural exchanges (better known today as telecollaboration), can contribute to culture learning and the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the foreign language classroom. Learning about the foreign culture and becoming more aware of one's own culture are possible outcomes of on-line exchanges, but this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, the evidence in a large number of reports reviewed suggests that many learners engaged in such activities actually confirm their stereotypes and fail to establish good working relationships with their partners.

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