Participant Perspectives on Intercultural Communication and Telecollaboration

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Abstract: Thanks to advancements in technology and the sudden onset of limited physical mobility, computer-mediated communicative (CMC) projects have become easier and more prevalent in the last few years, particularly in the foreign language classroom. Many of these projects have intercultural communication and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as a key goal, and many studies have investigated the links between CMC and ICC. As yet, however, very little has been done to understand the experience of the participants themselves. This study attempts to utilise reflexive thematic analysis on participants' open-ended responses to questions about their experiences following a ten-week semi-synchronous telecollaboration project called CONNECT. Responses were gathered from forty-three participants from fourteen institutions across different countries. They were read, coded, and themes were developed to produce the 'story' of the data. In this instance, four common themes across the responses were identified: *The importance of English proficiency, self-discovery through sharing, good attitudes/skills/behaviours,* and *variability of cultural identities*. Considering the participants' perspectives on ICC in general and in relation to telecollaborative exchanges in particular is important when designing tasks such as these, and may help influence curriculum and classroom content planning.

Keywords: Online intercultural exchange; intercultural communication; intercultural communicative competence; telecollaboration

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communicative (CMC) projects are certainly not a new phenomenon (some of the earliest studies go back to the early 90s), but with the advancement of technology and the realisation that intercultural competence is a necessary 21st century skill, not to mention the sudden enforced restrictions on physical mobility due to Covid-19 in the last few years, these projects have become easier and more attractive (or even necessary) to teachers and researchers. This is particularly the case in the field of foreign language education, as online exchanges provide a way to practice language skills in real-world situations and build students' intercultural communication competencies and experiences.

Before we delve deeper into the focus of this paper, it should be noted that the terminology around CMC is extensive and often confusing. The types of CMC tasks and their associated terms have been categorised and explained in great depth elsewhere in the literature, [1] [2] and so we will not go into it here. However, for clarity, we refer to CMC as a general broad term for any kind of communicative project involving digital tools, telecollaboration as a subset of CMC projects where

the aim is collaborative learning, and online intercultural exchanges (OIE) as a further subset where intercultural communication is - if not a key goal – at least an integral part of the project.

One such telecollaborative OIE project is CONNECT, a program run between fourteen institutions across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. This program has similar learning goals to many other of its kind: for participants to practice language skills, develop their intercultural communication, and become more familiar with online digital communication tools. CONNECT, however, has a unique difference between other similar semi-/synchronous telecollaborative projects which generally occur between two or three institutions, in that the participants represent a wide range of diverse cultural backgrounds from across the world. As such, it was seen as the perfect project in which to explore a potential gap in the literature on telecollaboration and intercultural communication (IC). As we shall see in the literature review of this paper, much work has gone into attempting to define IC, many studies have looked at how CMC projects might affect IC or be used to assess IC, but very little has looked into the participants' perspective at all. This is a rather vital point, as understanding student motivations, experiences, and opinions can help us to shape curriculum content, class directions, and the constructions of telecollaborative projects as a whole. As such, for this study, one research question was created:

RQ: What are the participants' perspectives on intercultural communication after participating in a multi-cultural online intercultural exchange?

To answer this question, a reflexive thematic analysis [3] was performed on a series of responses to a questionnaire designed to elicit participant perspectives on the topic. In the following sections we shall explore the existing literature connected to this study, look at the CONNECT project itself in a little more detail, outline the steps taken for the thematic analysis, discuss the themes and messanings reported in the participant responses, and see what impact these results might have on the issue.

Literature Review

Improvements in intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) are often cited as key goals in telecollaborative projects of all kinds, for good reason. A number of ways in which IC and ICC can potentially be improved through these projects have been identified by numerous scholars. [4] discusses how while participating in projects aimed at improving ICC, the technology used not only offered cross-cultural learning, but also access to a variety of perspectives that would otherwise be impossible to find. Similarly, numerous scholars have noted the failings of traditional FLE classrooms in introducing and discussing ICC, and how telecollaborative projects can be used to fill this perceived gap [5] [6] [7] [8].

Intercultural contact by itself, however, has not been seen to improve perceived ICC skills. Although it is generally acknowledged significant cultural contact is necessary to improve IC and ICC skills [9], it has also been shown that by itself cultural contact is not enough to facilitate such improvements [4] [7].

One of the main problems when discussing IC or ICC is the lack of agreed upon definition. Indeed, within IC the muddled, repetitive state of the literature and constant re-invention and re-

modelling of concepts a note of frustration is often heard from scholars [10] [11] [12]. There is comparatively less literature and confusion within ICC, but that may be because the linguistic communicative aspects of interculturality are often overlooked [13] [14]. That being said, there have been some notable contributions to the literature of defining ICC elements, particularly in relation to telecollaboration. One of the original models of ICC and the concept of the 'intercultural speaker' was developed by Byram [15], and although receiving much (largely justified) criticism [4] [5] [16], it is still highly influential today. Byram identified four key areas of communicative competence in the realms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and education as categorised in savoirs, including savoir s'engager or critical cultural awareness. From a sociological perspective, [17] in a similar vein to this study, utilised responses from people involved in intercultural interactions to identify cognitive, behavioural, and affective components of ICC which bear considerable similarity to Byram's original model.

Other conceptions of ICC have very astutely noted the necessity of including web 2.0 interactions and skills into our considerations of the subject [4] [16] [18] [19] [8]. In some particularly innovative studies, [8] has identified what he refers to as the 'intercultural turn' in new media, and the links between multimodal competencies, new media literacies/competencies and intercultural interactions provide a rich area of further research that is just now being undertaken [18]. [16] manage to integrate concepts of Byram's model of ICC, Foreign Language Education, and new media literacies in what they term the telecollaboration 2.0 framework, creating a four-part interconnected framework of necessary elements in creating successful ICC rich telecollaborative projects (including operational: technical, operational: attitude, cultural, and critical elements).

It should be noted, however (and with little surprise to anyone who has initiated similar projects) that telecollaboration by itself does not guarantee successful communication between participants, and quite often there are instances where intercultural communicative competence either failed to happen, or the lack of it resulted in a breakdown of communicative projects. [20], while compiling an inventory of reasons why intercultural communication 'fails' in telecollaborative projects, references this concept when discussing studies by [21] [22] [23]. [21] demonstrated that shorter correspondence (due to proficiency reasons) between inter-cultural telecollaborative partners was interpreted as a lack of friendliness and a refusal to open up. Belz's [22] also referenced by O'Dowd found that the interaction style of Americans (uncommitted and self-depreciating) led their German counterparts to dismiss them as unwilling to engage in debate, whereas the American participants viewed their German counterparts as aggressive because of their style of correspondence. In a similar study between US and German participants, [23] found that Americans' tendency to ask fewer questions and make fewer attempts to establish rapport led to low group functionality, as well as negative opinions of the opposite cultures. In the above examples, the linguistic choices and behaviours made by the participants led to a lack of intercultural communication, and thus displayed a lack of intercultural competence. Similarly, [19] while investigating the use of cyberpragmatics and politeness theory in a project based on the widely used Cultura framework found that the student participants actually displayed a marked lack in intercultural communicative competence.

There has been some work in integrating IC and ICC into the classroom, particularly the foreign language classroom, although issues remain on what and how to assess it. There is a general tendency towards acknowledging the developmental processes involved in IC, and that assessment should take a similar long view and indeed the assessment should be part of the learning process itself [24] [25] [26].

To briefly summarise the pertinent points highlighted in the literature on the topic of ICC, we can see that telecollaboration is difficult to pin down in any agreed upon definition, although knowledges, skills, and behaviours of certain kinds are often cited. We also see that although cultural contact is a necessity in ICC development, contact in and of itself does not guarantee any improvements in this respect. Indeed, there have been numerous instances where cross-cultural communication has failed. We have also seen how modern developments in ICC cite the importance of web 2.0 literacies and multimodality in both introducing cultural divergent peoples together, and in allowing the possibility for ICC to exist/develop.

It should be noted that this is by no means an exhaustive review of the literature; providing such a review would be a study in and of itself which would go far beyond the length of this paper. Rather, this is an overview of some relevant points that highlight the wealth of research being done on this subject. What is seemingly missing from this research, and what we are in a fortunate position to be able to explore, is the intercultural participants' reflections on ICC. Whereas much of the enlightening and interesting work that has been done on ICC and telecollaboration has been a study of the participants, what we are attempting to provide here is perspectives from the participants. We hope that the opinions and data provided here will offer some illumination into how participants approach telecollaboration, how they engage with it, and what they feel they get out of it. In doing so, we may be in a better position to design such projects and engage both students an institutional leaders in them.

Because the CONNECT project this study was derived from pre-exists the research question of this paper, the research design describing the project will be outlined first, followed by the chosen methodology of this particular study, so as to be more faithful to the linear process the study followed.

METHOD

Project CONNECT is a ten-week semi-synchronous telecollaborative project which hosts students from around the world. The Spring 2022 iteration included non-native speakers of English from South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Israel, Turkey, the Ivory Coast, Sri Lanka, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Chile with approximately two hundred and twenty students participating at one time or another over the length of the project. English ability was not tested, although institute representatives from the respective universities estimated their students' abilities to be between lower intermediate to advanced.

The ten-week project was divided into two five-week blocks, where participants were grouped together with four other people from different countries. After the first five-week block, the groups were re-made, and each participant was introduced to four new people. Each group was assigned a 'group mentor' who could act as a guide for providing information or providing answers to participants. Mentors were project developers, institute representatives (i.e., teachers), or former participants who had excelled in the project. Aside from providing project specific information and answering participants' questions, the mentors avoided direct interaction with the groups in order to allow for a more organic interactive atmosphere to evolve.

Two major platforms for interaction were used: Telegram (a social networking and messaging app available on Android, Apple, and Windows devices), and Zoom (a popular video conferencing platform). Telegram was chosen due to its similarity to other kinds of messaging services the participants were used to (Kakao in South Korea, Line in Taiwan and Japan, WhatsApp in other countries), and its in-built multimodality which allows for a variety of communication styles such as

synchronous, asynchronous, semi-synchronous, text-based, recorded or live video messaging, voice recording, uni-directional information dissemination, one-to-one and group conversation, all of which participants were free to utilise as they wished.

The project itself followed a semi-formalised structure of what [20] identifies as an information-exchange style OIE . Participants were given some loose expectations for their commitments and were made aware of the three learning outcomes the project was designed to deliver: Real-world English language practice, intercultural communication skills, and digital fluency skills. Each week one of the group members was designated as 'leader' and asked to choose a cultural topic for the group to discuss and compare with each other. Leaders were free to choose any cultural topic they liked, but some possibilities were provided for them (food, music, nightlife, family, relationships etc). Although it was recommended to avoid topics that could prove contentious such as religion and politics, nothing was strictly prohibited as one of the goals was to facilitate the potential for participants to experience 'rich points' [27]. Some of the topics chosen by leaders ranged from the heavily political (how is feminism considered in your culture?) to the humorous (what do you think is TMI?). Leaders were also asked to attempt to schedule a live meeting with their group, although it was not a necessity each week. All participants were asked to send at least 20 messages per week and try to attend three live group meetings.

Research Methodology

As the goal of this study was to gather student reflections and opinions on the nature of ICC, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. Following [3] [28], a reflexive thematic analysis was determined to be the best approach to coding and interpreting the dataset and relating it to the research question, due to its organic approach to data analysis and theme classification and its inherent relevance to analysing human experiences; a concept which is at the core not just of this study but of intercultural competence itself. With this in mind, an iterative process of piloting questionnaire items was undertaken until the final questionnaire was arrived at (appendix 1). The questions were open-ended to encourage detail in the answers and were designed to encourage self-reflection from the participants. This self-reflection would then help lead to both a set of data that could be analysed to answer the research question, and an improvement in intercultural sensitivity and a move towards the de-centred '3rd space' in participants [5] [29] [6]. Respondents were allowed to answer in either their native language or English, and all responses were translated into English and double checked by a native speaker of that language and fluent in English. The questions attempted to reflect commonly cited areas of intercultural communicative competence including the knowledge (cognitive), attitudes (behavioural), and skills (affective) referred to in the literature review above. While the aim was to elicit the respondents' opinions on these areas, the researchers attempted to leave the questions open enough to allow themes, ideas, concepts, and constructs previously undiscovered to be disclosed.

Each translated response was analysed following the six-step recursive process of reflexive thematic analysis advised by the [3]. Each response was read thoroughly, and key points were coded and given an informative and accurate title. This was done twice so as to capture as much relevant data as possible. A review of codes and possible relationships was then undertaken with larger themes and sub-themes generated from the results. These themes were then re-analysed in relation

to the original dataset to ensure the 'story' of the data was accurately represented. The results can be seen in the following section.

The subjective experiences of the researcher were an integral part of interpreting the data and constructing meaning from the responses. The researchers were themselves group mentors (i.e., supervisors in the CONNECT project) for the study and have been involved with this and other connected research questions. Arguments could convincingly be made that our particular study followed inductive, deductive, semantic, or essentialist approaches depending on how the reader interprets our interpretation of the data, however when undergoing the process of analysis, the researchers considered themselves to be taking a constructivist approach and allowing the data to describe its own reality as filtered through the perception of those doing the analysis. We fully acknowledge the following results and interpretations are inevitably subjective.

It should also be noted that this is a specific and narrow exploration of intercultural communication and communicative competence, and so this one methodology was chosen. For a larger and more holistic analysis, the authors recommend the 'consilience approach' devised by [30].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

42 responses were recorded from the participants, of which 75% were female, and 80% aged 18-25, 10% over 50, and the remaining 10% under the age of 18. The country the participant was studying in at the time of the project is recorded in Table 1.

Table 1. Country respondents were studying in

Country	No. of Respondents
South Korea	11
Argentina	11
Japan	3
Sri Lanka	6
Brazil	3
Turkey	3
Ivory Coast	2
Spain	3

As the responses were read, coded, and interpreted, certain core concepts connected to the participants' perspectives on intercultural communication re-occurred across multiple questions. From these core concepts, themes were constructed by the researchers to help 'tell the story' of the data and help answer the question we set at the beginning of this paper. The themes were: The importance of English proficiency, self-discovery through sharing, good attitudes/skills/behaviours, and variability of cultural identities.

The Importance of English Proficiency

By far the most commonly referenced concept across all answers from all respondents was the necessity of English skills specifically, but also language skills generally in intercultural communication. Interacting with other non-natives led to a process of realisation and self-reflection in their own language abilities, both in terms

of the self-perceived success of their own production and their abilities in comparison to others. While responses were mixed on if the participants felt their skills were better or worse than they originally thought, there was a general tendency towards an increase in motivation to learn after interaction. There were also many references towards being more forgiving of one's own mistakes, and the realisation that fear of making mistakes is likely to hinder one's ability to communicate with others.

The reflection on language was not just focussed on one's own success, but also in relation to the conversation partner and aiding in the partner's success as well. The desire to improve receptive skills such as pronunciation, and personality skills in allowing people the time to consider how to provide their answers in a foreign language were also repeatedly mentioned.

A further inference can be made in the reading of some participants preference for online communication as it 'gives me the time to think about my answer and check my mistakes'.

It must be noted, however, that all of the participants in this project were non-native English speakers, and English language learning was at least a part of their studies, and in some cases it was the main focus. This may well colour their attitude towards the importance of language skills in this project.

Self-Discovery Through Sharing

Inevitably, the questionnaire itself provoked certain realisations through the process of self-reflection. Another consistent theme throughout the responses, however, was how much the participants discovered about themselves during their intercultural interactions. Through sharing aspects of their own culture as requested by their group mates, many participants remarked that they knew less about their own culture than they originally thought and found an increased interest not only about learning about the rest of the world but also about an increased interest in their own heritage.

This feeling of discovery of one's own interests was further echoed by many participants (particularly those from self-described homogenic backgrounds) who said that one of the more remarkable outcomes from the intercultural interactions they had was the sparking of a strong interest in travelling and meeting people from different cultural backgrounds, an interest they had previously not had. In others from more self-described multicultural upbringings, this discovery translated as the realisation they needed to learn more about the world, as their knowledge was not as deep as they had previously assumed.

The Variability of Cultural Identities

When reading through the multiple references to culture from participants' responses, it became very clear that people identify 'culture' with very different and sometimes contradictory definitions. The majority of responses at least referenced country as an integral part of their cultural identity, and respondents from South Korea, Japan, and Sri Lanka commented on the homogeneity of people (and subsequently cultures) from those regions. Participants from Argentina and Brazil remarked how they saw their countries as multicultural, and therefore multiculturalism was a part of their cultural identity, although still equating country with culture.

Further elements that were seen to be an inherent part of culture were things such as ethnicity (Arabian, Asian, Latin American) and religion (Muslim, Buddhist, Confucian), and only two respondents remarked on their economic background being an important part of their culture. This may be due to a selection bias in the project participants, which we will look at in the discussion section of this paper.

Somewhat surprisingly, there was also a tendency in some of the responses towards individual preferences and tastes as being indicators of culture, rather than group history or shared backgrounds. Nine of the respondents commented on how their preferences for music, clothes, and food was an integral part of what

they considered to be their culture. Similar to the lack of consideration of economic background mentioned above, there was no reference at all to sexual identity or preference in any responses. This may be due to the non-anonymous format of the questionnaire itself, or again due to a selection bias in the original project.

Attitudes/Skills/Behaviours

When referring to positive interactions in intercultural situations (both in terms of participation in the CON-NECT project and in other situations the participants had been in), there were a number of commonalities in the responses that indicated why the interactions were positive. These responses all related to the attitudes, skills, and/or behaviours of the communicators, and bear striking resemblance to many of the elements of intercultural communication referred to in the academic literature. These elements have been grouped together in the following sub-categories:

Appreciation for Other Realities - Attitude

Participants in the project regularly spoke about the necessity of not projecting one's own values on to others and instead being receptive to different perspectives. Terms used such as 'respect' (the most commonly used word in all the responses'), 'understanding', 'different realities', 'accepting of differences', and 'relativity' fall into this category.

Engage - Behaviour

'Open mind', 'curiosity', 'explore diversity', and 'be proactive' were grouped together under the 'engage' behaviour. There was even one memorable mention of "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"! Engagement was also a common theme throughout the project itself, as participation in group chats was seen as one of the most important aspects of a successful group.

Practical Communication – Skill

The necessity of practical communicative skills and strategies for successful intercultural communication were also spontaneously and repeatedly referenced by many participants in their responses. According to their experiences, these skills were 'not being inappropriate', 'being clear with communication', and 'not being afraid to make mistakes'. This is particularly interesting when one considers one of the more often used definitions of intercultural communication is the ability to achieve one's goals effectively and appropriately. It may also, however, point to a fear of confrontation and comparison between cultures which other scholars on the subject consider to be essential in reaching the 'rich points' of intercultural contact.

There are inevitably limitations to this study. Perhaps one of the most concerning limitations is highlighted by the participants' reliance on using country as a proxy for culture. As mentioned earlier, this could point to a selection bias within the project itself where only the dominant cultures within each country have been given a voice in the telecollaboration, and minority groups (I.e., those with less institutional power) are not considered at all. If this is the case, special efforts should be made to actively seek more diverse voices.

It is also certainly possible that out of the one hundred and seventy participants in the CONNECT project, the forty-two that responded to the questionnaire may also be the most active and engaged in intercultural communication, and hence were most likely to respond. It should also be noted that the vast majority of respondents remarked that the CONNECT project was either the only or the main platform for them to meet or have met people from other cultures. Accordingly, the responses they gave may be solely applicable to the

CONNECT project format itself and not entirely relevant to other intercultural situations. The considerable overlap between their opinions and perceptions and the established literature on the subject makes that seem unlikely, however.

CONCLUSION

In this study we attempted to gather participants' perspectives on their experiences of intercultural communication (mostly) within the telecollaborative format, so that we can have a better understanding of what ICC means to them, and therefore how we can better create these projects, build from them, and prepare our students for interaction and engagement with the wider world.

The stories that the responses created show the attitudes, behaviours, and skills they believe need to be developed for successful communication; they show the value of intercultural communication in the process of self-discovery and learning; they show an appreciation and motivation for further improvement of language skills; and they show the remarkably personal process of cultural identification. All of these themes can and should be developed within a structured setting either before, during, or after a telecollaborative project that has IC and ICC as one of its main goals.

As telecollaboration as a method of engagement and intercultural communicative competence continues to gain prominence in foreign language education, it becomes increasingly important for researchers, practitioners, and instructors to understand the perspectives of the students who participate in the projects. By understanding what the students need and what they get out of these kinds of projects, we can be better prepared to create them and formally support them.

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