

Telecollaboration: Foreign Language Education in the Digital Age*

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0. Introduction

‘Telecollaboration’ is a word that has still to make its way into the mainstream dictionaries. In spite of this, the neologism is living proof of the way in which technologies have changed the goals and means of education. Less than twenty years ago, language teachers were discussing ways of integrating authentic materials into their lessons. Today, we have the possibility of offering to each and every student in our class the chance of interacting in real time, face-to-face, or rather screen-to-screen, with a peer from a point on the planet so remote that our student may not even have been aware of its existence before the interaction. We can not only provide an authentic experience, but we can tailor the linguistic experience in very specific ways. All this, however, is about potential and not necessarily about achievement. This paper will document three years of telecollaboration at Otaru University of Commerce (OUC), discuss its goals, opportunities and difficulties through the narrative of a project continued

* I wish to express my gratitude to my colleagues at Transilvania University of Brasov, Professors Marinela Burada, Andreea Nechifor, Raluca Sinu and Oana Tatu for their professionalism, their open-mindedness and their extraordinary patience. The project would have been utterly impossible without their ideas and encouragement. I also wish to thank the students from TUB who took part in these exchanges in their free time. The telecollaborative exchanges would have been far less successful without the kind help of Blended-Learning Project staff. Thank you all.

over the period 2014–present date between OUC and Transilvania University of Brasov (TUB), Romania.

The paper is organized as follows: section 1 will offer a very brief introduction to telecollaboration research and section 2 will describe the goals of the OUC–TUB project. In section 3, I will give a brief outline of the project. Section 4 will evaluate the project through students’ reactions. Section 5 will present some final remarks and conclusions.

1. The telecollaboration boom

Telecollaboration is defined by Julie A. Belz as “...internationally-dispersed learners in parallel language classes use Internet communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat, threaded discussion, and MOOs (as well as other forms of electronically mediated communication), in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange,” (Beltz, 2003). Simply put, telecollaboration represents the use of digital technology to bring together learners from distinct countries and cultures in collaborative learning activities. The terms Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) and Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education (ICFLE) have also been used to refer to this field, (Helm, 2015).

In spite of its short history, telecollaboration is gaining momentum with remarkable speed. The number of articles, books, projects, and conferences on the topic is growing incrementally. Peter Lang Publishing has already reached the fourth volume in its series ‘Telecollaboration in Education,’ Guth and Helm (2010), Sadler (2012), Dooly and O’Dowd (2012), and Tcherepashenets (2015). Journals such as *Language Learning & Technology* or *System and Language Learning and Higher Education* have hosted special issues on telecollaboration. UNICollaboration, ‘the website of a

cross-disciplinary professional organization for telecollaboration and virtual exchange in Higher Education' has even launched a specialized journal: *Practice and Theory in Telecollaboration and Virtual Exchange*. There are numerous sites offering advice and resources in support of telecollaborative projects. Some of the best known are Cultura (<https://cultura.mit.edu/>); UNICollaboration (<https://uni-collaboration.eu/>) and TILA (<http://www.tilaproject.eu/>). Conferences dedicated to the topic are being held regularly. After the first INTENT conference on 'Telecollaboration in University Foreign Language Education' held at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of León, Spain in February 2014, researchers held second event entitled 'New Directions in Telecollaborative Research and Practice', at Trinity College Dublin between 21-23 April 2016. In April 2018, the Pedagogical University of Krakow, Poland, will organize the third conference on telecollaboration with the title 'Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship.'

Why is telecollaboration so popular? Telecollaboration allows for the development of linguistic competence in an engaging manner and has a strong intercultural component. According to Helm (2015) reports on telecollaborative practices have documented 'increased motivation and linguistic output, gains in language development, accuracy and fluency, intercultural communicative competence, pragmatic competence, learner autonomy, online literacies, and multimodal communicative competence.' (Helm, 2015: 198). The practice has received encouragement particularly in Europe where the European Commission is actively supporting the internationalization of universities.

Telecollaboration comes in different forms in terms of the language used, the type of technology involved and the schedule of the activities.

According to Helm (2015: 204) the most common formula is the 'teletandem' a bilingual form of telecollaboration where speakers of two different languages help each other. There are also monolingual as well as multilingual and Lingua Franca exchanges. The exchanges make use of different technologies: emails, blogs, Wikis, videoconferencing, etc. The exchanges can be asynchronous- the participants share materials and process them in their own time, or synchronous, when the exchange takes place in real time.

Telecollaborative practices can be described also in terms of their relative complexity and involvement, ranging from less to more demanding activities. According to O'Dowd and Ware (2009), telecollaborative activities can be classified into three major types: Information Exchange, Comparison and Analysis, where students reflect on the data collected through the information exchange and Collaboration and Product Creation where students engage in joint activities. The latter is regarded as the most demanding and the least used type of exchange.

The responses of participants in telecollaborative activities, both students and educators are overwhelmingly positive. Over 80% of the students and more than 70% of the educators surveyed in Helm (2015) agreed that taking part in a telecollaborative exchange was a positive experience. Among the gains listed by student participants were: learning to communicate with people from other cultures, improving language skills and becoming more proficient in the use of online tools to communicate.

In spite of the support from European organizations and of the high satisfaction felt by participants in these exchanges, telecollaboration has yet to materialize its potential 'as telecollaboration has not been mainstreamed into higher education.' (Helm, 2015) The cause for this delay might reside with the difficulties encountered by practitioners of the

method. These range from difficulties in coordinating timetables, levels of proficiency and educational goals, to lack of institutional support, cultural clashes, and lack of time. The majority of the educators surveyed in Helm (2015) declared that telecollaboration was time-consuming (84%) and many referred to technical issues.

Both the positive outcomes and the difficulties discussed above were present in the OUC-TUB project.

2. Goals of the OUC-TUB project

The project was designed with three main goals in mind: (a) improving language skills through increased motivation; (b) increasing cultural competence and (c) encouraging metacognitive processes. The rationale was as follows. The opportunity to engage with peers from a distant part of the world in real time would result in increased motivation and engagement. This type of exchange turns language from an academic subject into a tool for meaningful communication allowing students to realize the usefulness of their studies. Moreover, being engaged in real communication takes focus away from form and places it on meaning and function. There is no time to worry about possible mistakes when a person your own age is waiting for a reply. But language is not the unique benefit of these interactions. The activities allow participants to become aware not only of linguistic facts- the different varieties of English- but of culturally determined communication styles. Rather than passively receive information about cultural distinctions, the students experience it first-hand. In this process, students are likely to learn not only about the partner country and its culture but about themselves and their own culture. These exchanges could increase students' self-awareness as individuals and as

members of Japanese culture and lead them to reconsider concepts and ideas they take for granted.

Although the project was not designed as a replacement for student mobility, it was expected that it would affect students' attitudes towards overseas travel and study. The project was not conceived only with students in mind. It is also an investigation into the effect of technology on academic globalization.

3. The OUC-TUB project

The OUC-TUB telecollaboration project is a synchronous, monolingual collaboration using English as *Lingua Franca*. The approach was task-based and covered a wide range of activities of varying complexity from information exchange, analysis and comparison to collaboration and product creation.

The idea for the collaboration was launched as early as 2011 when the author made contact for the first time with TUB, but could not be implemented until three years later, during the spring semester of the academic year 2014-15. This section will outline briefly the progress of the telecollaboration project between OUC and TUB from the 2014 pilot study to the current stage. The telecollaboration was scheduled at OUC as part of the English academic writing class but was carried out on a voluntary basis at TUB. The success of the pilot study was possible only thanks to the good will of the TUB faculty and the enthusiasm and curiosity of their students.

3.1. The pilot study

The syllabus for the OUC class was organized around a single topic for

the entire semester and the students were asked to produce different types of writing while exploring the topic. For the academic year 2014-2015, the topic was education. It consisted of three units. The first was: from presentation to essay. Students were asked to make a presentation about their university and write an essay based on the presentation. The second unit covered the steps necessary to move from data collection to a report. Students designed a questionnaire about student life at their university, conducted a survey and reported the results. For the third unit, students read some literature on education and wrote an article review. At the end of the semester, for the credit, the students had to produce a longer essay in which they combined the materials produced throughout the three units.

Due to scheduling difficulties, TUB participation was restricted to Unit 1 and, partially, Unit 2. Students from both universities prepared presentations introducing their school. Each side viewed the partner's presentations (asynchronous exchange) and had the opportunity to ask questions in an online face-o-face meeting. After the online discussion, OUC students wrote an essay based on the presentations viewed in which they compared the two universities.

Unit 2 involved creating a questionnaire regarding university life, administering it and writing a report based on the data accumulated. OUC students worked in groups to create a questionnaire which was made available online to the TUB students. Data from Brasov and Otaru was collected and used to write an essay. As the TUB students were volunteers, they did not complete this part of the program.

Although the differences in structure of the academic year in Japan and Romania did not allow the pilot study to cover Unit 3 of the course, the outcome of the collaborative activities carried out was encouraging enough

to justify moving on to the next stage.

3.2. *The academic year 2015–2016*

The collaboration during the pilot study, though successful by and large, was fraught with difficulties, mostly technical, but also concerning scheduling, the matching of the participants and the equitableness of tasks. Ways to smooth out all these wrinkles were discussed with the TUB partners and the beginning of the new academic year found us with a carefully coordinated schedule, better equipped, and with OUC technical personnel ready to help. The participants from the two universities were more evenly matched this time as the telecollaboration was, for both universities, integrated in the curriculum of an English academic writing class. The syllabus was the same as for the pilot study but this time aiming to cover the whole range of activities.

Students from the two universities completed the same tasks, some of them collaboratively, some of them separately, and had the opportunity to view and comment on each other's output. One of the issues during the pilot study had been the limited access of students to their overseas partners. We addressed this problem by providing several workstations allowing the students to carry out the activities in small groups in parallel sessions. This improvement was not quite as successful as expected for reasons to be discussed later. The schedule for the telecollaboration was as follows.

Introductions

At the beginning of the semester, the students from the partner universities had the opportunity to mingle freely, introduce themselves in an online face-to-face meeting.

Presentations

Students prepared presentations about their alma mater and presented them online. Presentations were followed by questions and answers.

Essay based on presentations

The presentations provided the information for a descriptive essay. Students had to write a report about the partner university based on the presentations they had viewed. The essays were shared online and participants could read them and make comments.

Designing a survey

Students prepared questions for a survey about student life and discussed them in an online meeting. A single questionnaire was agreed upon and used to collect data from each of the two universities.

Writing a report: compare student life at the two universities

The two sets of data thus collected were shared online and used to write a report comparing student life at the two universities.

Discussion on reading material

Students read *The Lost Tools of Learning* by Dorothy Sayers and discussed the essay in a final synchronous session.

Writing a review essay

Students wrote a review of the Dorothy Sayers essay.

Final essay

The OUC students were asked to produce a final essay offering their assessment of college education in Japan based on the information collected throughout the semester.

3.2. Academic year 2016–2017

The first year of the telecollaboration had an ambitious program which proved to be quite taxing especially for the Romanian university. The

program for the telecollaboration was based on the OUC curriculum and the Romanian partner had to adapt a course with a different structure to fit into this program. The need to compensate for this problem led to a streamlining of the telecollaboration during its second year.

For the second year of the project, Unit 3 was removed from the shared activities. The structure of Units 1 and 2 was identical with the previous year although the topic was changed. This year was focused on the two cities hosting the universities: Otaru and Brasov. The online sharing of writing output was eliminated because the TUB curriculum made it difficult for students to write essays. The schedule of the 2016-2017 telecollaboration was as follows:

Introductions

Presentations

The topic for this year's telecollaboration was 'My city.' Students prepared presentations about the cities hosting their respective universities, i.e. Otaru and Brasov and presented them in an online exchange.

Data collection

A survey was created and uploaded online. Students collected answers from people in their city. The results were compared and served as basis for an online discussion.

Questions and Answers

Students were given time to consider the differences between the responses given by the people surveyed in the two cities and to prepare questions. The questions were shared in advance of the online meeting in order to allow the participants time to reflect. One week after data collection was concluded, students had an online exchange in which they

answered the partners' questions and discussed the survey results.

Evaluation

Students were asked to write an essay reflecting on their experience with telecollaboration over the semester and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of adopting this method in Japanese education.

Due to scheduling problems, the collaboration based on the academic writing class had to be put on hold during the academic year 2017–2018 year. Telecollaborative activities were not completely interrupted although they were limited to two isolated presentation exchanges.

4. Student feedback

Feedback from the participants suggests that the project has met its goals. There are a number of themes recurring over the years in student comments. These refer to increased motivation, a deeper understanding of inter-cultural matters and a fresh perspective on their own situation. Along with these positive outcomes, there are regular complaints about the technical issues. The student comments quoted below follow the original grammar and spelling. The figures at the end represents the academic year when they were collected.

4.1. *Increased motivation*

As predicted, students find telecollaboration stimulating. Activities that appear otherwise as empty of purpose, suddenly acquire urgency. Rather than struggling to express thoughts in English to peers who would understand the message much better were it expressed in Japanese and who already share the basic facts, learners are faced with a genuine

challenge: they have to share information with people who are not familiar with it and who are actually curious to know it. Moreover, the only shared language is English.

I think this project is a chance inspire us by the application of a stimulus. It is very interesting for me. I want to tell my idea accurately and communicate foreign students. 2014-15

...there's more motivation when other people (not just teacher) read your stuff. 2015-16

Compare with one-sided class, students have to think and act personally. It has no time to sleep. Telecollaboration class needs not only listening what teacher say but speaking their own opinion for other students. It also can improve ability of communication. Moreover, it enabled to connect overseas, so it will be a chance for interacting with foreign people. 2016-17

Using English as a Lingua Franca for a genuine dialogue with speakers from another country makes students realize its usefulness and gives impetus to their efforts to acquire it.

It is true that OUC students and UTB students are living different places and speaking different languages but we can talk each other through ONLY English! The impression made my attitude toward English studying extremely motivated. Therefore I would like to take another opportunity to discuss with UTB students. 2014-15

One thing is to know that we can communicate with people from other

country. We have our own mother tongue and it may not be English, but we can communicate with foreign people by using English. 2014-15

As the study style, it is very interested because the system reflects contemporary social condition effectively. In addition, if they talk with other country students they have to use English, because it is a common language all over the world, so it can be connected to a strong desire to learn language study by hoping to speak English more fluently. 2016-17

The experience of actually meeting the overseas partners and having a conversation with them helps overcome some old fears regarding English.

I learned that there's no need to be nervous before I do that (I mean I was terribly worried about talking with Rumenian students but after all it was really fun) 2015-16

The online exchanges seem to motivate students not only to pursue the study on English in class, but also to consider study abroad.

I think the goal of this project is to communicate with and know university students in foreign countries and to become to be interested in foreign countries. Having done this project I started to think that I want to study abroad. 2014-15

4.2. Intercultural communication

Not surprisingly, students are aware that the online exchanges provide the opportunity to experience different cultures rather than have the information presented to them as an academic exercise.

I think this class was more effective at the point of knowing different cultures and communicating with foreign people. 2015-16

The purpose of telecollaboration is to study each other and understand the each culture. 2015-16

Japan consists of islands separated from continent. So, there is less opportunity to learn the real situations of western countries. Getting closer to other culture by using technology is one of the best way to get information about them for Japanese. Not by reading some materials or watching news programs, but by facing each other and exchanging information, learning will be more interesting and familiar to us, especially cultural learning. 2016-17

Japanese has a proverb; seeing is believing. This means that it is hard to believe something you have not seen. People who live in different place has a different culture and mindset, so it is useful and knowledgeable to communicate with other people actually who have different culture better than to read some materials. 2016-17

Having met the overseas partners can have a positive effect on attitudes:

I think it is a good opportunity for us to get used to communicating with foreign students for the time when we go abroad to study. I hope to do such project with other university. I think that the more we do such project, the less prejudice against foreign country we have. 2014-16

The exchanges contribute not only to a better understanding of the

other but also of one's own cultural characteristics.

We took time and hesitated to answer questions from the Brasov side in both (1) and (2), partly because we had to figure out what was our opinion on matters "as a group." One cannot just say whatever he/she thinks as a response or opinion of the group, and this is just as Yamakuse points out in the chapter of "harmony," saying that the Japanese value "is placed on understanding those with whom one must interact and on taking action in groups." 2016-17

4.3. Self-awareness

Although intercultural understanding is the most frequently mentioned goal and benefit of telecollaboration, this project was launched primarily with the goal of enhancing self-awareness in mind. There is a deeply insular attitude to be found among Japanese college students. Many of them show little interest in world news, listen only to Japanese music, watch only Japanese movies and read only Japanese literature (or manga). Their knowledge of world geography and history is startlingly scanty. This insular attitude gives them a sense of security, but also a lack of aspirations. Helping students place themselves, their university, their country and their culture in the grand scheme of things is one of the most important services the school can offer them. The telecollaboration, more than a window to the outside world, must be a mirror. Student testimony suggests that the project was successful in this respect.

I think that the goal of this project is to know about not only a foreign university but also me and my university. To be honest, I am not able to speak English well but I knew that I can join big things such the project.

And I could know deeply about OUC. I am glad to have good experience.
2014-15

It is a pity that 73 percents of OUC students don't have future vision. This rate is extremely too high compared to other rates of items. 2014-15

Finally, in this class, we write a report about OUC students. To compare OUC students and UTB student makes clear the characteristics of OUC students. We can get information about UTB on the internet. However, we cannot get real voice of students. Through this program, we understand college life each other in real. 2014-15

I noticed that we take small number of classes, but almost everyone feel like skipping class compared with TUB. And we work too much to study hard.
2015-16

In addition, I think learner's attitude is quite important in telecollaboration. Japanese students tend to be passive when they learn. This is because one-way lecture style has been a main way to "teach" in Japan and they are not used to "learning". The attitude to learn actively in Japan is not so improved as other western countries. So, education with telecollaboration may be a kind of one-way style as long as learners in Japan are not so active compared to western countries' learners. 2016-17

4.4. Problems

In spite of the students' positive attitude towards telecollaboration, complaints about the technical problems occurred year after year and the measures taken to alleviate them did not always have the desired results.

It came as no surprise that students complained about the bad connection during the 2014 pilot exchange when, after numerous glitches of the computer provided by the university, the twenty odd OUC students present were reduced to circulating the teacher's iPad in the hope of getting a glimpse of the Romanian partners and saying a word or two. This technical disaster led to substantial changes in 2015 when five workstations were set up and carefully monitored by the Blended-Learning Project (BLP) staff. Moreover, this time the number of OUC students was very small, five students only as compared to the large number of TUB students. Consequently, each OUC student was partnered with a group rather than one person and communication proceeded in parallel sessions. The result was not even remotely the expected one.

Technical issues during the telecollaboration. Sometimes there were connection problems, and even when the connection was fine the low audio volume combined with all the noise in the class (as all groups were speaking at the same time) meant that I could only hear about half of what the Romanian students said. During the first presentation it was actually less than half, maybe 40%. The time we discussed Sayers was better, I could probably hear about 75% of what they said. It's still not ideal when you have to put more effort into trying to hear their voice than discussing the topic. It also adds to the stress because you want to try to understand what they are saying, but you don't really want to ask them to repeat everything every 15 seconds. 2015-16

Sometimes, we couldn't communicate with TUB students because of the problem of internet. This is the problem of the telecollaboration, I think 2015-16

It was really hard time to talk with TUB students. One OUC to 6 or 7 students of TUB. 2015-16

Taking the hint from the 2015-2016 students, in the academic year 2016-2017 we provided headphones and experimented with a new and, hopefully, better video-conferencing application. In spite of the dedicated efforts of the BLP support staff, the outcome was almost equally dismal. The repeated failure to maintain smooth communication lead to the eventual abandonment of the parallel sessions style.

At the first online meeting with students of TUB, there were many problems with network condition. We tried to make face-to-face communication through the internet and use of an application, but sometimes network transmission stopped and we can't hear or see each other. It caused some confusion over our communication, and took very long time to wait for its recovery. 2016-17

In fact, the Otaru students communicated with Brasov students in the class, they didn't talk about their interested things sufficiently because the Internet line was not clear to tell comfortably each other. Some students sometimes gave up to tell their opinions, because if they told an information to their partner hard, the partner could not understand it by not listening that. 2016-17

Although technical issues with the connection were the main cause for imperfect communication, they were not the only one. Students complained about the limited amount of time available, of the 'little time of their own because of a time difference,' and more importantly, students became

aware of how their own culturally-determined attitude can be an obstacle to a fruitful exchange.

One of barrier to practical telecollaboration is “enryo” of Japanese students. A book entitled Heart & Soul of the Japanese written by Yamakuse Yoji, explains the concept of “enryo”. It says, “Enryo means thinking ahead before a situation develops, taking fully into account the other person, and then refraining from action based on the circumstance.” and “Without asking, one should be able to judge the feelings of the other person”. Furthermore, it says “the Japanese lose the chance to speak out on issues on the international stage due to their tendency towards enryo”. Such kind of situation can be occurred while trying telecollaboration between Japanese students and the students in other western countries. If Japanese students shows the attitude of “enryo” and ask nothing, and just waiting for questions from foreign students, the foreign students can’t get information from the Japanese students. Also, Japanese students can’t get information from foreign students. This may not beneficial for each and not very interactive. So, before carrying out lecture or class with telecollaboration, we have to make students be more active enough to ask what they want to know. 2016-17

5. Conclusions

Is telecollaboration worthwhile? The overwhelmingly positive feedback from the participants suggests that it is. The burden on the teacher, however, is considerable, far heavier than for a regular class. From the quest for a matching partner, through coordinating the content and schedule of the class, preparing the students for the online exchange, getting the equipment ready to the day of the actual exchange, the

educator interested in telecollaboration is very busy. There are numerous challenges to be overcome. The OUC-TUB project was no exception in this respect.

The main challenge to a synchronous telecollaborative exchange is, obviously, technology. As mentioned in the previous section, during the question and answer exchange of the 2014 pilot project, the computer provided by the university 'froze' in mid-skype session and communication had to be continued by passing around the instructor's iPad. This might have actually contributed to the atmosphere of excitement surrounding the online meeting.

Conditions seemed to have improved beyond belief in the academic year 2015-2016 during the first year of the project. Instead of one computer running a free version of skype, there were five computers each running a commercial software chosen by the technical support staff in order to avoid the glitches common on skype. The results were below expectation, as can be seen from the students' comments, and the mishaps encountered on skype occurred in this environment too. These technical issues recurred to a lesser degree during the following year, 2016-2017, although a less costly and more efficient software was provided. The glitches were so frequent that the parallel sessions approach was abandoned and communication was limited to a single source. This provided a valuable lesson regarding the importance of the balance between pedagogical ambitions and technical availabilities.

The parallel sessions experiment revealed another, more important, issue: the difficulties surrounding the planning and the timing of the exchange in the context of the participants' linguistic and cultural competence on the one hand, and engagement in the learning event on the other hand. Although the introductory session, where students got to meet

their partners, went fairly smoothly, with no embarrassing silences, the following sessions, counter to expectation, did not lead to stimulating discussion although the topics, 'Our university' and 'Our city', were familiar enough and offered a potential platform for exchange of both information and opinions. This was true both for the 2015-2016 project and for the 2016-2017 one. This could be linked to linguistic difficulties on both sides, but was due mainly to differences in communicative styles: Japanese students are less willing to 'open up' and chat casually with unfamiliar people, they tend to be overwhelmed by a 'chatty' interlocutor and withdraw, they are less willing to risk their personal opinions and worry unduly about making mistakes.

Another important challenge throughout the project has been scheduling. The considerable difference in time zone, six hours during summer and seven during winter, was compounded by the differences in structure of the academic year. The academic year starts in April in Japan and October in Romania. Moreover, the number and distribution of teaching days is different making it impossible to schedule a long-term collaboration during the spring semester. As things are, synchronous sessions have to be scheduled on, what in Japan is the end of day period and in Romania an early-morning class. This in itself has a less than desirable effect on the participants' condition.

The 'material' time troubles, however, are minor compared to the curricular issues. The activities described here are based on the curriculum for an English academic writing class at OUC, English Composition 1, a curriculum differing in important respects from that of the TUB partner class, Text Writing. In spite of an attempt to coordinate the curricula in order to achieve some degree of balance, the collaboration was fairly OUC-centered. This placed rather unfair burden on the TUB partner for both

teachers and students. The TUB teachers did not have the benefit of technical support staff and were consequently required to deal with the technical problems themselves. More importantly, the telecollaboration forced them to add extra activities to an already busy schedule since they had their own curriculum to cover. For the TUB students, the telecollaboration meant a different approach to assignments. Making sure that the assignments were handed in on time to meet the OUC-set schedule required additional effort on the part of the TUB class instructor. This led to the conclusion that a semester-long partnership between two classes was too ambitious and, for the next year of the project, it was decided to break the OUC curriculum into units, having two TUB classes, with two different instructors, take part, each joining the project for a limited period of time, the length of one unit.

Although the technical problems caused the most immediate and obvious discomfort— they were the only aspect of the telecollaboration constantly singled out by students for criticism, they are the easiest to deal with. It can be even hoped that they will resolve themselves as new technologies become available. The real challenges are those built into the goals of the project: differences in communicative style and the curriculum mismatches. If these issues remain unaddressed, the project is bound to fail.

Clearly, dealing with the difficulties associated with cultural differences is an essential part of the pedagogical task. It is up to the teacher to put on and take off the training wheels: teaching materials and learning tasks can be designed to boost confidence, the online meetings can be choreographed in a way that minimizes stress. It is important to provide some time, after the synchronous sessions, for students to reflect on the cultural differences they experienced. On the whole, culture related challenges offer an opportunity for improvement for both students and teachers.

The curriculum-related issues, on the other hand, fall partly outside the teacher's authority. Here, it becomes impossible to resolve the problems without institutional assistance. The OUC-TUB telecollaboration has been conducted on an individual basis without the backing of any institutional agreement between the two universities involved. While at OUC the project was recognized and integrated into a larger-scale project, the Blended-Learning Project, at TUB the collaboration was strictly a teacher initiative. That made it difficult for TUB teachers to justify time and resources spent on the project or to adjust the curriculum in a way that would suit the collaboration more. This has led to an asymmetry between the two institutions regarding the burden, the interest and the rewards associated with the project.

Institutional backing is essential for achieving another goal of the project, that of linking telecollaboration with student mobility. Online encounters provide a great opportunity for authentic exchanges but they risk turning into the equivalent of virtual reality if they are not punctuated from time to time by real world experiences. Ideally, the telecollaboration should be accompanied by face to face, on the ground exchanges. Several attempts to promote student mobility were made with limited success. An essay competition between the two universities was organized in the academic year 2015-2016 in which the winners were awarded a trip to the partner university. The initial plan included participation of the visiting students to classes- which would have afforded the students who could not travel to the partner university the opportunity to meet their online mates in person- but due to restrictions on the use of funding this was possible only for the OUC students. A TUB proposal to collaborate within the Erasmus Plus framework did not stir a lot of enthusiasm at OUC. The lack of an official status leads to uncertainty and makes it difficult to schedule real

world events such as the current plan to organize a joint summer school in Brasov.

In spite of all these difficulties, the project was successful in achieving its goals. Students were, as expected, more motivated to participate in EFL activities, they had the opportunity to notice cultural differences with positive effects on their general outlook and on their future goals. The online exchanges stimulated students' curiosity about the world outside Japan while reducing anxiety, it increased their sympathy for people from other countries and cultures, it made studying abroad more tempting and less frightening. At the same time, having been placed in a situation where they have to speak about their school, their city, their country and their culture, they realized how little they knew about familiar things. As well as an exploration of the outside world, the telecollaboration was an invitation to introspection and self-discovery.

The metacognitive benefits were not restricted to students. They extend to the teacher. Working together with a colleague from another country, being able to observe their interaction with their students, to learn about the goals, methods and achievements of a different academic system without having to leave behind one's office is an exciting and motivating prospect. It is a very real lesson in intercultural communication and an opportunity to reflect on one's established ways and reconsider some old conclusions.

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