Bridging Cultural Divides through Telecollaboration

Robert Godwin-Jones
Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

Abstract: Telecollaboration (student-to-student online exchanges) engages learners from different cultures in dialog and in building personal relationships which can promote intercultural competence. Originating in language learning, telecollaboration projects use several different models for exchanges, depending on context and goals. In practice today, participants may be language learners, but increasingly exchanges involve students from many different disciplines. This article discusses a telecollaborative exchange built around parallel courses in intercultural communication. Over two years, students at universities in the USA and Taiwan engaged in 3 to 5 video-based conversations per semester on topics related to culturally oriented practices and behaviors. That experience is discussed here, along with results from published studies on telecollaboration, as a way to point to benefits, challenges, and best practices in online exchanges. In itself, engaging in telecollaboration is no guarantee of increasing intercultural understanding; the process needs to be carried out in ways that invite critical reflection from the learners.

Keywords: Telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange, virtual exchange, intercultural competence, language pragmatics, action research

1. Introduction

One of the opportunities for bridging cultural divides is to bring individuals from different cultures into direct contact with one another. Telecollaboration uses online tools and services (email, texting, videoconferencing) to connect students from different countries, usually in a course setting (for an overview, see Godwin-Jones, 2019). In itself, this is no guarantee of increasing intercultural understanding, as Allport (1954) demonstrated long ago. Getting to know the "other" on an individual basis does hold the potential to dispel stereotypes and build personal relationships. However, if not carried out with care and preparation, the experience can actually have the opposite result, reinforcing stereotypes and hardening already held views (Guth, Helm & O'Dowd, 2012). Using telecollaboration to engage students in personal exchanges online can be instrumental in promoting intercultural competence, but the process needs to be carried out in ways that invite critical reflection from the learners (Helm, Guth & Farrah, 2012). That ideally involves a process of "distancing", students rethinking received views and gaining new perspectives on their own cultures (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). In this article, we will look at the different models and goals of telecollaboration and at a specific exchange in which the author participated (as instructor). That exchange will be used to discuss benefits, challenges, and best practices of using telecollaboration for developing intercultural communication competence (ICC).

2. The Nature of Telecollaboration

2.1. Basics and Set-up

Telecollaboration, also known as online intercultural exchange (OIE) or virtual exchange (VE), is a particular form of networked language learning which emerged in the 1990s, along with advances in text-based, and gradually, video-based communication (Chun, 2011). In practice today, participants may be language learners, but increasingly exchanges can involve students in many different fields of study. Recent collections of telecollaboration case studies show the range of disciplines involved, from engineering to tourism, as well as the great variety of contexts, from school children to immigrant communities (Dooley & O'Dowd, 2018; Wagner, Perugini & Byram, 2017). In language learning, exchanges are most often conducted with classes of students who are studying each other's languages. In fields other than language learning, exchanges are normally conducted in a lingua franca, most commonly English.

For language learning, there are two models commonly used, e-tandem learning (O'Dowd, 2016a) and the *Cultura* model (Furstenberg et al., 2001). The former involves learners splitting the time equally (typically 1/2 to 1 hour sessions) communicating using two languages, the learner's native tongue and the L2 of the partner. While exchanges using this approach focus primarily on linguistic goals, improving fluency and pragmatic competence, those using the *Cultura* model emphasize general cultural learning to an equal degree. This approach involves the use of a variety of mechanisms for connecting learners, cultures, and languages, including preparatory questionnaires, online discussion forums, and reflective journals. As in the tandem model, exchanges following this framework use both the participants' native language (L1) and the target language (L2). In order to provide students with the opportunity to respond as fully as possible, the initial questionnaires and word association activities are often done in the students' L1. That also provides authentic native speaker texts for the exchange group to work with. The online discussions are conducted in both languages.

One of the issues in arranging bilateral exchanges is the difficulty in locating a suitable partner, particularly one for which courses overlap in content, time frame, and student compatibility. Time differences in terms of semester schedules and time zones can be difficult to overcome. Often an exchange can be arranged during a period when the two semesters overlap. In the case of language-oriented exchanges, there can be a significant gulf between the proficiency levels of students. European students, for example, who start learning English at an early age, generally have better abilities in English than American students do in European languages. Often, the courses targeted may have a quite different main focus but overlap in some way in content and goals. That might involve students with different, but complementary fields of study. That could mean, for example, graduate level teacher-trainees working with undergraduate students engaging in a course in that subject area. Such exchanges have become fairly common for aspiring language teachers, who improve both their pedagogical and linguistic skills by working virtually with language learners as tutors or cultural informants (Guichon & Hauck, 2011; Helm, 2015).

2.2. Exchange Dynamics and Pragmatics

Telecollaboration arose in language education at a time when theories in second language acquisition (SLA) took a "social turn", stressing the importance of using language in real communicative situations, negotiating meaning and form with a meaningful partner (Block, 2003). This complements cognitive SLA approaches which emphasize interactionist practice, based on comprehensible input and output (Chun, 2016). The partners provide both general conversational practice and peer feedback. In the process, participants can develop strategic competence – how to ask for help or work around lexical or structural roadblocks– as well as pragmatic competence – for example, how to formulate requests or to apologize (Sykes, 2018). That learning may come from the experience of having difficulties in communicating with a partner:

> Communication breakdowns online can make visible the pragmatic assumptions that are generally taken for granted (speech acts, conversational maxims, facework). Learners are often unaware of these assumptions, particularly when conversing in a second language, and it is therefore essential for teachers to help students go beyond comprehending the surface meaning of words and sentences in order to understand what their intercultural partners are writing. (Chun, 2015, p. 19.)

> Communication failures in telecollaborative projects can be useful teachable moments. Increasing students' awareness of the dynamics of real language use can be helpful in leading them to see the need to improve their own communication skills. Learning about the variables involved in meaning making is a critical step in developing language learner autonomy (Godwin-Jones, 2013, 2019a).

Developing pragmatic competence in another language has been seen as one of the most important outcomes of telecollaboration: "If there were no other justification for engaging in OIE, the opportunities it affords for developing intercultural pragmatic competence would suffice" (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016, p. 51). Culturally informed communication norms become evident in the exchanges, for example, how to engage in turn-taking or to change topics. There may be other cultural factors in play, such as how direct/indirect to be in voicing opinions or what conversation topics are better not addressed in a given culture and context. In this way, telecollaboration can contribute to students' cultural understanding and to metalinguistic awareness, namely that to communicate effectively, grammar and vocabulary are not enough, but that language needs to be culturally and contextually appropriate (Chun, 2011). If learners make lexical or syntactic errors, that is less important than pragmatic failure: "If the L2 learner/user inadvertently violates some sociolinguistic or sociopragmatic rule in the L2, interlocutors might have more difficulty in hiding their irritation" (Dewaele, 2008, p. 261). That visible irritation may be embarrassing or disconcerting to the learner, but the emotional impact might make the experience memorable, and therefore linguistically and culturally profitable (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006).

2.3. Dealing with Conflict

Learning firsthand about communicative norms and typical pragmatic behaviors provides insights into the expectations of native speakers. That is important in enabling participants to interpret possible adverse reactions or breaks in the conversation, which may result from pragmatic transfer, i.e., expecting conventions to be the same in the L1 and L2, or pragmatic failure, that is, ignorance of conventions (Thomas, 1983). On the other hand, participants may know about expected speech patterns or formulaic expressions, but for personal reasons decline to use them. There may be, for example, politeness formulas or honorifics used to express social hierarchies or the dominance of particular groups, which a speaker for political or philosophical reasons might refrain from adopting. It is also the case that, depending on the culture, there may be a low expectation for foreigners to use correct pragmatic behaviors or language. In fact, this might be seen in the culture as an attempt to be treated as "native", possibly inappropriate for an outsider (Liddicoat, 2017).

Assuming partners get along (not universally the case), there is the possibility for participants to develop meaningful and lasting relationships. Personal, affective interactions can lead students to become more engaged with the language and with the culture. The emotional involvement in language use has been shown to aid in retention (Norton & Toohey, 2011). On the other hand, negative emotions can be generated in the course of exchanges, leading to adverse views of the other culture and its representatives. There have been studies which have shown exchanges resulting in hardening of negative views or even in development of new stereotypes (Flowers, Kelsen & Cvitkovic, 2019; Guth, Helm & O'Dowd, 2012; Kirschner, 2015). There are in fact, a variety of areas within telecollaboration which could result in conflict, or even open confrontation. That is less likely to involve language issues and more likely to be the result of differing views on substantive issues. There may be strongly held and opposing views on a whole host of issues. That could result in conflict if controversial issues such as nationalism or religion are involved. As a consequence, many exchanges keep to "safe" topics such as family, school, or hobbies (Helm, 2015).

2.4. Engaging Deeper

Limiting conversations to surface-level aspects of culture may result in relatively shallow cultural insights and a superficial appreciation of the target culture. In fact, students sometimes find that, as age peers, they have much in common with their exchangees, particularly as related to leisure time activities or taste in music. Moving away from youth culture and delving into larger social topics such as politics or the environment may stir up controversy. That may, however, not necessarily be a negative development (Kramsch, 2014):

> Many of the telecollaborative tasks described in the literature often reveal a superficial approach to culture based on traditional communicative classroom themes such as musical tastes, travel, sports and so on...Tasks such as these, perhaps useful as initial icebreakers or for generating language practice, are likely to have little effect on students' understanding of the partner culture or to lead to a critical reflection on the

> students' own culture. This often can be accompanied by a tendency in exchanges for students to use the outcomes of their online interactions to sidestep differences and to focus instead on what cultures may have in common at a superficial level (O'Dowd, 2016b, p. 277).

Having participants perceive fundamental differences of opinion or of cultural orientations can take the conversation deeper, revealing a "rich point" (Agar, 1994; O'Dowd, 2011), illuminating key cultural distinctions (Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Reports on telecollaboration projects, however, caution that in order to learn from disagreements, reflection and guidance may be needed (Helm, Guth & Farrah, 2012; Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016). If left unmonitored and unexamined, there is a possibility that animosity could arise between partners.

2.5. Providing Guidance

Reflection and guidance can be done in a variety of ways, depending on the context of the exchange. In a principally classroom-taught course, students and instructor could engage in discussion, analyzing the encounter and its dynamics. Personal journals might be used as well, with students commenting on their experiences and receiving feedback from instructors (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Another approach is to introduce monitors or mediators. That can be particularly useful in synchronous video formats. Monitoring can be done by the instructor, a designated assistant, or a specially trained mediator. The latter is the case in the *Soliya* project, which connects students from Western countries with those from the Middle East (Helm, Guth & Farrah, 2012; Helm, 2016). It is an attempt to bring mutual understanding on controversial issues such as the stereotyping of Muslims and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because these are potentially explosive conversation topics, *Soliya* uses trained mediators to run the video conferences. The mediators structure the conversations and, as needed, invite participants to clarify statements or to respond to what others have said. One of the helpful practices used by *Soliya* is that mediators often summarize comments or repeat questions in text chat. That aids in comprehension for non-native English speakers, as well as helping in situations when video streams are inconsistent.

Soliya is an example of a multilateral exchange. This departs from the traditional models of e-tandem or *Cultura*, which are bilateral. *Soliya* is also not primarily designed for language learning, even though that is a possible byproduct for non-native English speakers. Its principal aim is to work to enhance knowledge and understanding of the Middle East among Westerners, in an effort to work towards tolerance and peace. Similar projects have been introduced in recent years, such as the EU project on "Human rights in Italy and Guatemala" (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). A number of multilateral exchanges have been instituted through the Erasmus + Virtual Exchange Program, a "pre-mobility" program which is designed to develop cross-cultural understanding as preparation for students engaging in study abroad (Batardière, Giralt, Jeanneau, Le-Baron-Earle & O'Regan, 2019). A recent program from that EU flagship project is "Newcomers and Nationalism: Exploring the Challenges of Belonging in Europe," which "invites refugee and non-refugee students from all over Europe and the Southern Mediterranean" (Newcomers and Nationalism, 2019). Content-based exchanges and

multilateral projects inevitably are conducted in English, although some activities may take place in other languages as well. In contexts involving both native and non-native speakers of English, this can lead to an imbalance in language proficiency, which may result in relatively higher control over the conversation for English expert speakers (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018). That can be mitigated in part by mediation, as in the *Soliya* project. The predominance of English also raises issues regarding the hegemony of English as a world language and the relative neglect of other languages in online exchanges (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Lewis, 2017).

3. The VCU-Wenzao Exchange

I will be discussing a particular exchange in which I have been involved as an illustrative example of telecollaboration, between Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, USA and Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. In the process, I hope to provide information based on experience in terms of setting up an exchange, creating tasks, and looking at best practices and challenges.

3.1. Background and Set-up

A course I regularly teach, "Communicating across cultures" is required for all students at VCU whose major field of study is either a foreign language or international studies. The rationale for having students in this course engaging in telecollaboration is to supply them with a hands-on experience of "communicating across cultures." A few years ago, I initiated an exchange with an Indian university, but the project was limited due to technical issues. In the meantime, two developments have occurred that make it much easier to arrange and conduct such exchanges. One is the change in technology, as audio and video conferencing "has rapidly evolved from expensive group to group equipment to desktop and, more recently, mobile applications" (Helm, 2015, p. 200). At the same time, laptops, tablets and smart phones have become less expensive and therefore more widespread, allowing students to connect to the Internet at home. This provides considerably more flexibility for students to arrange one-on-one online conversations with partners, allowing time zone differences to be less of an impediment. It is also the case now that there are a variety of videoconferencing and messaging apps available for free. Students increasingly are using mobile devices for video exchanges. A second enabler of telecollaboration projects is the availability of services which supply help with finding a partner and running an exchange. Organizations such as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) or UNI Collaboration provide extensive guidance for practitioners. UNICollaboration, for example, features an exchange partner locator, a walk-through guide, a personal reflective diary, and multiple sample projects. The International Virtual Exchange Project (https://iveproject.org/) allows teachers of English to find partners and is geared towards lower-level English learners and provides resources for both language learning and intercultural understanding.

For the past two years, my undergraduate students have engaged each semester with undergraduate students from Wenzao University. While my students are enrolled in a course specifically targeted towards development of ICC, the Taiwanese students are enhancing their English through the discussion of intercultural competence. In that way, the Wenzao students

are engaged in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an approach to combining language education with content delivery which has become increasingly popular in recent years, especially in Europe (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). While the American students are focusing on a content area, they are also having a linguistic experience in negotiating language and content with non-native speakers of English. The exchanges have involved several different courses and instructors in Taiwan. The most recent arrangement (Fall, 2019) involves 32 students of mine and 39 Wenzao students, who are seniors taking an advanced English course, centered around intercultural communication. The mismatch in student enrollment numbers is frequently an issue that arises in telecollaboration. As in other areas, this situation can be solved with flexibility and creativity, both from instructors and students. In this case, some VCU students were paired with two Taiwanese students. In the past, enrollment discrepancies have been even higher, necessitating on the Taiwanese side recruiting students from several different courses. As there is a 12 to 13 hour time difference between the eastern US and Taiwan, arranging for synchronous meeting times necessitated willingness on both sides to engage in conversation at times that were likely not optimal for one or the other partner. Participation was required for students in both courses. Studies have shown that exchanges work best if both sides of the exchanges have the same expectations and requirements (Chun, 2011; Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018). Having participation in exchanges be recommended but not required can lead to a lack of motivation, inconsistent participation, and frustration from students on the other side.

3.2. Tasks and Tools

Students were paired up randomly by the instructors. Some exchanges have students on both sides write profiles of themselves or create short biographical presentations (Flowers, Kelsen & Cvitkovic, 2019). That creates the potential for students to choose a partner based on mutual interests. An innovative approach was used by Liaw and English (2017) in an exchange involving French and Taiwanese students. Students on both sides were asked to create "About-me-bags" (2017) as an initial task, multimodal presentations of three objects from their past, present, and future. In our case, the limited time during which semester calendars overlap did not allow time for such a project. Students on both sides were given the email addresses of their partners and were asked to make contact to find a time for an initial video chat of half an hour outside of class. Students were free to find a mutually agreeable time as well as to choose which tool or service to use. Skype was widely used, but other tools were as well, including Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Depending on the semester and the course, 4 to 5 exchanges are held. The content is based on a shared e-textbook, written by the author, *Language and Culture in Context* (http://langculture.com; see Appendix). While the text provides common starting points for discussion, for each session, specific guidelines and resources are provided, as in the example below:

Table 1. Sample Task Assignment (2017-2018)

Session 1: Language and Culture Online discussions: Prior to meeting online, you should view the following videos: The world's English mania (TED talk by Jay Walker) Learn to read Chinese ... with ease (TED talk by ShaoLan Hsueh) The content in the videos should supply some context for your Skype conversations. Here are suggested additional topics to explore, related to language and culture: • Personal experiences with language learning • Views of English and Chinese as world languages, referencing TED talks • Use made of technology in language learning, especially through mobile devices • In their views, how important is language ability in intercultural communication

As in most telecollaboration projects, the initial task for students is to get acquainted with one another, which is followed by discussion of views on specific topics. In this case, the assigned task was to discuss perspectives on language use and language learning. In addition to reading the relevant chapter in the textbook, students are assigned two TED talks to watch. Both deal with the topic of world languages. A good number of TED talks are used as initial content in the exchanges, as they often provide entertaining and informative explorations or illustrations of the concepts discussed. Moreover, they represent stable, reliable resources, likely to continue to be accessible (in contrast to many hyperlinks). They feature transcripts and subtitles provided in multiple languages, as well as low band-width versions. These are important considerations for a set of resources to be used by non-native speakers of English. TED talks have been criticized for being slickly produced "edutainment", providing a platform for "experts" who may exaggerate the significance of findings, sometimes qualifying as innovative breakthroughs, what has long been known or has been debunked by others (Rasulo, 2015). They are used as resources, not because they represent the most up-to-date or accurate research in a given field, but rather because they can stimulate discussions, including discoveries about alternative views to those presented in class or in a textbook. In any course on intercultural communication, critical reception of media and ideas about culture, language, and technology (the content of many of the TED talks) is an essential component. Another rationale for incorporating TED talks is the importance of storytelling in intercultural communication (Ludewig, 2017). Many of the talks focus on personal insights or developments around an epiphany of some kind. Along with other kinds of stories (for example, language autobiographies), the narratives presented in TED talks can be used to explore the nature of narration and the dynamics of identity formation.

3.3. Student Feedback

Not all units included TED talks. Other resources, such as essays, blog posts, or journal articles were assigned as well. The choice of readings reflected the need to accommodate non-native English speakers in terms of length and linguistic complexity. In feedback from participants, there were no problems reported regarding either access to or comprehension of assigned

materials. There were, however, several complaints from Wenzao students that the American students did not always take the exchange process as seriously as they did and sometimes engaged in the exchange sessions without having done the preparatory work ahead of time. It may be that, as non-native English speakers, the Taiwanese students made sure to be as prepared as possible before engaging in the conversations with native English speakers, so that they knew the context of the conversation as well as being familiar with key vocabulary.

On the whole, few language issues were reported. In fact, one of the key take-aways for the US students was the high level of English proficiency of their partners. One of the interesting points of feedback from both groups of students was surprise over the diversity of backgrounds in the other class. That was true for the American assumption that the Taiwanese students would all be from Taiwan. There were a handful of foreign students taking the course in Taiwan including students from France, Germany, Korea, and China. The US classes were even more diverse, with typically approximately one third of the class from minority or immigrant families. That provided an interesting topic for conversation, particularly on the issue of Ebonics or Black American English, which is a controversial issue in the US (Baugh, 2000), about which the Taiwanese students were largely unaware. One of the interesting areas of comment from the students was on communication styles. The Taiwanese students had expected the US students to be very direct in the expressions of opinions, given general perceptions of directness/indirectness in Western versus Asian cultures (Hofstede, 1980). Instead, there were a number of comments expressing surprise that the US students were on the whole indirect and perceived as not significantly different in that aspect of communication style.

Data from the two years of exchanges is now being analyzed, with the bulk of the work being done at Wenzao. The Taiwanese students were asked to record their sessions with the US students. Those conversations are being transcribed and analyzed by colleagues at Wenzao. Because of university privacy policies, no recordings were made by the US students. Wenzao students were required to write short reflections on the content and learning of their exchanges, while VCU participants wrote an entry in their reflective journals on each exchange session. That written material is being assessed along with notes from class discussions, questionnaires, and interviews. On both sides there were online questionnaires regarding difficulties, expectations and overall satisfaction (see Appendix for texts of the surveys). At VCU the survey was done in 2019 using Google Forms with 8 students responding. A similar survey was conducted in Wenzao each year of the exchange from 2017 to 2019, with respectively 21, 14, and 6 students represented. The satisfaction rate in each year of the exchanges as registered by Wenzao students was 77%, 79% and 83%; for VCU students in 2019 it was 76%.

Sample comments in the questionnaires from US students included the following:

> "I loved talking to my partner and we connected instantly and always looked forward to talking to each other. I'm grateful for this opportunity"
> "I really liked it! I think doing one exchange a month would be perfect!"
> "I loved it. More. More. More."

In class discussions, students were also very positive about the exchanges. They often expressed the idea that the conversations with their partners provided practical illustrations of many of

the concepts discussed in class. One such comment is as follows: "It was nice to talk about the things we used in class in a much more practical way. It's better than learning from a book." The fact of favorable perceptions by students is representative of the majority of reported telecollaborative projects (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018).

3.4. Project Benefits

The online exchanges specifically benefited my students in the US in a number of ways.

3.4.1. Engaging in Real Communication Across Cultures

The exchanges provided a practical experience that complemented the theoretical perspective provided in the class. This involved for my students the opportunity to communicate with peers whose first language is not English. That process supplied a practical example of issues which arise in speaking with non-native speakers, including the choice of register, avoidance of slang, and caution in using cultural or local references. Involved as well was negotiating with partners issues such as form/modes of address, turn taking, and conversational flow (choosing/switching topics, the role of pauses/silences, conventions/formulas for starting/ending conversations, etc.) These are important lessons for effective intercultural communication, whether that be online or in person.

3.4.2. Establishing Personal Relationships with Foreign Others

By meeting repeatedly with the same partner, the students got to know their partners and, in many cases, developed a warm rapport. This made it increasingly more comfortable on both sides to engage in conversation. That seemed to have been particularly the case with some Taiwanese students, who, according to the VCU student reports, exhibited initial shyness or hesitancy over their level of English proficiency. Part of that process included as well finding the most appropriate online tool for communication – whether Skype, Google Hangouts, WhatsApp, Facebook – and having each partner develop a comfort level with the technology used. In that way the project contributed to the development of digital literacy, an important life/work skill in the 21st century (Godwin-Jones, 2015). In some cases, the media used (especially Facebook) enabled and encouraged personal contact to continue beyond the class context. Indeed, several students reported that they consider their exchange partners to have become new personal friends.

3.4.3. Gaining Insight into Aspects of Life in Taiwan

My students were mostly surprised how similar their lives were to those of the Wenzao students. This reflects their shared status as university students of similar age. In fact, in areas such as popular entertainment and leisure time activities, the VCU students had more in common with the Wenzao students than they did with their professor. However, they were intrigued by some of the differences. One such area was the perception that students at Wenzao seemed to be

working harder at their studies and to be taking more courses than their American counterparts. In several cases they also commented on Taiwanese school experiences that are quite different from those in the US, such as the attendance at cram schools.

3.5. Future Plans

Based on the experience of the past two years, the partners plan several changes moving forward. Mostly students reflected on their exchange experiences through their online reflective journals. We spent minimal in-class time on discussions. I plan to have more class discussions to enable and encourage VCU students to exchange their telecollaborative experiences with others in the class. That should allow students as well to integrate better their experiences with specific aspects of content covered in the course. I intend as well to ask for specific reflections on aspects of their experience such as language adjustments made, topics suggested but not taken up by partners, and areas in which they would have liked to learn more. We would like to have students continue to explore issues of communication, but expand the conversations to include also societal issues that touch on communication, such as integration/discrimination of foreigners/minorities, questions of free speech (including in social media), and effective strategies for fair and balanced media consumption (i.e., dealing with fake news and avoiding media echo chambers).

There are in addition concrete measures planned to enhance the exchanges in several ways. The first is to increase the number of sessions completed. That is more feasible in the fall then in the spring, as Wenzao has a later start date in the spring then does VCU. Another change is to include several levels of content depth and seriousness in each of the exchanges. In the selection of tasks and topics, an effort was made to include surface level topics as well as culturally deeper themes. Also included are fun cross-cultural topics that could serve as conversation starters. The topics for Fall, 2019 are listed in the Appendix. As an example, for the first session, students will focus on the following:

Table 2. Sample Session Topics

Session 1 – Warm-up and icebreaker
Surface level topics: Getting acquainted (preferred names, status as student, family, etc.). Choose topics for future *Intercultural Exchanges* from this list or find other topic(s) of mutual interest: Chinese Fēng-shuǐ (風水), Chinese Gōng-fu (功夫), Cultural Taboos (文化禁忌), Hospitality (請客文化), Medicine (中西醫), Concept of Beauty (瘦身美容)
Going deeper: Given your background (national/ethnic identity), interests, and future aspirations, does intercultural understanding and competence have a particular importance to you? Is it important for your country of origin or for society as a whole?

In addition to striving to guide students to greater depth in their conversations, it was also decided that students would complete together a joint project, with the option of creating

a report on a third country, to include both general information (languages, communication norms, minorities, etc.) and more personal perspectives (Would I want to visit/work/live there? What cultural issues might arise for someone with my cultural background?). Alternatively, students could address a content area such as Chinese *fēng-shuǐ,* cultural taboos, hospitality, or concepts of beauty. Such a project is intended to deepen the collaboration by having partners work together in creating a mutually produced, shareable product or artifact. This kind of final task is frequently seen as a vital ingredient in making exchanges more meaningful, in that collaboration necessary for completing a project necessitates that partners negotiate both content and language. (O'Dowd, 2016a). In the process, working together towards a common goal can build more meaningful relationships.

4. Best Practices in Telecollaboration

4.1. Good Initial Organization

Based on reported studies and on my own experience, one of the most important practices for success in online exchanges is good planning, communicating clearly in advance with one's partner on agreed-on goals, outcomes, content, tasks, partnering, schedule, and assessment. If there are mismatches in any of these areas, there may be unhappiness and frustration that will likely affect both instructors and students. One of the ways to head off problems is not to be overly ambitious when starting out. That goes for both the overall goals and the specific tasks assigned. One should not expect instant bonding of partners but should ease students into the exchange with getting-acquainted activities. Having lighter topics for conversations initially also helps with the process of getting used to the online tools or services, which may be new to some participants. It is good to advise students on available and recommended tools, especially if there may be issues in access, for example, for China (no Facebook or Google services) or for countries where the Internet is less readily available. One should take care in using campus services, such as a learning management system (Blackboard, Moodle), which may be unfamiliar or unavailable to guest users. It's helpful to have students discuss which tools/services they have found to be best for the exchanges, so that recommendations can remain current. Often students are more knowledgeable and experienced in using online communication tools than are instructors.

4.2. Monitor Implementation

There may be some glitches early on in the partnering process, such as assigned partners not responding to emails or inconsistent communication. In fact, one should expect to encounter such issues (Sadler, 2018). It is imperative to resolve these problems early on, so that pairs don't fall behind. That can mean communicating oneself with non-responsive students or re-assigning students to other partners. It is important to set up concrete due dates for task completion and to remind students regularly about upcoming deadlines. Instructors or designees should themselves monitor to make sure course resources remain available (for example, Web page listing assignments). Students should be encouraged to report issues that may arise (process,

technology, language). If the telecollaboration is taking place in a face-to-face or hybrid class, one can discuss in class any potential issues.

4.3. Clear Assessment Process

Students should be clear about expectations regarding assignments, including length, language, and content. With their permission, one could post sample student work from past semesters. The feedback to students should be frequent, consistent, and substantive. If students are writing reflective journals, those should be read and assessed in a timely manner. A grading rubric can be helpful both for instructor and students (see example in Appendix). Most online exchanges use qualitative assessment measures, based on the quantity/quality of content in assignments and evidence of growth in terms of intercultural competence. Student journals/blog entries, transcripts, or portfolios provide a written record that can be examined and assessed according to the model and rubrics used (Helm, 2015). Belz (2007) recommends looking at artifacts and transcripts for the presence of "signposts of intercultural competence". She uses appraisal theory (Martin, 2000) to look at linguistic signs of attitudes (expressed views on partner comments) and graduation (intensity with which opinions are voiced). That involves looking at patterns of change over time, especially perspective shifts that may signal a decrease in the use of negative judgments. Standard evaluation criteria for ICC can also be used, such as the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000) or Deardoff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006). Frequently used in telecollaboration projects is Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997). Byram's model has been criticized for adherence to the concept of homogeneous national cultures and for seeing ICC as a set of measurable skills (Belz, 2007; Kramsch & Zhang, 2018). Some telecollaboration projects take Byram's model as a starting point, making adjustments as needed, according to the nature of the project and its goals (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Lenkaitis, Calo & Venegas Escobar, 2019).

4.4. Do Follow-up Work

Whether the collaboration was successful or not, it is recommended to conduct a project evaluation as soon as possible after a project has been completed (EVALUATE Group, 2019; Lewis, 2017). One can conduct surveys/questionnaires of students, including soliciting suggestions for improvement. It is good to stay in contact with partner colleagues and discuss the results and future plans. From a teaching practice and research perspective, telecollaboration projects can vary. They might be one-off projects, examples of ongoing action research, or they might develop into formal research projects. Using such projects for research encourages iterative improvement. In that sense, design-based approaches can be helpful (Mishran & Koehler, 2006; Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016). Telecollaboration is often seen within the paradigm of action research, projects which explore practical solutions to challenging instructional issues (Müller-Hartmann, 2012; Nunan & Bailey, 2009). For such student-oriented projects as telecollaboration, "participatory action research" is an ideal approach. That entails active involvement of students in providing feedback on tasks, experiences, and learning (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002). Recent collections of telecollaborative case studies by teacher-researchers are

helpful in that regard (Dooley & O'Dowd, 2018; Wagner, Perugini & Byram, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Telecollaborative exchanges engage students in real one-to-one conversations with cultural "others", individuals who are different from them in background, heritage, and language. In the process, learners develop personal relationships that are meaningful, leading to curiosity about the other person, and, in many cases, through that connection about the culture and way of life that individual represents. That can be an enlightening process, adding a valuable experiential component to formal learning.

The approach can be used in both face-to-face and online courses. In my case, because of the significant course components done outside of meeting times, the course is taught in a hybrid or blended format (Vaughan, 2007). We meet together in the classroom once a week (for 75 minutes). That class time is used for discussion, group work, and student presentations. Every week students complete assignments online including watching a narrated presentation on the unit content (using a "flipped classroom" approach; Tucker, 2012), participating in discussion forums, and writing entries in a reflective journal. In this way, class meetings can be dedicated to active student learning. This provides the opportunity to clarify issues coming up in partner exchanges or to explore further topics of interest. Extensive use of online writing through discussion boards and journals supplements and complements in-class discussions, while providing an opportunity for more thoughtful responses and allowing all students a voice in discussions. In the process, social learning is enhanced (Bandura &Walters, 1977). The online discussions enable and encourage peer-to-peer interactions, individual instructor-student dialogs, and interactions with online partners.

The format creates an inviting collaborative space, ideal for instituting a dialogic approach to learning through telecollaboration (Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010; Renshaw, 2004)**.** Using telecollaboration within a blended learning format facilitates development of digital literacy (for both teacher and student) as normally a variety of technology tools and services will be used, including collaborative tools, as well as blogs and other social platforms (Sevilla Pavón, 2019). Setting up a blended course that includes telecollaboration is not something to be undertaken lightly. It requires familiarity with various digital tools/services. It also necessitates careful consideration of whether course objectives and curricular considerations align with this activity. There are adjustments necessary for students as well. In addition to technology know-how, students will need better time management and learner autonomy than is the case for most courses (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018). For exchanges to have maximum benefit, it is important to provide enough reflective context for students to move beyond the dualism that accompanies bicultural exchanges. Having two cultures in contact can promote the idea of homogenous national cultures and confirm the widely held belief that national culture equates to personal identity. Ideally, we want students to extend the gains from bicultural exchange to engagement with other cultures. That means stressing the importance of critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997), transitioning learners from observers to participants and potential instigators of change. In the process, students are positioned to take on the role of informed and responsible global citizens (O'Dowd, 2019; De Wit, 2016).

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Author Note

Robert Godwin-Jones, Ph.D., is Professor of World Languages and International Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. His research is in applied linguistics, within the areas of language learning and technology, and intercultural communication. He has published five books, multiple articles and book chapters, and writes a regular column for *Language Learning & Technology* on emerging technologies. His most recent book is *Internationalizing English Language Education in Globalized Taiwan* (co-edited with Wen-Chuan Lin and I-Jane Weng. Taipei: Tung Hua, 2018). This paper is an expanded version of a talk given at the 25th International Conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies in Brno, Czech Republic, 2019.

Appendix 1. Topics for VCU-Wenzao Exchanges, Fall, 2019

Session 1 – Warm-up and icebreaker, due September 25

Surface level topics: Getting acquainted (preferred names, status as student, family, etc.). Choose topics for future exchanges from this list or find other topic(s) of mutual interest: Chinese Fēng-shuǐ (風水), Chinese Gōng-fu (功夫), Cultural Taboos (文化禁忌), Hospitality (請客文化), Medicine (中西醫), Concept of Beauty (瘦身美容)

Going deeper:

Given your background (national/ethnic identity), interests, and future aspirations, does intercultural understanding and competence have a particular importance to you? Is it important for your country of origin or for society as a whole?

Session 2 – Chapter 1 of Textbook, due October 9, Introduction of Language, Culture and Intercultural Communication

Surface level:

- The need for intercultural communication in today's world
- Cultural Taboos/Hospitality – Differences in Taiwan and USA?
- Superstitions in Taiwan/USA: Bad or good luck omens/events/language [Is Fēng-shuǐ a superstition?]

Going deeper:

- What are leaders' role/importance in modeling and advocating intercultural competence?
- Examples of inspirational leaders in that mold? [See blog post on leadership on climate change]
- Should intercultural competence be understood to include civic action? [one sample argument]

Session 3 – Chapter 2, due October 23, Language and Cultural Identity

Surface level:

- School systems: What kinds of schools did you attend (public, private, "cram [補

習社]")? How are universities different?

- Group membership: How important is family in your identity? Organized (or personal) religion/faith? Online communities? Gaming culture?
- Food and identity: Typical dishes? Communal practices (hot pot, tailgating)? "Exotic" or taboo foods? "Comfort" foods? Special dishes for holidays or celebrations? Eating out versus home cooking?

Going deeper:

- Minority groups: Groups discriminated against? Marginalized communities? Parallel societies?
- Majority group privilege: Does it exist in your respective countries? How does it manifest itself? How to combat it?

Session 4 – Chapter 3, due November 6, Using Language, Non-verbal Communication

Surface level:

- Is language learning in today's world of instant translation devices no longer needed? Do you use virtual assistants (Alexa, Siri, Google Assistant) or Google Translate? Have tech tools helped you in language learning? Should they be allowed to be used in language classes? [see Advanced tech blog post]
- How important are non-verbal clues in communication in your culture? Do you think the use of gestures and facial expressions is primarily personal or culturally determined?

Going deeper:

- English as a world language: Is the widespread use of English as a world language displacing local languages? Is that a problem?
- With the rise of Bollywood movies, Turkish soap operas and K-pop, is American cultural dominance, spreading the English language and American cultural practices, now over? [See The Days Of American Culture Dominance Are Over]

Session 5 – Chapter 4, due November 20, Intercultural Communication in Context

Surface level:

- Gender and communication: Are there real differences between how men and women communicate or is that socially determined? Are LGBTQ stereotyped in your culture based on speech patterns?
- Judging on appearances: Tattoos, nose rings, purple hair - should I ask my parents first? Should I be worried about how potential employers will stereotype me? Are socially determined beauty standards harmful (example: Barbie)?

Going deeper:

- Communication style: Is how you engage in conversation determined by your culture (i.e., "cultural scripts" in place) or is it personal (for example, being an introvert or extrovert)? Other factors?
- Cultural spaces: Are there particular places (in nature or in built environments) which have special meaning in your culture or for you personally? Are there controversial (historical/cultural) spaces locally (e.g., Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial

Hall in Taipei; Monument Avenue Confederate statues in Richmond?) How should they be viewed?

Appehdix 2. Post-exchange Survey Given to VCU Students

Your reactions and suggestions are much appreciated, so as to maximize the benefit of doing these kinds of student-to-student connections in the future.

1. Logistics: Any difficulties getting connected; working with the time difference; using the communication tool?
2. General: Did you feel comfortable in speaking with your partner? Any language difficulties? Problems on the partner's side?
3. Learning: Did you gain insights into the topics discussed through your interactions? How about gaining information about Taiwan and student life there?
4. Views: Did the conversations confirm or change views you held on Asian students? Anything surprising? How about Wenzao students' views on the US or on other topics?
5. Other: Any other comments? Suggestions on how to do the exchanges?

Appehdix 3. Post-exchange Survey Given to Wenzao Students

1. Briefly describe your cultural and geographic background. Include your home country, gender, age, university major, and what type of career you're interested in pursuing after you have graduated.
2. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the best, and 1 being the worst) how would you rate your experience of collaboration with the students at VCU? (Circle the number)
3. Did the experience help in your understanding of other cultures? Why or why not?
4. What was the best part of the collaborative experience?
5. What is something you think should be improved about the collaborative experience?

Appehdix 4. VCU Grading Rubric for Reflective Journals
(20 points total); 2 entries per week required

Criteria	Excellent	Good	Poor
Content	Rich in content; reflections demonstrate good knowledge of course content and application of content *6-7 points*	Substantial information; reflections demonstrate some knowledge of course content and application of content *4-5 points*	Rudimentary and superficial; reflections show little evidence of knowledge of course content or application of content *0-3 points*
Evidence of critical thinking	Insightful analysis, synthesis and evaluation, clear connections made to real-life situations or course content *5 points*	Some evidence of analysis, synthesis & evaluation; general connections are made, but are sometimes too obvious or not clear *3-4 points*	Little analysis, synthesis and evaluation; little or no connections with any course material or are off topic *0-2 points*

Quality of personal reflection	Entries are high quality, with personal reflections that connect between real-life, learning, and reading *5 points*	Connects ideas and thoughts to personal life; Evidence of personal connection to learning, community *3-4 points*	Lack of connections to personal life, community *0-2 points*
Clarity and Mechanics	Reflections are clear & contain grammatically correct sentences without any spelling errors *3 points*	Reflections mostly clear and grammatically correct with at most one spelling error *2 points*	Reflections are unorganized or may contain multiple errors *0-1 points*

Appehdix 5. Content Outline of Common Textbook Used

Language and Culture in Context: A Primer on Intercultural Communication
by Robert Godwin-Jones

Chapter 1: Broadening Horizons

I. Introducing intercultural communication
- What is intercultural communication?
- The need for intercultural communication today
- Culture: Central to our lives
- Culture from the perspective of complexity theory
- Communication: A human necessity

II. Cultures under study and in the media
- Intercultural Communication as an academic discipline
- Cultural taxonomies and their dangers
- Ethics & intercultural communication
- Countering the media echo chamber
- Technically speaking: Information literacy

Chapter 2: Building Identities

I. How identities are built
- Cultural identity
- Integration and marginalization
- Social identity
- Worldviews and religions
- Intercultural communication and ideology

II. Judging and treating others fairly
- Categorization and stereotyping
- Addressing prejudice and intolerance
- Language and identity
- Food and culture
- Technically speaking: Online identities

Chapter 3: Using Language

I. Language and culture
- Language: How we process the world around us
- Language reflects culture
- Sociolinguistics: Studying language in use
- World languages
- Bilingualism and multilingualism

II. Second language learning
- Approaches to language learning
- Understanding the nature of language
- Learning a second language
- English as a world language
- Technically speaking: Language learning and technology

Chapter 4: Conversing and Relating

I. Communication in practice
- Language and relationships
- Communication styles
- Communication contexts
- Communication accommodation
- Uncertainty management

II. Language in society
- Sources of miscommunication
- Culturally embedded language use
- Gender and communication
- Communication in personal relationships
- Romancing across cultures
- Technically speaking: Communicating and relating online

Chapter 5: Communicating nonverbally

I. Body language
- The nature of nonverbal communication
- Sending signals without words
- Gestures across cultures
- The universality of facial expressions
- Personal space
- Physically interacting with others

II. Nonverbal messaging
- Paralanguage: Conveying meaning through ways of speaking
- Managing conversations
- Physical appearance and dress
- Nonverbal expectancy violation theory
- Music: Another way to communicate nonverbally
- Technically speaking: Semiotics and the Internet

Chapter 6: Contextualizing intercultural communication

I. Environmental contexts
- The impact of the environment on conversations
- Built environments and communication patterns
- Privacy across cultures
- Cultural spaces
- Car and driving behavior in a cultural context
- Time orientation

II. Professional and institutional contexts
- Business and organizational contexts
- Equity and ethics
- The importance of names
- Communicative genres
- Translation and interpretation
- Education
- Technically speaking: Professional discourse & privacy online

Chapter 7: Encountering other cultures

I. Communicating across cultures
- Personal encounters
- Conflicts and language
- Conflict resolution
- The concept of face
- Cultural schemas
- Mediated encounters

II. Moving among cultures
- Experiencing a different culture
- Cross-cultural adaptation
- Refugees
- Culture Shock
- Study abroad
- Achieving intercultural competence
- Technically speaking: Reflective writing