



**Increasing student motivation through
telecollaboration in elementary German classes**

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With decreasing enrollment trends for German classes at US colleges, programs have to find ways to motivate students to select German as their foreign language and to interest them in continuing with the language beyond a language requirement. One possible way to increase students' interest in German is to integrate telecollaboration as early as the first semester of German. Through telecollaboration students get to interact with German native speakers and learn first-hand about the target culture which can have a strong impact on their curiosity about the language and culture.

This article summarizes the projects that were incorporated in first-semester German over the last ten years at Yale University, a private college in the US. These include traditional e-mail exchanges between US learners of German and learners of English in Germany, a photo exchange using the mobile app Cluster, and tandem chat exchanges including both voice chat and text chat. The article outlines strengths and weaknesses of the different exchanges for first-semester classes. Student feedback on the exchanges will also be incorporated to shed light on learner preferences for different types of telecollaborative communication tools.

1. Introduction

Enrollment in German language classes has been declining both at the high school and college level in the US over the last couple years (American Councils for International Education 2017; Furman et al. 2010) and questions of how to attract more students to take up the study of German and how to get students to continue with the language beyond a requirement or introductory class remain urgent. Many initiatives and projects have been undertaken by German programs in the US to strengthen German enrollments, including strengthening ties to the community (Hellebrandt 2014), outreach projects (Melin 2005; Schenker 2022), effective integration of technology and best practices in teaching (Davidheiser & Wolf 2009).

Another way to increase students' interest in learning the language is to connect them with native speakers and direct access to German culture right from the start. Through virtual exchanges – or telecollaboration – this connection between learners of German and native speakers of the language is easily available and can enhance beginning language classes. This article outlines the benefits and challenges of incorporating

telecollaboration into first-semester German college courses. Telecollaboration has been shown to be an effective tool for advancing intercultural competence (Lee & Song 2019; Ware & Kramsch 2005). Research has also identified positive effects of telecollaboration on students' multiliteracy skills (Guth & Helm 2012), awareness of otherness (Lindner & Garcia 2014), language learning autonomy (Ushioda 2000), and motivation (Polat et al. 2013).

At Yale University, whose German program is the focus of this study, telecollaboration has been incorporated in all language classes from beginning to advanced courses for the last ten years with excellent results. This article summarizes the projects that have been included in first-semester German, which include traditional e-mail exchanges between US learners of German and learners of English in Germany, a photo exchange using the mobile app Cluster, and tandem chat exchanges including both voice chat and text chat. The article outlines strengths and weaknesses of the different exchanges for first-semester classes and highlights the unique affordances of telecollaboration for increasing students' interest in language learning at the earliest language levels. Student feedback on the exchanges will also be incorporated to shed light on learner preferences for different types of telecollaborative communication tools.

2. Background

Telecollaboration can broadly be defined as an online exchange between learners with the goal of advancing language skills and intercultural competence (Guth & Helm 2010). Though sometimes narrowly defined as an exchange between language learners in different countries (O'Dowd 2006), telecollaboration can also connect learners in the same country to work on cultural exchange or language learning collaboratively (Schenker 2019). A telecollaborative exchange typically relies on reciprocity – both partners are learners of a language and culture and help each other practice their language skills or advance their cultural knowledge.

Research has outlined a myriad of benefits of telecollaboration, not just for language development but also in the domain of intercultural learning. Projects between learners in different countries have shown that there are many opportunities for cultural learning in telecollaboration and that students can increase their intercultural competence by working across cultures (Freiermuth & Huang 2021). Telecollaboration's positive effect on the development of intercultural competence has been confirmed in studies utilizing

a variety of communication modes and project formats, both asynchronous and synchronous tools, through one-on-one interaction and small group communication. Some examples include small-group video conversations between native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) (Toscu & Erten 2020) or one-on-one video chats between language learners (NS/NNS dyads) (Lenkaitis et al. 2019) and joint task completion between NNS and NNS (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban 2014), bilingual e-mails between learners of the partner's language(s) (Schenker 2012, 2016; Vogt 2006), discussions in forums including NS/NNS groups (Liaw & Master 2010; Üzümlü et al. 2020) or instant messenger communication (Jin & Erben 2007), and social media sites such as Facebook (Jin 2015; Vurdien & Puranen 2020). While each communication format and project design has its own advantages and disadvantages, when designed well, research suggests that there is potential for the development of intercultural competence in almost all telecollaborative environments.

Not only is telecollaboration a great tool for cultural learning, it also allows students to increase their language skills. Depending on the communication format and task types of the project, students have been shown to increase their vocabulary knowledge (Akiyama & Saito 2016; Dodd 2001), speaking skills (Schenker 2017), writing abilities (Chen & Brown 2012; Fotos 2004; Llopis-García & Vinagre 2019; Schenker 2016), speaking skills (Correa 2015; Satar & Özdener 2008), listening comprehension skills (Yanguas 2012), reading skills (Taki & Ramazani 2011), and grammar skills (Ware & Canado 2007), including comprehensibility (Akiyama & Saito 2016), and pragmatic competence (Belz 2006; Rafieyan et al. 2014; Vyatkina 2012), among other linguistic skills.

Further benefits of telecollaboration that have been outlined in prior research include its potential to build a community of learners (Lomicka & Lord 2012; Luo & Yang 2022), to foster content knowledge development (Cunningham 2019), as well as electronic and multi-literacy skills (Guth & Helm 2012; Shetzer & Warschauer 2000), its promotion of learner motivation (Spodark 2001) as well as autonomy (Fuchs et al. 2012; Gonglewski et al. 2001), and its positive impact on students' cross-cultural awareness (Lee 2009).

3. Examples of telecollaborative projects for first-semester German

Due to the myriad benefits of telecollaboration and in order to increase students' curiosity about Germany and strengthen their interest in learning the language, the small

German program at Yale University began incorporating telecollaborative exchanges into all language classes ten years ago. Over the last decade, different telecollaborative projects have been implemented in first-semester German to meet different goals and identify the most suitable learning contexts for elementary language learners. The following section summarizes three of the most successful telecollaboration projects.

3.1 E-mail exchange

An e-mail exchange may be the most traditional form of telecollaboration which has been around since the beginning of internet technology (Barson et al. 1993; Brammerts 1996) and still enjoys popularity today (Schenker 2016; Wang 2019). In fact, in his systematic review, Avgousti (2018) revealed that e-mail was the most commonly used tool for intercultural exchanges. There are several advantages of using e-mail for telecollaboration at beginning language levels, most of which are tied to the asynchronous nature of the tool. As such, like other asynchronous tools, e-mail can easily be used across different time zones making it possible to connect learners in different parts of the world (Ahern 2008; Meskill & Anthony 2010). While synchronous exchanges may make it difficult to find a mutually agreeable time to communicate between learners, which may cause frustration in telecollaboration (Gimeno 2018), e-mails can be written at the convenience of each participants' schedule. As an asynchronous tool, students also have time to re-read their own messages and check for errors before sending it to their partners. Similarly, they can take their time reading and understanding their partners' response and are not pressured to respond right away. This additional planning time can have positive effects on students' language learning (Ortega 1999) and asynchronous communication has been shown to produce more complex language (Sotillo 2000).

The e-mail exchanges for elementary German at Yale University connect learners of German in the US with learners of English in Germany. In order to allow students to communicate for the entire duration of a semester, our partner class is typically a high school in Germany. Even though there is a slight age gap (US students are typically between 18 and 20 and the German high school students are typically between 16 and 18 years old), partnering with high schools allows us to have a longer duration of the exchange because the academic schedules of high schools align more closely with US college schedules. The German university schedule does not match the US system well

and when partnering with German colleges, our exchanges can only be five or six weeks long. We prefer having students communicate for twelve weeks with slightly younger students rather than only five weeks with same-aged students. In our e-mail exchanges we employ one of two models in consultation with the instructor of the partner class. In the first model, we ask students to alternate between communicating in English and German by week. Each week, a new discussion topic is assigned that is aligned with the class content for each group; this way both classes get to communicate about topics that are relevant to them in their respective target languages. In the second model, students use both languages in each e-mail discussing two different topics (one in English and one in German). Both models have advantages and disadvantages; when alternating by week, students spend an entire week using only English, for example, but when using both languages in each e-mail it can get confusing discussing two separate topics. Nonetheless, both models also have clear advantages for beginning learners. The e-mail exchanges combining two languages, regardless of whether both languages are used within an e-mail or alternating by week, allow students to practice their emerging language skills while gaining a lot of cultural knowledge. Additionally, giving students the chance to be learners and experts boosts their confidence and increases their motivation. Occasionally, our telecollaboration projects connect our learners of German with university students abroad who are studying to become teachers themselves. In those cases, we can conduct the entire exchange in German, because our partners' goal is not to improve their English skills but their pedagogical expertise.

For our e-mail exchanges, we expect students to exchange two e-mails a week and we typically require them to write around ten sentences. The length is only a recommendation and we explain that we understand that there are topics where students have more to say than others. E-mails are forwarded to the instructor and are graded on a completion basis as part of students' homework grade. It is also important for instructors to read students' messages so they can intervene in cases of misunderstanding. Instructors also use some class time each week to have students discuss their e-mail exchanges with each other. This allows students to learn from one another and get to know different point of views and share cultural points that they have observed in their exchanges.

Topics for the German component of e-mail exchanges in elementary German typically start with the simpler topics of introductions, hobbies, living situation ('my room'),

family and daily activities, and move on to more complex topics including school life, discussing birthdays and past events such as travel, student jobs and plans for future work (see Appendix A for more details). Topics for the English component of the exchange vary by partner school and their learning goals but have in the past included German-American relations, stereotypes, pop culture, dining and restaurants, travel, sports, and others.

Students have reacted very positively to the incorporation of e-mail exchanges in elementary German classes, which was seen in students' comments on feedback surveys. One student commented: "I really like it to communicate with a native speaker. I always wished to meet one, but I never did." Students enjoy the flexibility of the e-mails, as can be seen in the following student comment: "e-mails are convenient because you can e-mail the partner whenever and don't have to worry about the time difference." Additionally, students often comment on both the cultural learning as well as the language learning that happens through an e-mail exchange. One student, for example, liked "being able to get cultural information from natives of Germany" and another one said that writing e-mails "helped me think about writing in German more than I do usually."

3.2 Photo exchange

In recent years we have begun incorporating a photo exchange into our elementary classes and we have identified some benefits of this type of telecollaboration over e-mails. For this exchange, we use the mobile application Cluster and we also connect our learners with partner classes in a German-speaking community. Similar to the e-mail exchanges, we typically use a high school class in Germany so that the project can run over several months. In the photo exchange we split students into smaller groups of about 6-8 German learners and 6-8 learners of English. Each week students receive a prompt and are asked to take a photo and post it to the private Cluster group with a short description. The rest of the week participants look at the other photos and interact with each other through comments and questions. We alternate languages by week and spend one week posting in German and the next week in English so both sides of the exchange get to practice their respective target languages.

The photo exchange is especially suited for beginning language learners because it requires less textual input but still allows them to receive a great amount of authentic

cultural input through the images. Research has shown that using authentic videos, photos, images, and art can bridge cultural distance and advance language skills, for example in the areas of vocabulary (Vungthong et al. 2017), grammar (Santos 2015), and writing (Walter et al. 2019). Most importantly, authentic images can support cultural learning (Barnes-Karol & Broner 2010), and the development of intercultural competence (Arizpe et al. 2014; Köhnen 2010). Using platforms such as Cluster can help students build a community of inquiry, as has been suggested about using social media platforms such as Instagram as well (Fornara & Lomicka 2019).

Similarly to the e-mail exchange, the prompts for the photos are aligned with the course content of the participating classes. One example of weekly topics can be found in Appendix B. It is important to remind students that they are expected to post photos they have taken themselves and not search for an image on the internet.

The “gallery view” function of Cluster is especially beneficial for incorporating the photo exchange into class meetings. Here, the instructor can pull up a view of all images and students can discuss them together. This provides great opportunities for cultural exploration. Students responded very positively to the photo exchanges and they are a preferred telecollaboration format for many of our German high school partner classes. In a brief feedback survey, the first participants in our photo exchange indicated that they especially liked learning more about classmates and German peers, learning about other cultures and cultural differences, learning by seeing, communicating with new people and practicing German in a useful way. One student noted about the exchange: “It helps me know my classmates better and allows me to better appreciate the diversity in my class.”

A majority of students highlighted the positive effect of the exchange on their cultural learning. One student explained that the exchange helped them “visualize how German culture functions”. Students also mentioned learning more about life in German-speaking countries, cultural similarities and differences, differences in student life, and the educational systems. One student summed it up well in his comment: “I learned that there are more similarities between mine and others’ (both my classmates and students abroad) lives and basic feelings/thoughts.”

Students also felt that through the photo exchange they improved their language in writing, especially casual expressions, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehen-

sion. Most importantly, students noted that the exchange made them “more interested, excited, eager to use German.”

3.3 Chat exchange

While the German program typically incorporates asynchronous exchanges in first-semester German for the reasons outlined above, we occasionally include synchronous exchanges to accommodate our partner class interests or to try out new communication modes. Synchronous exchanges can allow students to practice communicating in real-time with immediate feedback and answers. It usually encourages the use of more informal language and is more personal and dynamic because of the spontaneous exchange (Pellettieri 2000). It supports more social interaction (Wang 2004) but can also put a lot of pressure on participants (Rösler 2007). Students don’t have as much time to compose their responses as they do in e-mails, and the content of their exchange may be less thought out (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read 2010).

The chat exchanges we have incorporated included both text-based chatting using Facebook, Google or Skype chat and video-based chatting using Skype or a voice communication tool of the students’ choice. We typically alternate text- and voice-based chatting each week and provide a German and an English discussion topic for each session. Topics are similar to the ones for the e-mail and photo exchanges since they are also aligned with our course content. As with all our exchanges, students split their time between speaking English and German. For our chat exchanges, they spend half their chat time in one language before switching to the other language. Even though chatting, either in text or through video, at the elementary language level can seem daunting, our own research into this telecollaboration showed positive results and great improvements in students’ language skills (Schenker 2015, 2017). Students also appreciated the chat exchange as highlighted in the following student comment: “It was a good challenge and forced me to use my skills even when I was timid. It gave me confidence.”

Instead of partnering with English learners at German high schools for our chat exchanges in elementary German, we have also had opportunities to partner with teacher candidates in Germany and were able to plan semester-long chat telecollaboration using German only. Additionally, we have had projects that were e-mail based but included several Skype conversations throughout the semester to allow students to benefit both

from the more reflective asynchronous e-mail tool as well as the more immediate and personal video chat.

In spite of the time difference making it challenging for some partners to find times to chat each week, the feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive. Students indicated that the chat exchange made them more interested in participating in study abroad in the future and curious to visit Germany and experience the culture first-hand. Additionally, students mentioned that they feel “more motivated to continue learning German” and that they are “more interested now because learning what goes on in Germany made it more exciting to see what I learn.” Several students commented positively on now having someone close to their own age in Germany to talk to and generally found it “cool speaking with native speakers.” An overwhelming majority of students reported being interested in doing another exchange in the future, even if scheduling “was annoying at times”.

Similar to the other exchanges, students noted having learned more about German culture, dialects, and about daily life. In contrast to the other two text-based exchanges, the chat exchange which also included video chats also allowed students to improve their speaking which several students appreciated. They also highlighted improving their colloquial German, conversational words, and speaking more casually.

4. Recommendations for setting up telecollaboration projects

For effective telecollaboration at the novice language level, a semester long exchange is ideal. This gives students enough time to become comfortable with their partner(s) and communication format(s) and to reap the benefits of a language and culture exchange. Setting similar requirements in terms of participation and contribution amount and lengths for both partner classes can support the success of an exchange. Clear guidelines and expectations for students are crucial. It is recommended to spend some time in class dedicated to the exchange to check for misunderstandings, to exchange impressions and ideas, and to further the cultural discussions. Lastly, strong collaboration between the participating instructors is a must for telecollaboration to run smoothly. Instructors have to be able to communicate about any issues and to intervene in instances of miscommunication or lack of participation.

One of the questions that instructors typically have about telecollaboration is how to find partners. There are several websites that allow language instructors to connect with

other teachers looking for exchange partners, including UNICollaboration (UniCollaboration 2023), Epals (Cricket Media 2017), My Language Exchange (Cormier & Yue 2023), British Council which targets joint project work and global learning (British Council 2023), Conversation Exchange which is intended for finding individual tandem partners (Conversation Exchange 2012), or The Mixxer hosted by Dickinson College (The Mixxer 2023). At our institution we have successfully used both Uni collaboration and Epals to find partner classes.

Another way to connect with partners for telecollaboration is through listservs, which are mailing lists for specific purposes that distribute messages to subscribers electronically typically through e-mail. There are several listservs for German as a foreign language and one that we have used is [deutsch-als-fremdsprache.de](https://www.deutsch-als-fremdsprache.de) (Institut für Internationale Kommunikation e.V. 2023) where one can use the discussion forum to post a search for partners. Facebook groups for German teachers are another great resource. Lastly, personal connections are always a useful way to connect with teachers abroad.

5. Conclusion

The incorporation of telecollaboration into elementary German language classes at Yale University has confirmed that not only do these exchanges help students develop their language skills (Sasaki & Takeuchi 2010; Schenker, 2015, 2016; Taki & Ramazani 2011) but they also increase students' motivation to learn the language (Schenker 2013, 2017). As enrollments in German college programs are declining, incorporating telecollaboration at all levels of a German curriculum can positively impact students' interest in learning German. Once it is known that all German classes connect students with native speakers in the target communities, more students may become interested in signing up for the language. As Godwin-Jones (2019: 13) puts it, "the direct, visual, and auditory contact between interlocutors can be highly motivating." It is the hope of the author that the positive experiences with and examples of telecollaboration in beginner's language classes outlined in this article encourage other instructors to integrate cross-cultural virtual exchanges into their own language classes.

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Author Biography

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Telecollaboration, motivation, intercultural learning, beginners, e-mail, chat

APPENDIX A

Email Exchange

This semester you will be part of an electronic exchange between your section of German 110 and a high school class in Germany.

The purpose of the project is to give you an opportunity to practice German in an informal environment and become more comfortable with writing in German. You are only graded on completing the assignment not on accuracy or content.

Project Overview

The project will last the duration of the fall semester. You will be assigned a partner and you can then establish an electronic partnership to the student. Each week you will communicate with your partner via **e-mail**. You have a list of assigned questions and topics for each week which you discuss in German.

You are expected to write a minimum of **2 e-mails per week**. Please forward all of your e-mails to your instructor or print them out and turn them in so that you can receive credit for this part of the course. You will receive 10 points per week (5 points per e-mail) for this homework assignment. There may be weeks where you are very busy with school and you may find it difficult to send two emails – don't worry, you can make up for missed points by sending additional e-mails in later weeks. However, please remember that your partner is probably waiting to hear from you, so if you have time, send a quick note to let your partner know that you'll write as soon as you can.

Assignments

Below you will find a summary of the questions you should ask your German partner in German. You should not only ask but also give the answers for yourself. The topics correspond to what you will learn in class each week and will be a good opportunity for you to practice what is introduced in class.

Week	Topic to be discussed in German <i>Ask your German partner the following questions and provide information about these topics in German</i>
Week 5	<i>Describing where you live</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What his/her room looks like • What kind of furniture he/she has • Does he/she share a room? • Where your partner is from and what his/her home “at home” looks like
Week 6	<i>Learning about each other’s families & other things</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is part of his/her family: siblings, parents, pets? • What do they do, how old are they, what are their names? • What does the family do together? Are there any traditions? • Who is part of his/her extended family? Are they a close family? • What his/her favorite thing to do is on weekends at Yale
Week 7	<i>Filme, Bücher, Musik</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is his/her favorite film, book, music? • What types of books/films does your partner enjoy? • What is his/her favorite book/movie about?
Week 8	<i>Discussing chores, duties, likes, dislikes...</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What he/she must do on a daily basis • What he must do in school, what he must not do in school • What chores everyone in the family must do • What your partner likes/dislikes doing on a daily basis
Week 9	<i>Discussing past events</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What he/she did over break • How he/she spent the summer • When his/her birthday is and what he/she does for his/her birthday • What he/she did over fall break
Week 10	<i>Talking about Feiertage</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a particular holiday/festival that is celebrated in your partner’s home town? When is it and what is it for? What do people do there? • What’s your and your partner’s favorite holiday and why?
Week 11	<i>Talking about jobs</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If he/she has a part-time job • What his/her parents’ / siblings’ occupations are • What he/she wants to do later in life and why • What the best student jobs are • What his/her dream job would be
Week 12	<i>Discussing housing</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What his/her dream house/apartment looks like

Week 13	<i>Discussing the movie "Frau Ella"</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does your partner like the movie?• Which character does your partner like best and why?• Has your partner ever done a roadtrip like in the movie?• Has your partner seen other German movies?
Week 14	<i>Wrap up</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How was your partner's semester?• What are your partner's plans for the break?• What courses will your partner take next semester?

APPENDIX B

Photo-Exchange

WOCHE	THEMA	SPRACHE
3. September – 9. September	Getting to know each other: That's me <i>Who I am, where I live, my age, family...</i>	
10. September – 16. September	Freizeitaktivitäten und Hobbys <i>What I do in my free-time, my interests and hobbies</i>	
17. September – 23. September	My daily routine <i>What best describes my daily routine (home/school...)</i>	
24. September – 30. September	Mein Zimmer / Zuhause <i>Where I live and feel at home</i>	
1. Oktober – 7. Oktober	My ♥-book <i>What I like to read</i>	
8. Oktober – 14. Oktober	Eine wöchentliche Pflicht <i>Something I have to do every week</i>	
15. Oktober – 21. Oktober	Friendship <i>What friendship means to me</i>	
22. Oktober – 28. Oktober	Urlaub <i>My favorite / dream vacation, what makes a great vac.</i>	
29. Oktober – 4. November	Student life <i>What is typical of life at my school</i>	
5. November – 11. November	Mein ♥-Film / Meine ♥-Serie <i>What I like to watch</i>	
12. November – 18. November	Jobs <i>My job, future career plans, dream job...</i>	
Thanksgiving Break		
26. November – 2. Dezember	Mein ♥-Gebäude auf meinem Campus oder in meiner Stadt <i>My favorite building on campus or in town</i>	
3. Dezember – 9. Dezember	My ♥-food <i>What I like to eat/cook, my favorite recipe...</i>	

Weekly “to dos” for students

- By Wednesday: Post a topic-related picture that you have taken, write about 5 sentences to describe the picture and answer the topic/question
- By Sunday: React to **at least two pictures** by asking/answering questions and adding comments to get into a real exchange (2-3 sentences; not just “I agree” or “Interesting picture”!). Make sure to get online **at least twice between Thu and Sun** in order to react to others’ comments/questions in the course of the weekly blog.