Implementing the Intercultural Reflection Team Method (iRT) in Teaching German: A Telecollaborative Project Proposal

Sabrina Link, Urbino & Laura Lewis, Durham

Implementing the Intercultural Reflection Team Method (iRT) in Teaching German: A Telecollaborative Project Proposal

Sabrina Link, Urbino & Laura Lewis, Durham

The need to prepare students for an increasingly interconnected, culturally and linguistically diverse world has been emphasised repeatedly in recent years and is an important objective not only in the field of language teaching and learning, but in higher education (HE) in general. With a specific focus on German as a foreign language (GFL), this paper will show how key competences for language learners such as critical thinking, collaboration and intercultural awareness can be developed through the implementation of the Intercultural Reflection Team (iRT) method. While the iRT method, based on peer supervision, was originally designed to promote dialogue between academics facing teaching challenges across regions, countries and disciplines, this paper will show how the method can be applied in the context of teaching German as a foreign language, using the example of a telecollaborative project between students at level B2 and above (according to the CEFR- Common European Framework of Reference) at Durham University and the University of Urbino.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted, as evidenced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2020) and the QAA (2023) for Languages, Cultures and Societies (LCS), that a key objective of language education today is to go beyond communicative competence (Beacco et al. 2016) and to enable language learners to encounter the linguistic and cultural diversity inherent to our global societies. The QAA LCS Benchmark statement (2023) makes a clear case for more inclusive approaches to language education, emphasising the importance of avoiding exclusionary assumptions about language competence. This includes challenging the notion of the "native speaker" which links language ability to nationality rather than measured proficiency (QAA 2023). In this regard, the LCS Statement stresses the significance of including a range of linguistic varieties and cultural formats in LCS courses, with the aim of encouraging students to critically reflect on the concept of a 'standard language'' and the relationship between language and cultural identity, thus highlighting that our societies today are highly heterogeneous and characterised by an increasing range of linguistic and cultural diversity (Peskoller 2022b). Another key factor in language education today, accelerated by the increase in technology-mediated situations resulting

from the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of technological developments such as generative AI, is that the digital has become an almost integral aspect of active participation in society. With digital and non-digital realities often merging, the notion of (post)digital citizenship[1] is evolving as a new core competence for all learners (Villar-Onrubia et al. 2022). Already prior to these rapid developments, Hauck (2007) emphasised the importance for language learners to develop multimodal communicative competence (also called multiliteracies), which is defined as "a set of skills related to communicating in the globalized, culturally and linguistically diverse world using multimedia communication tools available on the Internet" (Ensor et al. 2017).

In this context, and with the aim of achieving and integrating the above objectives, such as enhancing multimodal communication skills, challenging the native-speaker norm, fostering critical thinking and peer learning, as well as promoting cultural awareness, a telecollaboration project was set up with students of German from a British (Durham University) and an Italian (University of Urbino) university using the Intercultural Reflection Team Method (iRT), designed to facilitate reflective processes that encourage critical thinking and problem-solving.

In the following we will present the theoretical basis of the project by discussing the value of telecollaboration and the integration of the iRT method into the language classroom as a means of creating opportunities for intercultural learning and authentic language acquisition. This is followed by a description of the project, including its objectives and implementation, and an analysis of the feedback received from the students. The paper concludes with an outline of future plans to establish a network of universities utilising the iRT method in their teaching practices. This approach involves the use of virtual exchange and reflection techniques to facilitate learners' acquisition of intercultural awareness and experience of linguistic diversity in the target language. In doing so, it is in accordance with the Internationalisation at Home agenda, which aims to purposefully integrate "international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen & Jones, 2015: 69).

---

[1]   The European Commission's Digital Competence framework (2018) and UNESCO's Digital Literacy Global Framework provide detailed examples of the skills, knowledge and attitudes that citizens need to engage in citizenship through digital technologies.

2. The Potential of telecollaboration in the context of GFL

Telecollaboration is typically defined as "internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (as defined by Byram 1997) through structured tasks" (Guth & Helm 2010: 14). In the field of second language acquisition, the term telecollaboration is used to describe a process whereby groups of learners with diverse cultural backgrounds engage in prolonged, virtual interactions and collaborative activities (O'Dowd & O'Rourke 2019). Over the past few decades, there has been a gradual increase in awareness of the benefits of telecollaboration in foreign language education (e.g., Jackson 2012; Liddicoat & Scarino 2013) and numerous publications and teaching projects highlight the potential of virtual exchange and telecollaborative learning in regard to language acquisition (Dooly & O'Dowd 2018) and the promotion of intercultural communication competence (Godwin-Jones 2019). It has even been argued that telecollaboration should become a standard and integral part of foreign language education (e.g. Çiftçi & Savaş 2018; Lewis & O'Dowd 2016; O'Dowd 2016; Thorne 2016). In addition to the primary objectives of utilising telecollaboration in language learning, to enhance learners' proficiency in the target language, their digital literacy, and their intercultural competence (O'Dowd & Lewis 2016), it can also help to increase learner motivation by providing authentic language situations in a student-centered telecollaborative environment (e.g. Loch & Páal 2020; Yang 2020)

Nevertheless, the value and effectiveness of telecollaboration have also been questioned (e.g. Liddicoat & Scarino 2013; Train 2006) for example for the potential reinforcement of cultural stereotypes (e.g., Flowers et al. 2019; Guth et al. 2012; Kirschner 2015). It is therefore important to emphasise that the gains in terms of language and cultural understanding are not automatic and that exchanges must be carefully constructed and conducted in accordance with best practice (Godwin-Jones 2019). These legitimate concerns are discussed further in the objectives of the project and have also been considered in the analysis of the results and feedback received for the project as a whole.

2.1 Recognizing Linguistic Diversity

Initially, and still to this day, bilingual exchanges have mainly focused on the development of language skills, following the "input-interactionist paradigm of second language acquisition" (Godwin-Jones 2019: 10), where learners engage with each other via audio or video videoconferencing, guided by teachers on topics of conversation or assigned tasks (Chun 2015). The two most prevalent telecollaborative models in this regard are the e-tandem and the blended intercultural model (Chun 2015). The former encompasses projects in which speakers with different L1 (first languages) are paired to engage in synchronous or asynchronous conversation, using both languages for an equivalent duration (Godwin-Jones 2019). The latter combines language learning with a cultural component (Da Costa et al. 2018) and includes participants responding to culturally oriented questionnaires, engaging in discussion forums, and discussing their experiences either in-class or online (Chun 2014; Furstenberg & English 2016).

The project discussed in this paper combines aspects of several existing models of tele-collaboration but takes a different approach by bringing together students of German from different linguistic backgrounds (UK and Italy), none of whom are first language speakers of the target language or have spent any significant time abroad in the target culture. The rationale for choosing this approach was to move away from bilateral exchange models where one of the exchange partners is a first language speaker of the target language, as these models are often based on the idea that the first language speaker is not only the ideal linguistic expert, but also a model and expert on everything related to the culture of the target language (Byram & Wagner 2018). This view, which still often underpins language teaching and telecollaborative projects, ignores the complex diversity of today's society and portrays linguistic diversity in a negative light, as the "NSL[2] construct supports the marginalization and devaluing of bilingual, multi-lingual, and intercultural discourse practices that have been shown to be basic to tele-collaboration" (Train 2006: 258). Indeed, one of the benefits of telecollaboration is that it can introduce students to linguistic diversity and variation, and to the reality that the assumed culturally homogeneous target culture is in fact quite diverse and will be perceived differently by different learners of the target language (Godwin-Jones 2019: 16). Furthermore, studies suggest that interactions between non-first language speakers have

---

[2] "native standard language" (Train 2006: 254).

the potential to facilitate a reduction in the inherent power differential, typically associated with telecollaborative exchanges between first language and non-first language speakers. This is due to neither of the exchange partners being regarded as the expert, which can assist learners in feeling less anxious about making mistakes and can enhance their confidence to participate (Guarda 2013). In alignment with this approach, the decision was made to diverge from the conventional practice of utilising English as a lingua franca for the project (Godwin-Jones 2019). Instead, students were encouraged to use German throughout the project, with the intention of exposing them to 'non-standard' German accents which highlight the linguistic diversity and is more reflective of the German language.

2.2 From Language Learning to Intercultural Learning

In consideration of the graduate skills outlined in the QAA (2023) benchmark statement and their alignment with the key competences (e.g. critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration) set out in the Guidance for Education for Sustainable Development (AdvHE/QAA 2021) and the Guidance for Global Citizenship Education (UNESCO, 2015), it was essential that the project went beyond providing students with the opportunity to practice the target language and also encouraged processes of critical reflection on topics related to language learning in general and German in particular.

A key aim in this regard was to promote a non-essentialist understanding of interculturality, emphasising the fluid and constructed nature of the concept (Holliday & MacDonald 2020), by focusing on the individual person and their unique "experience-based, socially influenced perspective" (Risager 2012: 106). Hoping to move away from the idea of the existence of homogeneous national cultures, the project approach sought to draw attention to the dynamic, highly individualised nature of culture, which is constantly being redefined and shaped (Risager 2018) through the encounters of individuals who negotiate meaning and "bring their own identities and cultures" (Byram 2021: 51) to the situation. In practice, this meant that the online space of the telecollaborative project was to be seen as a manifestation of culture itself, or rather what Holliday (1999) calls a 'small culture', with an emphasis on interaction, dialogue and negotiation of meaning and perspectives, without making the students representatives of their national 'culture'. By getting students to reflect on questions relating to their individual experiences of language learning, rather than comparing how languages are taught in the UK versus Italy in general, the aim was to raise awareness that they are all

culturally and linguistically different from each other (Peskoller 2022a), even if they share the same nationality. The rationale behind this approach was to foster an understanding of the relativity of culture, thereby preventing the reproduction of stereotypes. Instead, the objective was to equip learners with the skills necessary for intercultural learning, including empathy, critical thinking, and an awareness of diverse socio-cultural identities. Starting from the catalogue of criteria for intercultural learning activities (Peskoller 2022a), where reflection, self-reflection and negotiation of perspectives are key elements, designing the telecollaborative project based on the iRT method offered the possibility to stimulate intercultural learning processes.

3. The intercultural Reflecting Team (iRT) method

The intercultural Reflecting Team method is part of the IntRef project[3], which combines innovative methods to enhance and internationalise reflection practices in teaching in higher education. So far, the method has been used to connect academics across institutional and national boundaries via videoconferencing to share critical incidents related to learning, teaching and assessment in higher education . Originally, the method was developed for the therapy context and involved a therapist talking to a patient while a team of fellow therapists observed and discussed what they saw behind a one-way screen. Key elements of the intercultural Reflection Teams method are thus spatial separation and the generation of multiple perspectives on a problem and how to solve it (Reimann et al. 2020).

The abilities to reflect and to develop the capacity for critical reflection are considered to be fundamental to the processes of intercultural learning and gaining important global citizenship skills (UNESCO 2015). In the context of German as a Foreign Language, this also encompasses an understanding of the significance of a reflective awareness of language use. One concept that is of importance in this regard and has influenced the project approach is that of symbolic competence (Kramsch 2014). This concept understands language as a social practice and goes beyond mere linguistic proficiency. It emphasises the importance "to interpret intentions behind the message, understand the use of symbolic systems and their social, historical and ideological significance and to imagine the influence of other languages on the way one thinks and communicates"

---

[3]   https://sites.durham.ac.uk/intref/.

(Müller-Hartmann & Kurek 2016: 132). The distinct phases of the iRT approach, namely capture, sharing, discussion and reflection, appeared to be conducive to fostering this kind of reflection and critical thinking.

After taking part in several online meetings based on the method, the idea arose to use it in the context of German as a foreign language teaching and to explore its potential for both authentic communication opportunities and intercultural learning. For the tele-collaborative project, a hybrid scenario for the implementation of this method was chosen. This included individual face-to-face elements with the two different groups of students in Durham and Urbino, as well as a virtual exchange meeting in which everyone participated.

3.1 Implementing the iRT method – Project outline

The telecollaborative project was developed in close adherence to the original iRT method and was integrated into the modules at the individual universities, namely a B2 course for students of the Institution Wide Language Programme (IWLP) in Durham (German Stage 5), consisting of eleven students, and a C1 degree course in Urbino (LIM-LET C1), consisting of nine students. The B2 and C1 courses were deliberately paired due to the exceptional proficiency level of the Durham cohort that year. At the outset of the academic year, the students were informed of the project's timeline and introduced to the original iRT method. A total of two contact hours were dedicated to the project in both courses, with one hour allocated for the introduction of the project and the other for the implementation of the telecollaborative exchange.

For the first step of the project **(Capture),** students were asked to describe in German in 200 words a problem or critical incident they had encountered as language learners. The prompt was left very open, so as not to restrict the students too much in describing their cases. As part of this, students were also asked what they had done to resolve their individual problems/critical incidents themselves, and they had to come up with a specific question that they would like to discuss in the online meeting at the end of the project. This part of the project was designed to give students the opportunity to develop their productive skills and to write down and describe a specific problem in a clear and concise way. Before sharing their individual written cases with all project participants, students received individual written feedback on the accuracy and coherence of their cases from their respective teachers. Students then had the chance to review their cases

again before sharing them. It is important to note that the teachers did not provide feedback on the individual cases themselves, only on accuracy and coherence, so as not to influence what the students wanted to share. The aim of this phase was for students to reflect individually on the problems they had encountered, how they had managed to solve them, or in some cases, how they had not, and what they could have done differently. It was hoped that this would reveal the students' unique perspective and approach to dealing with the problems they encountered on their journey as language learners.

In the second step of the project **(Share)**, the students' anonymized cases were shared via Padlet[4] and all students had access to each other's cases. This approach was taken to avoid students making 'cultural assumptions' about individual submissions, as it was not clear whether a submission came from a Durham University student or a student from the University of Urbino. It is important to note, however, that this approach did not yield the desired outcome. This was due to the specificity of some of the examples, which revealed the university at which the case provider was based. At this point in the process, students were also given the opportunity to cast their votes for the cases they found most intriguing. The three cases that received the greatest number of votes were subsequently selected by the teaching staff for discussion in greater detail during the online meeting scheduled at the end of term.

In this phase, students were provided with the opportunity to evaluate their own problems in comparison with those of their peers, and to reflect on their personal values and methods of problem-solving in the context of their peers' approaches. The objective was to highlight that, despite the existence of certain commonalities, each individual possesses a distinctive approach to problem-solving. Moreover, this approach is not inherently linked to a specific cultural background; rather, it is shaped by the individual's unique experiences.

In the third and final stage **(Discussion & Reflection),** students from both universities participated in a one-hour online meeting, facilitated by the teaching staff. The meeting was structured into four phases and concentrated on the development of the students' oral communication skills. The first phase of the meeting was based on the oral re-sharing of the individual cases that had been selected through the aforementioned voting process. Each individual student (case provider) began by summarising the main points

---

4   https://padlet.com/.

of their case, which had already been shared via Padlet. The remaining participants were permitted to request further details or clarification pertaining to the case. Subsequently, the case provider posed a precise question aiming to resolve the issue, which the other participants then had to discuss. Once all queries had been addressed, the case provider proceeded to mute themselves and turn off their camera, thereby allowing the remaining participants to engage in a discussion regarding potential alternative solutions to the problem. During this discussion, the case provider took notes on the new perspectives gained. At the conclusion of the discussion, the case provider was requested to unmute once more and share and reflect on the new insights gained, as well as the potential influence these may have on their approach to solving similar problems in the future. This approach was repeated for all three cases.

Contrary to the apprehension that the students' collaboration in the online meeting would be largely dependent on the moderation of the teaching staff, this proved to be an unfounded concern. The students demonstrated a notable level of engagement in the discussion, with all participants having their cameras turned on and providing constructive feedback. This allowed the teaching staff to maintain a background presence, and the discussion was student-centred.

3.2 Results and student feedback

In order to evaluate the students' perception of the project and to identify potential areas for improvement, the students were invited to complete a feedback questionnaire at the end of the project. The feedback form was provided in German, but students were also permitted to respond in either English or Italian.

The survey was designed to obtain feedback on the following five aspects: the development of problem-solving skills and the creation of new perspectives; the stimulation of intercultural exchange and the promotion of intercultural competence; the perception of the iRT-Method; the improvement of language skills; and the positive and negative aspects of the project. Some of the questions were open-ended, while others provided the students with a five-point Likert scale, with values ranging from five (indicating complete disagreement) to one (indicating complete agreement). A sample of the questionnaire can be found in the appendix, including the consent form for the project at the beginning of the questionnaire which made students aware that all collected data would be anonymised. In order to facilitate the analysis of the results, the values one

and two were assigned the code for agreement, three was assigned the code for neutrality, and four and five were assigned the code for disagreement. A total of 12 out of the 20 participating students decided to complete the survey.

The majority of students (nine out of twelve) indicated that the project facilitated more meaningful reflection on a problem and offered new perspectives. However, two students did not perceive the project as beneficial in this regard (cf. Graph 1).

Helpfulness of project to reflect a problem and to gain new perspectives on problems
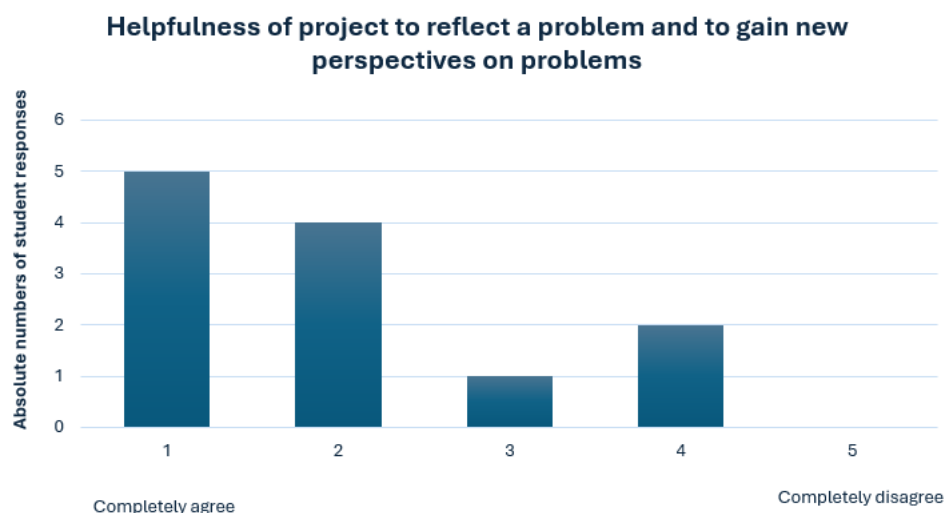
Graph 1 Project being perceived as helpful to reflect on a problem and gain new perspectives on problems

The iRT method was also perceived positively, as evidenced by student responses 1-4 (Italian and German comments were translated by the authors into English). The students expressed particular appreciation for the opportunity to select the problems to be discussed in the meeting, as well as for the chance to interact with students from other countries and gain insight into their perspectives.

1. It was good because it was possible to choose topics that we all found interesting. That's why we discussed topics that were relevant.
2. I think it's a very nice way to meet people from other places without going to the place itself.
3. I've never had this experience, and I think it's very interesting. You don't just hear the opinions of your familiar fellow students, but also the opinions of people you don't know.
4. It can be useful because we can discuss different aspects and understand the perspective of other people.

In terms of the stimulation of intercultural exchange and the promotion of intercultural awareness, the majority of students (nine out of twelve) found the exchange with students of German from another university interesting. Only two students expressed

disagreement (cf. Graph 2). Furthermore, all twelve students provided positive responses with regard to their perception of the concept of an intercultural exchange in German (cf. student answers 5-8). The students expressed particular appreciation for the utilisation of German as a lingua franca, as well as the fact that the exchange facilitated the generation of new ideas and perspectives and addressed linguistic and cultural challenges.

Appreciation of getting in touch with German students from another university
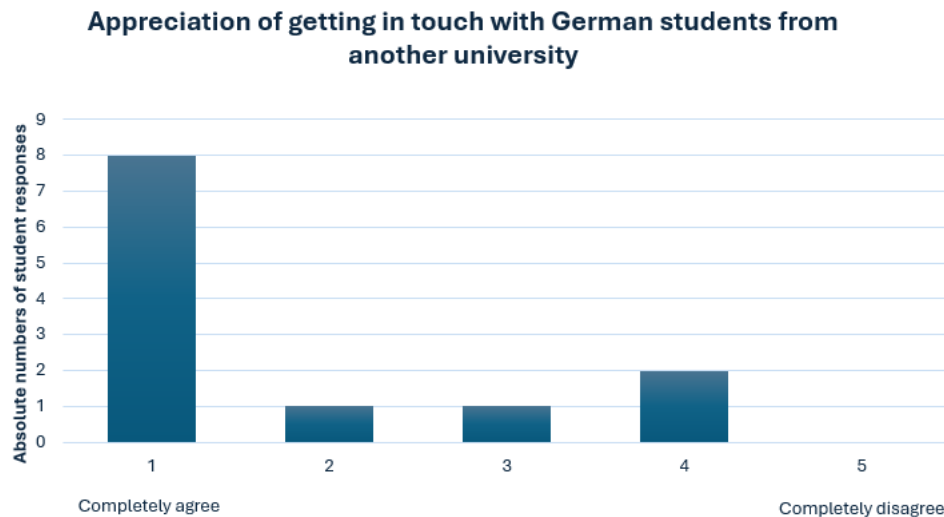
Graph 2 Finding it interesting to get in touch with German students from a different university

5. It is a very good experience to practice the language. It is also nice because we can have new perspectives.
6. I think it is useful to confront both linguistic and cultural difficulties that one may encounter while studying German language and culture.
7. I like it! It's interesting to see German as an international language.
8. I believe that an intercultural exchange in German is very important and mentally educational because you learn a lot and can improve your intercultural and communication skills.

The enhancement of the students' intercultural competencies was met with a more nuanced set of responses. The responses on the Likert-type scale showed some variation, with four students indicating that the project had facilitated an enhancement in their intercultural competencies, five students neither concurring nor dissenting, and three students expressing a contrary opinion (cf. Graph 3). Subsequently, an open-ended question was posed to ascertain the extent to which the project had assisted or hindered the students in developing their intercultural competencies. The students' responses were more favourable than those provided on the Likert-type scale (cf. student answers 9-10). However, some comments did not address intercultural competence, but rather

discussed the learning of German culture (cf. student answer 11) or language skills (cf. student answer 12).

Improvment of intercultural competence due to project
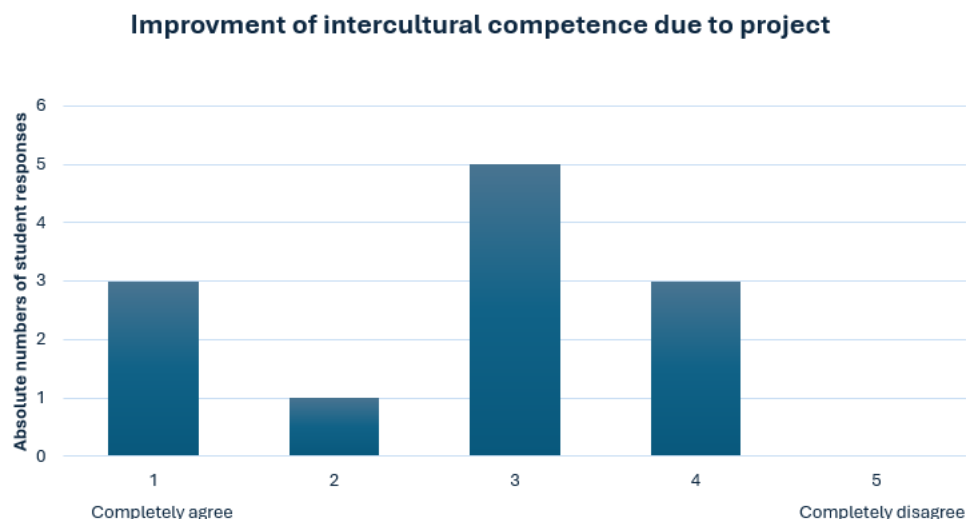
Graph 3 Perceived improvement of intercultural competence due to project

9. The cases we discussed were about our experiences of language learning and culture and, as we were talking to Italian students, they had different perspectives on the topics being discussed. Therefore, it was possible to get a broader world perspective.

10. The project helped me to improve my intercultural skills because I had the opportunity to discuss my language problems with people of another mother tongue. We all had different ideas, and this exchange of information was very useful.

11. Through the project I did not discover new things about German culture, and therefore did not improve my cultural competence. However, in the final part I liked and found interesting the question about intercultural competencies, which made me think about what they are and what it means to have them.

12. It helped talking in German with people from other countries.

The responses regarding the students' language skills were also somewhat disparate in nature. A total of six out of the twelve students indicated that their German language skills had improved as a result of the project. Five students neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement and one student disagreed with the statement (see Graph 4). A subsequent question was posed to the students, inquiring as to the extent to which they perceived the project to have assisted them in improving their German language skills. While only half of the students indicated that the project had assisted them in improving their German, the responses to the open-ended question were predominantly positive (cf. student answers 13-15). One student did, however, provide a negative response (cf. student answer 16).

Improvement of German due to project

Graph 4 Perceived improvement of German competence due to project

13. The project has helped me a lot, mainly because now I have found solutions to some of my language problems and therefore, I can try to improve my German. I believe that it is always useful to listen to other people's opinions.

14. The project helped me improve my language skills, especially my listening and comprehension skills, as I had to understand what my colleagues were saying.

15. I believe that the project helped me to be less afraid when speaking.

16. This project did not help me to improve my German because the meeting was a bit short.

Finally, the students were invited to share their opinions on the project, offering positive and negative feedback. The aspect that the student appreciated the most was the fact that the project was conducted with students of German, as opposed to with German first speakers. A significant number of students reported feeling more at ease and less apprehensive when speaking German in this context, without the sense of "linguistic inferiority" (see student responses 17-19). Other positive aspects were the topics, the ideas presented, and the diverse perspectives exchanged during the meeting to address challenges in learning German. Additionally, the active involvement of all participants through the guidance of the instructors was highlighted as positive.

17. I liked the structure of the project and interacting with German students from another country.

18. I felt free to speak because German was not the mother tongue of the other students either.

19. I like that we all have the same problems with the German language. That's why I didn't feel alone with my fears.

The primary criticism pertains to the limited time available for discussion. The majority of students indicated that they would have benefited from a longer meeting, allowing for

a more in-depth examination of each case, a greater opportunity to reflect on the contributions of their peers, and a longer speaking time (cf. student answers 20-21). Moreover, it was observed that the utilisation of ZOOM technology on occasion imped - ed effective communication, rendering it more challenging to comprehend the perspec- tives of other participants (cf. student answer 22). Ultimately, one of the student re- sponses indicated that the project did not facilitate an enhanced understanding of culture. This response (cf. student response 23) is noteworthy insofar as it exemplifies an essentialist understanding of culture as a static entity, that is to say, as something that can be clearly categorised into distinct groups, such as "us" and "them". This perspec- tive was arguably something the project sought to move away from, with an emphasis on individual reflection and the avoidance of direct comparisons, showing that "cultures are relative" (Liddicoat & Scarino 2013: 24). Nevertheless, it constitutes an essential input, demonstrating the necessity to adapt the project in order to foster more in-depth reflection and to advance a non-essentialist and critical understanding of interculturality.

20. Perhaps there was little time to think about the questions.
21. Perhaps we had too little time to talk
22. It was sometimes difficult to hear the other participants as it was on Zoom.
23. Perhaps we could discuss other topics, such as the differences between our cultures and the culture of Germany.

3.3 Discussion of results

The students' positive feedback suggests that the project was, on the whole, well received. The students valued the integration of the iRT method, which proved an effective approach to fostering collaboration between learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The discussion held during the meeting provided a forum for the exchange of new ideas, alternative perspectives, and diverse approaches to problem- solving. The opportunity to engage in an intercultural exchange with students of German abroad was met with a high level of approval. In particular, the use of German as a lingua franca, as opposed to English, and the opportunity to collaborate with other learners of the language instead of first speakers, were noted as beneficial aspects of the project. This outcome serves to reinforce the project's objective of advancing telecolla- boration formats that diverge from bilateral exchanges in which the first speaker is viewed as the "ideal cultural and linguistic expert" (Godwin-Jones 2019:16), capable and willing to offer informed comments on language use and cultural topics (Train

2006). Rather than adhering to this narrow understanding of the "native speaker", the project highlighted the need to promote a more nuanced understanding of plurilingual learner profiles by emphasising linguistic diversity.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that there are several aspects of the project that require further attention and revisions to be made in future versions. In particular, it became evident that a one-hour meeting at the end of the project was insufficient. It would have been beneficial for students if they had had additional opportunities to engage in activities leading up to the final meeting, both in-class and online. Allocating more time and linking tasks could hopefully also enhance students' perceptions of the value they derived from the project in terms of language acquisition, as this was one of the areas where the project received mixed responses. In order to facilitate these adaptations, it would be ideal for future exchange projects using the iRT method to be integrated more seamlessly into the curriculum at the different participating universities. However, this presents certain challenges, as the courses often do not run in parallel. While this is less problematic in terms of tasks and reflection activities conducted in class, it becomes more difficult in respect of arranging online meetings which must take place during class time to ensure that all students can attend.

Furthermore, future implementations of the project should consider the importance of allowing students sufficient time to become acquainted with one another, thereby establishing trust, which can in turn enable more productive discussions. This aspect was not fully addressed in the project, which concentrated on the development of analytical skills and the fostering of students' adaptability to engage in more spontaneous discussions. Nevertheless, it is evident that the desired outcomes in terms of critical reflection and collaboration would have been enhanced by an initial phase of informal interaction and familiarisation. An alternative approach to enhancing the intrinsic value of the project would be to incorporate more complex topics (e.g. structural and political realities) that prompt a more critical and analytical discussion (Agar 1994; O'Dowd 2011). By exposing students to potential disputes and challenging scenarios, their interpretative abilities and comprehension of discourses and their impact on individuals can be enhanced (Müller-Hartmann & Kurek 2016). This perspective is consistent with the view put forward by the transformative learning theory, which suggests that such complex situations can act "as catalysts for reflection and changes in viewpoint" (Crane et al. 2017: 228). In this context, it would be necessary for the teacher to take a more

active role in preparing students in order to lead a constructive and informed discussion and to avoid possible misunderstandings.

Finally, future projects should include elements that allow active discussion and reflection on the perceptions of intercultural competence and interculturality. This could entail presenting students with brief research articles on ICC[5] and developments in intercultural education. Incorporating this phase could assist students in connecting theory and practice (Belz 2002; Schneider & Von der Emde 2006) more effectively and can help to promote a non-essentialist understanding of culture.

4. Conclusion and outlook

The project demonstrated that integrating the iRT method into telecollaborative language projects can offer invaluable opportunities for reflection and foster engagement among students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While not all of the objectives were met during the pilot phase of the project, the overall feedback was still positive. The incorporation of feedback received will inform the design of subsequent projects, which will include additional phases as previously discussed. As the cohort of students participating in the inaugural project was relatively limited in size, the feedback collected is not sufficiently representative and further data must be gathered. In pursuit of this objective, we are currently engaged in the process of establishing an international network of German teachers who utilise this methodology in their teaching practice. To date, the University of Barcelona and the University of Bologna have expressed interest in participating. At this time, we are still in discussion regarding the alignment of the modules, with the goal of potentially running the next telecollaborative project in 2025.

Should this prove successful, the intention is to extend the network beyond German as a foreign language, thereby opening it up to language learners and teachers of different languages. Plans are also in place to collaborate more closely with the original intercultural reflection team with the objective of further developing the approach, with a stronger focus on students.

---

[5]   Intercultural communicative competence, as defined by Byram (1997: 2021).

References

AdvanceHE & QAA (2021) Education for Sustainable Development Guidance. Executive Summary. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/education-sustainable-development-guidance.

Agar, Michael (1994) The intercultural frame. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18 (2), 221–237.

Beacco, Jean-Claude; Byram, Michael; Cavalli, Marisa; Coste, Daniel; Egli Cuenat, Mirjam; Goullier, Francis; Panthier, Johanna (2016) *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education.* Council of Europe Publishing.

Belz, Julie. A. (2002) Social dimensions of telecollaborative foreign language study. *Language Learning & Technology*, 6 (1), 60–81.

Beelen, Jos; Jones, Elspeth (2015) Redefining Internationalisation at Home. In: Curaj, Adrian; Matei, Liviu; Pricopie, Remus; Salmi, Jamil; Scott, Peter (eds*.) The European Higher Education Area*. Springer: Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-208770_5.

Byram, Michael (1997) *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, Michael; Wagner, Manuela (2018) Making a difference: Language teaching for intercultural and international dialogue. *Foreign Language Annals*, 51 (1), 140–151.

Byram, Michael (2021) *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence: Revisited*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Chun, Dorothy M. (2015) Language and culture learning in higher education via telecollaboration. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 10 (1), 5–21.

Chun, Dorothy. M. (2014) "Cultura"-Inspired Intercultural Exchanges: Focus on Asian and Pacific Languages. *LLCMC Pre-conference Event / 2nd Cultura Conference National Foreign Language Resource Center*, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Çiftçi, Emrullah Yasin; Savaş, Perihan (2018) The role of telecollaboration in language and intercultural learning: A synthesis of studies published between 2010 and 2015. *ReCALL*, 30 (3), 278–298.

Council of Europe (2020) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing. http://www.coe.int/lang-cefr.

Crane, Cori; Fingerhuth, Matthias; Hünlich, David (2017) "What makes this so complicated?" On the value of disorienting dilemmas in language instruction. In: Dubreil, Sebastien; Thorne, Steven L. (eds.) *Engaging the World: Social Pedagogies and Language Learning*. Boston: Cengage, 227-253.

Da Costa, Leila Martins Goncalves; Salomao, Anna Cristina Biondo; Maisa de Alcântara, Zakir (2018) Transcultural and transcontinental telecollaboration for foreign language learning: Proposals and challenges. *Revista do GEL*, 15 (3), 26-41.

Dooly, Melinda; O'Dowd, Robert (2018) *In this together: Teachers' experiences with transnational, telecollaborative language learning projects*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Ensor, Simon; Kleban, Marcin; Rodrigues, Christine (2017) Telecollaboration: Foreign language teachers (re)defining their role. *ALSIC* 20 (2). https://journals.openedition.org/alsic/3140

European Commission. (2020) *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age*.

European Union. (2019) Key competences for lifelong learning. *Publications Office of the European Union*. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/569540.

Flowers, Simeon; Kelsen, Brent; Cvitkovic, Bob (2019) Learner autonomy versus guided reflection: How different methodologies affect intercultural development in online intercultural exchange. *ReCALL*, 31 (1), 1–17.

Furstenberg, Gilberte; English, Kathryn. (2016) Cultura revisited. *Language Learning & Technology*, 20 (2), 172–178.

Godwin-Jones, Robert (2019) Telecollaboration as an approach to developing inter-cultural communication competence. *Language Learning & Technology,* 23 (3), 8–28.

Guarda, Marta (2013) *Negotiating a transcultural place in an English as a lingua franca telecollaboration exchange*. Unpublished PhD thesis. http://paduaresearch.cab.unipd.it/5337/1/guarda_marta_tesi.pdf.

Guth, Sarah; Helm, Francesca (2010) Introduction. In: Guth, Sarah; Helm, Francesca *Telecollaboration 2.0: Languages, literacies and intercultural learning in the 21st century*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 13-39.

Guth, Sarah; Helm, Francesca; O'Dowd, Robert (2012) *University language classes collaborating online. A report on the integration of telecollaborative networks in European universities.* www.intent-project.eu.

Hauck, Mirjam (2007) Critical success factors in a TRIDEM exchange. *ReCALL*, 19 (2), 202-223.

Holliday, Adrian (1999) Small cultures. *Applied linguistics*, 20 (2), 237–264.

Holliday, Adrian; MacDonald, Malcom N. (2020) Researching the intercultural: Intersubjectivity and the problem with postpositivism. *Applied Linguistics*, 41 (5), 621–639. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz006.

Jackson, Jane (ed.) (2012) *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication*. New York: Routledge.

Kirschner, L. Lynette (2015) Combining Skype with blogging: A chance to stop reinforcement of stereotypes in intercultural exchanges? *The EuroCALL Review*, 23 (1), 24–30.

Kramsch, Claire (2014) Teaching foreign languages in an era of globalization: Introduction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 98 (1), 296-311.

Lewis, Tim; O'Dowd, Robert (2016) Introduction to online intercultural exchange and this volume. In: O'Dowd, Robert; Lewis, Tim (eds.) *Online Intercultural Exchange: Policy, Pedagogy, Practice*. London: Routledge, 17-34.

Liddicoat, Anthony. J.; Scarino, Angela (2013) Technologies in intercultural language teaching and learning. In: Liddicoat, Anthony. J.; Scarino, Angela (eds.) *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 107-121.

Loch, Agnes; Pál, Ágnes (2020) Developing intercultural communicative competence through telecollaborative modules integrated in foreign language and intercultural

communication university courses. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 28 (2), 1125-1141.

Müller-Hartmann, Andreas.; Kurek, Malgorzata (2016) Virtual group formation and the process of task design in online intercultural exchanges. In: O'Dowd, Robert; Lewis, Tim (eds.) *Online Intercultural Exchange*. London: Routledge, 145-163.

O'Dowd, Robert; O'Rourke, Breffni (2019) New developments in virtual exchange for foreign language education. *Language Learning & Technology*, 23 (3), 1–7.

O'Dowd, Robert (2016) Emerging trends and new directions in telecollaborative learning. *CALICO Journal*, 33 (3), 291–310.

O'Dowd, Robert; Lewis, Tim (2016) *Online Intercultural Exchange*. London: Routledge.

O'Dowd, Robert (2011) Intercultural communicative competence through telecollaboration. In: Jackson, Jane (ed.) *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication*. New York: Routledge, 340–356.

Quality Assurance Agency (2023) *Subject benchmark statement: Languages, cultures and societies*. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-languages-cultures-and-societies.

Peskoller, Jasmin (2022a) Interkulturelles Lernen als Grundlage nachhaltiger Bildung. Einblicke in eine Lehrwerksanalyse für das Fach Englisch. In: Sippl, Carmen; Rauscher, Erwin (eds.) *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit Lernen und Lehren*. Innsbruck, Wien: Studienverlag, 411–424.

Peskoller, Jasmin (2022b) Unity in diversity: Exploring intercultural teaching and learning practices in secondary education and teacher training in Austria. In: Dervin, Fred; Yuan, Mei (eds.) *Teaching Interculturality 'Otherwise'*. London: Routledge, 33-54

Reimann, Nicola; Rajab, Taha; Rattray, Julie; Dragas, Areti; Murry, Malcom (2020) *Intercultural Reflecting Team, Walk-Through Guide for Facilitators*. https://intref.webspace.durham.ac.uk.

Risager, Karen (2012) Linguaculture and transnationality: The cultural dimensions of language. In: Jackson, Jane (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*. London: Routledge, 101–115.

Risager, Karen (2018) *Representations of the World in Language Textbooks*. Bristol and Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Multilingual Matters.

Schneider, Jeffrey; Von der Emde, Silke (2006) Conflicts in cyberspace: From communication breakdown to intercultural dialogue in online collaborations. In: Belz, Julie; Thorne, Steven L. (eds.) *Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education*. Boston: Thomson Heinle, 178–206.

Thorne, Steven (2016) Foreword: The virtual internationalization turn in language study. In: O'Dowd, Robert; Lewis, Tim (eds.) *Online intercultural exchange: Policy, pedagogy, practice.* London: Routledge, ix–xi.

Train, Robert (2006) A critical look at technologies and ideologies in internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education. In: Belz, Julie; Thorne, Steven L. (Eds.), *Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education*. Boston: Thomson Heinle, 247–284.

UNESCO (2015) *Global citizenship education: topics and learning objectives*. https://doi.org/10.54675/DRHC3544.

UNESCO (2018) *A Global Framework of Reference on Digital Literacy Skills for Indicator 4.4.2.* Information Paper No. 51, ip51-global-framework-reference-digital-literacy-skills-2018-en.pdf.

Villar-Onrubia, Daniel; Morini, Luca; Marín, Victoria. I.; Nascimbeni, Fabio (2022) Critical digital literacy as a key for (post)digital citizenship: An international review of teacher competence frameworks. *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society*, 18(3), 128-139. https://doi.org/10.20368/1971-8829/1135697.

Yang, Se Jeong (2020) Perceived Benefits of Using Telecollaboration for Pre-Service English Teachers. *English Teaching* 75 (3), 109-131.

Biographical information

Sabrina Link is a lecturer for German as a foreign language and German linguistics at the Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo in Italy. Her fields of research include gender-fair language, GFL didactics, project-based teaching, lexis and pragmatics. Recent publications: Gendergerechte Personenreferenzen und ihre Integration in den universitären DaF-Unterricht: ein Experiment. *German as a Foreign Language* 3 (23). 33-55; Link, Sabrina (2024). The use of gender-inclusive language in Austrian, German, and Swiss broadsheets: a contrastive, corpus-based study. *Lingua 308,* 1-16. E-mail address: sabrina.link@uniurb.it

Laura Lewis is an Assistant Professor and Director of Studies (Strategy) at the Centre for Foreign Languages at Durham University, where she is responsible for coordinating the German section. Her research interests include the application of AfL approaches in higher education, AI in GFL, interculturality in GFL, and the potential of literature in this context. Recent publications: Coderch, M., & Lewis, L. (2024). Towards sustainable assessment formats in language teaching: testing integrated skills with portfolio-based tasks. Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 1, 87–96. E-mail address: laura.h.wichmann@durham.ac.uk

Key words

IntRef method, Critical reflection, Interculturality, German as a Foreign Language, Telecollaboration

Appendix

Feedback questionnaire

Feedbackformular Interkulturelles Reflexionsteam

Liebe Studierende,

herzlichen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme an dem Telekollaborativen Austauschprojekt. Wir wären Ihnen sehr dankbar für Ihr Feedback. Das Feedback ist anonym und wird nicht länger als 10
Minuten Ihrer Zeit in Anspruch nehmen. Sie können Ihre Antworten gern auch auf Italienisch/Englisch schreiben.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Dr Sabrina Link und Laura Lewis

Hat Ihnen das Projekt geholfen, ein Problem zu reflektieren / neue Perspektiven auf ein Problem zu gewinnen? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Ich stimme auf jeden Fall zu	○	○	○	○	○	Ich stimme überhaupt nicht zu

---

Wie finden Sie das Konzept eines interkulturellen Austauschs in deutscher Sprache? Bitte begründen Sie Ihre Antwort. *

Your answer

Was halten Sie von der InterRef-Methode? *

Your answer

Fanden Sie es spannend, mit Deutschstudierenden einer anderen Universität in Austausch zu treten? *

1 2 3 4 5

Ich stimme auf jeden Fall zu ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Ich stimme überhaupt nicht zu

Hat Ihnen das Projekt geholfen, Ihre sprachlichen Deutschkenntnisse zu verbessern? *

1 2 3 4 5

Ich stimme auf jeden Fall zu ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Ich stimme überhaupt nicht zu

Kommentieren Sie, inwiefern hat Ihnen das Projekt geholfen, Ihre sprachlichen Deutschkenntnisse zu verbessern bzw. nicht zu verbessern? *

Your answer

Hat Ihnen das Projekt geholfen, Ihre interkulturellen Kompetenzen zu verbessern? *

1 2 3 4 5

Ich stimme auf jeden Fall zu ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Ich stimme überhaupt nicht zu

Kommentieren Sie, inwiefern hat Ihnen das Projekt geholfen, Ihre interkulturellen Kompetenzen zu verbessern bzw. nicht zu verbessern? *

Your answer

Was hat Ihnen an dem Projekt gefallen? *

Your answer

Was hat Ihnen an dem Projekt nicht gefallen? *

Your answer