

Original Paper

Practical Challenges to Teachers and Students in Asynchronous Cross-cultural Communication Projects

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Abstract

Teachers are expected to prepare their students for life in a world that changes daily, fueled by technological progress and globalisation (Howells, 2018). In this internationalized world, English has become the lingua franca for business, science and education (Tatsioka et al., 2018). Young professionals are expected to be proficient in English and able to easily communicate with colleagues from other countries. Achieving these objectives presents challenges for teachers and students.

Practical approaches to incorporating authentic communication across cultures in the English language classroom are discussed in this paper. Over three years we authors implemented several projects using different didactic methods to bring students from Japan and Germany together to improve their proficiency in language as well as their cross-cultural communication skills. Students worked in small teams on joint tasks, in which the use of ICT (information and communication technologies) was crucial to successful outcome. Naturally, any careful advance planning was quickly met by the emergence of unforeseen problems that needed immediate attention from teachers and students.

In this paper, we focus on challenges teachers and students may encounter when developing new strategies to include meaningful cross-cultural and intercultural exchanges in the tertiary ELF classroom, based on teacher and student experiences.

Keywords

cross-cultural communication, asynchronous virtual projects, higher education, online learning

1. Introduction

Over the past three years, we have created and implemented five projects in our English language classrooms that were aimed at strengthening both language and cross-culture communication skills of our students. Those projects were completed with varying degrees of success. The majority of our students are pre-service engineers and often not very interested in language learning. Nevertheless, we also found that students from other academic backgrounds such as health science or media had a more open attitude to languages and cross-cultural communication projects. Additionally, in some of our projects, we not only included students from our countries of residence (Germany and Japan), but also from various parts of Africa, Asia and Europe, who were studying in Germany.

In this collaboration, our initial idea was to increase our students' motivation and language proficiency by providing a very hands-on experience of working with colleagues from another country and the subsequent necessity to use English as a common language. We were very conscious of the challenges that many EFL/ESL teachers face in their classrooms: motivating students in their use of English and offering them opportunities to use English as a means of communication rather than an object of study. However, initially, we were unaware that such a cross-cultural virtual exchange might be a "very complex and difficult activity to integrate and use in the foreign language classroom" (O'Dowd, 2012, p. 350).

The beginning of the collaboration presented here, was very spontaneous. From idea to implementation of the first project in the classrooms, less than two weeks passed. Though fuelled by enthusiasm, at least on the teachers' side, it is easy to imagine that we soon became aware of numerous challenges throughout the course of the project. This paper covers challenges that we have faced in our projects, literature to frame our experience, and notes that we feel are most pertinent to consider when embarking on an asynchronous cross-cultural communication project.

2. Background

The interactions that took place and that we refer to in this paper, were between students studying at a German science university and students at a Japanese science university. In this context, we will briefly discuss the terms intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication. While these two terms are often used synonymously, some voices in literature differentiate in their interpretation. For example, Tichnor-Wagner., Parkhouse, Glazier, & Cain (2019) state that intercultural communication is "also referred to as cross-cultural communication" which is comprised of several elements, including an awareness of differences in communication, both verbally and non-verbally. Indeed, they are closely connected, however, when we ask how those two terms are understood in the respective languages of the participants, we can see that the German language, for example, implies that a cross-cultural study may be analytical, or compares cultures, but also where interaction between those of different cultural backgrounds is taking place. Intercultural communication, however has a different nuance that implies

interaction in the German language. Japanese researchers translate the two English terms seemingly indiscriminately into one of two terms in Japanese. Yashiro & Wakita (2001) define intercultural communication as a place where ‘my common sense is not yours, and your common sense is not mine’. Holliday says, “interculturality is a reflexive awareness of Self and Other” which aligns with Yashiro & Wakita (ibid.). We acknowledge that not all languages have both words (such as French which uses “intercultural” for intercultural, but for cross-cultural the translation is less straightforward).

Intercultural communication requires an examination of oneself, one’s own culture and the perception of others. It is through intercultural communication that “students are expected to recognise aspects of culture and create their own communication styles to accomplish the objectives” (Tasaki, 2020, p. 96). Cross-cultural communication also acknowledges a difference in cultures, but the focus lies less on application of the knowledge, or the practicalities of communicating, and more on the differences of cultures and the way they communicate. In short, we focused more on the practicalities of communicating with people from different cultural languages and background, and while doing so learning about them. Therefore, in the context of this study, we formalize the occurrence of cross-cultural communication when students from different cultural backgrounds meet and interact, which may include making comparisons between their respective countries. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the two terms are intertwined and due to the nature of our projects cannot be separated. The terms intercultural communication, and cross-cultural communication are used throughout the paper on this basis. However, where the literature may deviate from our definitions, we have not changed the terminology therein.

The majority of Japanese students have had limited experience communicating with someone from a different cultural background, let alone intercultural encounters. They are often anxious to enter into any conversation with “a foreigner” and it has long been accepted that Japanese EFL learners are reluctant to speak in English (Cutrone, 2009). On the other hand, while the German students have more contact with others from different countries, their awareness of “interculturality” is almost non-existent. Therefore, it is of little surprise that in pre-project surveys, most of our students’ worldview can be qualified as essentialist. For example, comments that were given ran along the lines of “Germans drink beer”, and “Japanese people eat sushi”. As a consequence, we consciously aim to expand our students’ understanding of culture to encompass “the skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed to improve interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity and so on) or across borders” (Deardorff, 2020, p. i). We endeavour to foster the awareness that perceived differences are based more on individual notions of identity than on national cultures when engaging with students from abroad. Thus, we seek to train and strengthen our students’ “ability to relate constructively to people who have mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one’s own” (Dypedahl, 2019, p. 102) in our projects.

In creating and assigning tasks to our students, we put the focus on individual experiences and preferences that are to be shared with their respective partners from the other country. Our focus is thus less on “broad constructs like ‘culture’ and more on the everyday concrete actions through which culture is produced” by the individual (Scollon, 2012, p. 18).

However, while our projects are designed to enhance our students’ intercultural competence, we also need to be aware of how relatively little time we were able to spend on them. Most of the projects only make a very small part of an otherwise packed syllabus and need to use a fairly uncomplicated approach to be successfully completed by our students. Since we put a strong emphasis on relationship building and cooperation, we ask our students to communicate with their partners abroad regularly via a chat app or video chats. We encourage them to discover personal commonalities and differences that stem from being part of different identity-groups such as age, gender or interests rather than different countries. However, due to the short-term nature of the projects we have implemented so far, personal relationships between our students often stay on the surface. Nevertheless, there are also teams in which students have continued communicating with each other long after a project had ended.

Finally, before embarking on describing the challenges that surfaced to both teachers and the students, it should be noted that in each project ethical procedures were followed. However, this paper shares summaries of issues that arose during our projects, rather than details of data from individual projects that would require the use of pseudonyms.

3. Challenges for the Teachers

3.1 The Syllabus

One of the first challenges a teacher may face is positioning an exchange within the frame of a syllabus, deciding goals, working out details of implementation and grading. O’Dowd (2016) argues that telecollaboration should not only be integrated into current study programmes, but also be used as “alternative credit systems for students” (Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016). Furthermore, when working with engineering students “[d]esigning an appropriate syllabus, selecting appropriate materials and methodology for teaching English language and culture in a technical university with a view of developing the engineering students’ cross-cultural understanding, constitutes a challenge for language teachers as they have to enhance everyone’s motivation to learn and communicate” (Catana, 2014, p. 346). There are a number of ways to approach this and the solution is going to depend on a number of interdependent factors. Nevertheless, organising a cross-cultural project means taking on quite a considerable amount of additional work. Teachers lead busy lives: In tertiary education our roles include teaching, conducting research, writing papers, being part of university committees or academic organisations, and working on a variety of other projects at any given time. Consequently, when adding a cross-cultural project to your regular workload, you must be prepared that this will put increased pressure and demands on your time.

Many teachers have to deliver a prescribed syllabus content whilst wishing to impart what they perceive will be necessary for students in their futures. Those with complete freedom over the syllabus are left to determine what should take priority in the EFL classroom. Both of these situations can be challenging as our world becomes increasingly complex. Syllabi can “enable the students to acknowledge and evaluate cultural differences, to empathize with other cultures, to enhance their motivation to learn and their ability to act in line with the rules of the culture they will encounter in their lifelong work and social experience” (Catana, 2014, p. 345). Therefore, finding the focus of any project is of primary importance.

While deep learning and AI are delivering increasingly high-quality text translations, and reliance on those tools will become inevitable in a future work environment, cross-cultural projects challenge students on many different levels-giving them a learning experience beyond translations of text whilst facilitating communication. Thus, examining what to teach, how to teach and when to teach, need to be examined.

Consequently, in this part we discuss some of the underpinning challenges teachers face when embarking on the more practical aspects of conducting an asynchronous cross-cultural communication project, including what the students need to learn, or should learn, and why.

Having successfully weaved a telecommunication project into your syllabus, the question of evaluating the project arises. There are two aspects to the evaluation: the tally of the project in the whole syllabus, and the evaluation of the project itself.

It is important to assess the coursework in the class, and determine the portion that can reasonably be allotted to the project. In many cases, it is not possible to commit 100% of the course evaluation to a telecommunication project despite O’Dowd’s (2016) case for doing so. When deciding the tally of the project in the course, it is also important to respect the decision the other teacher(s) you may be working with. Therefore, it is possible that in one country the participants will have a greater weighting of their course on the project, than in another. This may affect the degree of success of the project and thus it is helpful to be aware of decisions made by other teacher(s).

With the evaluation of the project, again, we would like to emphasise the importance of mutual respect. Some teachers may choose to evaluate the amount of interaction between participants, or the outcomes of the interactions. These are relatively easy to understand for the students and for the teachers to create a grading framework. However, other teachers may wish to approach grading from a different perspective. Leontjev and DeBoer illustrate how in one study “learners used multimodal resources to develop their English and conceptual understanding” (2020, p. 14). This insight would not have been achieved if the interaction between students had not been carefully examined. Furthermore, this may be attractive to a teacher who wishes to evaluate language development. However, with telecommunication projects, it is also possible to focus evaluation on aspects such as Bloom’s taxonomy, or critical thinking skills. In such cases, the project can be organised so that participants’

feedback, or other responses, will provide evidence for grading. Since our students' interactions are generally on LINE, and the privacy of their communication is respected, we chose the latter approach for evaluation.

3.2 Cultural Aspects

Teachers in tertiary education are tasked with preparing students to succeed in a world that is complex and rapidly changing. Perpetual developments in technology and globalisation challenge teachers and students on social, economic, and environmental levels (Howells, 2018). According to the OECD and other organizations aiming to define and explain skills needed for the demands of a global workplace, communication and, more specifically, intercultural communication are of top priority (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Communication is no longer understood as immediate, face-to-face interactions, but includes digital formats since students need to "have the ability to communicate, exchange, criticise, and present information and ideas, including the use of ICT [Information and Communications Technology] applications to participate and make positive contributions to the digital culture" (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009, p. 5).

There are many facets to intercultural communication which not only focus on language but also negotiation skills, a knowledge of hindrances, diversity awareness, non-verbal communication, and communicative business skills such as giving presentations (Gibson, 2002). Many teachers are already aware of, and teach, business communication skills to their students. These are often called "hard communication skills", which we define as a communication skill that predominantly relies on the deliverer of the message.

"Soft communication skills" are defined as skills that rely on communication between two or more participants where the outcome relies heavily on the participants (e.g., negotiation). Needless to say, the hard communication skills are more concrete, the outcomes more controllable and predicable; thus it is easier to create a framework with which to teach them. There are abundant variables in soft communication skills, which make them harder to implement in the EFL context. Additionally, when communication is taking place predominantly online, it is difficult to access, whereas written language is available for interpretation. These all interlink with the challenge of how to evaluate or grade students' coursework as mentioned above.

Consequently, when conducting a project such as we describe, reflection on the cultural aspects are fundamental. Gibson states that "in intercultural communication it is vital to distinguish between what is part of a person's cultural background and what is part of their personality" (2002, p. 12). One way to approach this may be to follow Hadley's suggestion which says that the first step in "teaching for cultural understanding in our classroom" is "becoming aware of our own biases" (2001, p. 354) for both teacher and student. Additionally, Williams and Burden point out that:

Humanistic teaching, therefore, is not just learner-centred, but person-centred. A teacher's view of teaching mirrors [a] view of [oneself] and [one's] teaching behaviour reflects [one's]

essence as a person. One consequence of taking such an approach is having to accept that teaching is an expression of values and attitudes, not just information or knowledge. Another consequence is that teachers must recognize that they themselves are constantly involved in a lifelong process of learning and change. (1997, p. 63)

Certainly, for a teacher to be aware of their own cultural biases is vital to facilitating intercultural communication projects.

Meanwhile, another approach that can be taken is to start with establishing a “sphere of interculturality”, emphasising the diversity that exists within all cultures and then critically examining “cultural content” (McKay, 2002). Regardless of one’s teaching situation, we have found that being aware of one’s own cultural biases as a teacher, and respecting and understanding those of the students, helps lay a foundation which facilitates reducing potential hindrances. Nevertheless, how this is done, and the depth to which is it done may be dictated by several factors including logistical limitations imposed by time, teaching tools and methods, as well as syllabus requirements.

Therefore, teachers need to decide on the priority for each project. We recommend continually focusing on the aims of the project and revisiting them as the project proceeds. Consequently, teachers need to evaluate their own situation, and prioritise what they deem necessary for their students. In our situations, we chose to focus on cultural background as a starting point for all our projects while maintaining teacher-teacher communication throughout the project. Often, it is a challenge to find, take, and give the time needed to guarantee smooth execution of the project. It cannot be overstated that flexibility, honest communication, and the willingness to support one another is fundamental.

3.3 Communication

Above all, good communication in all directions is vital to an intercultural project: between teachers, teachers and students, and the students themselves. The main communication tool for us teachers was email. However, we also tried to meet via video conference as regularly as possible. While we did not use this tool as much at the beginning of our collaboration, we noticed the high value of direct conversation during our third project. When time differences are an issue, as in our case, emails are easier. Nevertheless, while a project is active, direct feedback, reassessing expectations and quick adjustments to strategies are imperative. Video exchanges enable the teachers to “alter the logistics of the exchange to adapt to developments and problems as they arise” (O’Dowd, 2015a, p. 67). Furthermore, this face-to-face communication also helps the teachers to become more familiar with each other.

Throughout all stages, clear and honest communication between the teachers involved is required. Since our first project was created so spontaneously, we did not give much thought to our own expectations towards the projects. This led to a misunderstanding, which translated to some confusion for our students. In later projects, we always made a point of discussing the academic background of our students and the outcomes we aimed to achieve. When team-teaching, especially with a colleague

from abroad, mutual understanding, tolerance and respect are the foundation of success. These aspects will strengthen when a personal level is added.

3.4 Tools and Instruments

Having decided to include an exchange into the syllabus, the logistics need to be planned carefully. How are the students to interact? If you participate in an externally organised exchange, then only limited technological access or knowledge might be needed. One such example is the International Virtual Exchange Project which has had seven thousand participants from 15 different countries, and which has taken place on a Moodle platform on which participants and teachers enroll (Hagley, 2020). Such large projects with defined goals and parameters tend to be less flexible and while only limited technical knowledge is needed teachers still need to be prepared to learn how to use the interface tools. Thus, regardless of the type of project, the teachers need to decide on communication tools. In our case, communication between teacher and students pre-dominantly happens in class (whether face-to-face or virtual) and/or via email. Other technological tools are also useful in asynchronous projects. However, choosing and finding the right tool is not always easy, as the “wide range of options can be daunting for inexperienced practitioners” (O’Dowd, 2015b, p. 5).

Overall, for general communication we have experimented with emails, messaging apps, google docs, Survey Monkey and Moodle. While google docs and Survey Monkey both have the advantage that students from both countries can access the survey, sharing and analysing the results were not very practical. Since both universities use Moodle as an LMS, we settled on this tool often, as it was simply the easiest way for teachers to collect information from their own student cohorts. We collected feedback from our students mainly using the feedback module on Moodle. By the end of our fifth project we found teacher-teacher communication worked best using emails (as mentioned above), LINE (a powerful messaging app which we outline in more detail below) and a shared Moodle course which served as a space for sharing documents between us teachers.

To facilitate easy and immediate communication between students in our first project, we chose to include a chat, or messaging, app. We knew that the majority of students were already using chat apps frequently and thus were familiar with this method of communication. In Japan, the app LINE was most popular; in Germany, students regularly used WhatsApp. We decided on the app LINE for several reasons. Firstly, LINE allows users to create a QR code to add contacts. Since students might have been uncomfortable sharing their private phone numbers, we deemed this as appropriate for protecting students’ personal information and data (Sato & Horn, 2020). Secondly, the first project was rather spontaneous, and rapid in its inception as mentioned above. The German students involved in this first project were media students. Consequently, we correctly assumed that they might enjoy trying out a new chat app. Knowing your students helps reduce hindrances in the exchanges. Ultimately, finding LINE suitable we have continued with it for all the remaining projects together.

As mentioned above, both of our universities use Moodle. With this background, for the exchange platform in project 3, we used Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) and linked our institutions' Moodle courses to a central Moodle course. This was achieved as "LTI can be utilized for integrating different remote activities for advanced online collaboration" (Harashima et al., 2015). In Project 3, we also introduced another new element: a synchronous meeting of all participants via Skype. During the meeting, students could participate in a quiz using laptops or cell phones. The answers to the questions appeared on the screen either in the form of a diagram, a word cloud or text for everyone to see. Some of the responses led to further questions directed at students, which individual students would answer. In our fourth project, we invited all students to a MoodleCloud course, where we could share information and facilitate different types of communication. One conversation platform was the forum on Moodle, where each week a new question (e.g., What do you like about your home town/country?) was posted and answered by students. Project 5 was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic when our classes were online. To streamline the project we returned to LINE for the students to communicate directly with one another, and for us teachers: emails, LINE, video conferencing and our shared Moodle course for sharing documents. Ultimately, finding what works for both teachers has taken some time and testing, but eventually, we have settled on tools that we know or are familiar with, have found easy to use, and with which we are comfortable.

3.5 Teacher Collaboration

Teacher collaboration on a project can either reduce tensions and facilitate the project, or increase tensions and possibly hinder it. Therefore, it is helpful to be aware of the socio-constructivist approaches that underpin such exchanges:

[w]hile telecollaborative teachers do often come to exchanges with widely shared beliefs about teaching and learning, ... It is precisely the ability to tolerate and work with these differences that is part of the intercultural skills and beliefs of the telecollaborative teacher. (O'Dowd, 2013)

Being comfortable working together in the project, being open to ideas, and being flexible in our execution of the projects are three components that have facilitated the collaboration in the projects. Using these three components as a check-post is recommended for any type of cross-cultural project preparation.

The demands on teachers when engaging in cross-cultural, online collaborations are manifold. O'Dowd (2015a) has created a set of 40 descriptors of what is expected from a teacher in such projects which may serve as a useful reference for teachers wishing to prepare before embarking on an exchange. The descriptors are in four sections: "(a) organisational, (b) pedagogical, (c) digital competences, and (d) attitudes and beliefs" (p. 66). In the above sections, we have touched on all of these four areas.

Consequently, a critical aspect to the success of projects is the mind-set of the teachers collaborating on the project. They need to be open to another country's cultural beliefs and traditions, especially, but not exclusively, with regard to foreign language teaching. One crucial aspect is the ability of the teacher to "prepare students for their online interaction, to debrief following contact with their partners" (O'Dowd, 2015a, p. 66). Therefore, having illuminated some of the most pertinent challenges to teachers we now turn to the challenges students may encounter when participating in online exchange programmes.

4. Challenges to Students

Challenges to students come from various directions. In the increasingly global society in which we live today, reliance on import/export of goods, services, and information is increasing. Even though students may not envisage working overseas, or even in an intercultural environment, raising awareness to be a responsible, educated global citizen is pertinent. However, in science universities, we have observed that students are not always strong communicators. This is even more the case when we challenge them to communicate in a foreign language (Sato & Horn, 2020).

Nevertheless, globalisation has been an external force affecting business (Gibson, 2002). In turn, this has trickled down into education where instructors strive to equip students for their future as part of a global community. This is where the challenge to the teacher lies; how to integrate 21st century skills into the academic environment, and more specifically, the EFL classroom. 21st century skills, which focus on life-long learning skills and competencies, offer a new definition of what teachers need to keep in mind when designing classes. Binkley et al. defined four categories and ten skills that reflect the needs of life-long learners. The first category, "ways of thinking" includes the skills: creativity and innovation, critical thinking (problem solving, decision making) and learning to learn (metacognition). The second category, "ways of working" lists important skills such as communication and collaboration (teamwork). The "tools for working" are defined in category three as information literacy and ICT literacy. Lastly, in category four we find essential skills that reflect an increasingly global world with citizenship (local and global), life and career and personal and social responsibility (including cultural awareness and competence) (2012, pp. 18-19).

All of these 21st century skills play an important part in cross-cultural projects. Where teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) has relied on students gaining linguistic competence, in an intercultural communicative settings participants also need interactional competence and sociocultural awareness (Gibson, 2002). Preparing students for the projects and guiding them through the process is important for successful completion.

4.1 Preparing Students for Projects

Often a curriculum focuses on target vocabulary as well as the linguistic structures (such as grammar and syntax), which students are accustomed to learning, and being graded on. Nevertheless, topics that may arise in students' future careers spanning 30 years post university studies could very well include

issues covered in the limited time given to studying EFL at university. Therefore, expanding the current curriculum to equip students for competent communication in the global workplace is an element that instructors need to consider teaching. Meanwhile, students must be made aware that such studies have considerable benefits (Hagley, 2020).

When preparing students for the global business context there are three elements an instructor might consider as the focus for the students: global awareness, global perspective, and global engagement. Global awareness may include the students showing an awareness of cultural differences and how these may affect their workplace in later life. Global perspectives may include examining a problem in a business setting (possibly through a case study) as a foundation to teaching students how to solve a problem considering local and international cultural understandings (Catana, 2014). While these can expand the knowledge base of the student, undertaking a project will also expand their experience.

Global engagement requires students to work collaboratively to find practical solutions to global issues, whilst considering the global and intercultural elements of the context. Therefore, the instructor(s) should determine the extent to which students can work within the practical limitations of working and learning in a project (such as time, study load) whilst also choosing which elements students should engage with or experience. In other words, knowing your students and tailoring the focus of the project to their needs is elemental.

4.2 The Projects

Finding the focus suitable for the students is one factor teachers have to consider, but students also need to perceive they are learning something new, and relevant. Out of the EFL context, international business communication courses are taught, which include instruction on appropriate use of (English) language. As we were working with students who often had a limited proficiency in English, one challenge was to integrate linguistic elements into the practical side of the project. In our first project, we were able to reduce the linguistic challenge by using their knowledge about their field of study as a foundation for the project. This was possible since the participating students in both countries were media students in mandatory classes. In doing this, the students had a springboard from which they were able to rise up and overcome challenges that appeared.

In all of the projects, it was central to us teachers that students recognise the importance of English as an instrument to achieve a goal. The objective of some of the tasks that were given to students were to create a video giving cultural advice to a business traveller from the other country, create a joint PowerPoint presentation with narration on a topic such as festivals, education, or our students' carbon footprints. Simultaneously, we encouraged and provided avenues through which students could forge more personal relationships with other students. Whether students worked in larger or smaller groups, in teams of four or two, they used Line to communicate with each other on a more personal level. Thus, we also integrated the use of Line to create a platform where the students could get to know each other unmonitored by teachers, and from which they were to introduce their partners to the class in their

respective universities. As already mentioned above, we introduced a synchronous video meeting between the participants in both countries, which was received very well by the students.

Through these avenues, we were able to combine the challenges of the EFL classroom and the ten 21st century skills mentioned above, to achieve the aims, which were to engage and ultimately challenge our learners to become more responsible citizens of the world.

4.3 Frequency of Communication and Time Difference

Despite achieving the goals, cross-cultural projects can hold a number of challenges for the students. Considering the geographical distance, one of the main issues for participants was working in different time zones.

Time lags between posts were quite common. Students, who expected quick replies, were often frustrated. On a more positive note, others mentioned that the lack of immediacy allowed them to think more carefully about a reply or to find the correct phrasing. However, those students who complained about not receiving replies were in the majority. Additionally, we observed strong variations in frequency of communication (Sato & Horn, 2020). Some teams chatted regularly, whereas others would not hear from their overseas' partners for days or even weeks. Naturally, this led to dissatisfaction among students whose teams or partners were not very loquacious. Interestingly, these types of issues could be observed both with larger teams (up to ten members) and with teams where only two students, one from each country, were matched. Since students from both countries voiced these concerns, we assume that diverging cultural communication styles are not necessarily an explanation. However, more research into this matter will be undertaken in the future. Potential reasons for this behaviour could be individual strengths and weaknesses in communication as well as the overall motivation of students. Consequently, when planning a cross-cultural project across different time zones, allowances for lags in communication need to be made. Solutions lie in setting schedules and deadlines and, in allowing time between questions that include class assignments.

Further considerations need to be given to differences in academic schedules as well as holidays. For example, during the spring term, there will be a one-week vacation for German students around Easter, and for Japanese students during Golden Week. Unfortunately, these periods vary and do not overlap. Since many students think of their cross-cultural projects as "school work", they do not feel the need to continue communication with their overseas' partners during these holidays. Again, this leads to lag in conversation and often frustration with team members.

While in Japan, students need to study for mid-term exams, German students in our projects only had exams at the end of each semester. Accordingly, we observed a decline in conversation during mid-term exam period. In teams, where this issue was voiced and communicated, students had fewer problems catching up after the exam period compared to groups where communication simply stopped. In a few cases, once interrupted conversation never really took off again and the team could not successfully complete the project.

Time and time differences, are obviously issues that need to be carefully considered when planning a cross-cultural project. To increase agency, and as a good exercise to develop life skills needed for future success, students can be asked to prepare for these issues and to find solutions to overcome them. Nevertheless, this can be quite challenging.

4.4 Language Proficiency

Differences in language proficiency can also lead to issues in communication. For the majority of students in our projects, English is their second, at times even their third language. While some students are quite fluent and confident speaking English with teachers and fellow students, others are much more hesitant about using their English skills and try to avoid it whenever possible.

Two extremes we have observed are students who struggle to write even one clear and correct sentence in English; they often have difficulties understanding and following instructions, and there are those that are too shy to ask. On the other hand, we have had students for whom communication in English is quite normal, either because their secondary school education was bilingual, or they are part of an international degree programme where English is the working language. While this does not mean that these students' English proficiency is perfect, they are experienced in using English as a communication tool and do not mind making mistakes or asking for clarification.

Throughout the projects, we have also received feedback from students who said that not always being able to understand their partners immediately, was a stimulating challenge. They would have to ask for explanations, which would in turn lead to further conversations.

4.5 Cultural Background, Collaboration, and Group Dynamics

Communicating with a total stranger is a challenge. This can further be amplified in online asynchronous cross-cultural communication projects due to a number of factors: the participants are using a foreign language, their experience of such projects is limited or non-existent, cultural differences, and furthermore, written communication can be hard to interpret. This was clearly evident with the Japanese and German students however, less so with the international students.

According to Lewis (2010), Japan is a reactive society, which means that the Japanese students will seldom take the first step towards a conversation. For some of the Japanese students, our projects were the first time they had to engage with someone from another country, other than a teacher. To them, the situation was entirely unknown. Japan is an island nation that was historically cut off from the world for 200 years. It has never been colonised; the only time it was ruled by another power was post World War II, and even during this time, media and education were heavily censored by the US (Dower, 1999). As a nation, being shy (*hazakashii*) is accepted by society, thus in a project such as ours, communication is rarely initiated by the Japanese students, and it is acceptable in the culture to remain quiet, making communication challenging. In addition, the group mentality is strong, thus stepping out and doing something by oneself is not common. Conversely, Japanese work well in groups.

On the other hand, Germany, being at the centre of Europe has more immediate exchanges with people from other countries. Many German students have a migration background or know colleagues with migration backgrounds, so that speaking to people with different cultural roots and different languages is much more common, or at least not too far removed from everyday life. Furthermore, going on holiday to neighbouring countries is normal and many German students will have travelled to several foreign countries by the time they enter university. However, because German and international students may have more experience with different cultures and languages, it does not mean that they know how to successfully engage and work with others. These projects often offer a very new experience for them as well.

Adding to these dynamics in some of our projects was the inclusion of international students in Germany, who come from a variety of countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. These students add to the melange of cultural norms and expectations of each group. Being aware of such dynamics and considering them when embarking on an asynchronous cross-cultural communication project is essential to their success.

4.6 Communication Styles and Other Issues

Other issues we observed concerned the use of emoji and stickers (Sato & Horn, 2020). For most of the German students, stickers and emoji in the Line app were rather different from what those they had used in WhatsApp. Consequently, we were told about a few misunderstandings, which occurred because one side used emoji, or stickers, which were misinterpreted by the other side. However, these issues were normally clarified quickly and both sides mentioned having learned something from the experience.

During our 5th project, which happened during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, several students expressed a desire to have face-to-face, video meetings with their colleagues from abroad. As teachers, we encouraged these types of meetings. However, since we had not included this in the plans for the project, students were reluctant to initiate video chats. In general, we have observed that when clear instructions are not provided, students hardly ever engage and stick closely to the written rules. Thus, we are planning to encourage our students actively to venture beyond the general project guidelines.

5. Conclusion

Entering a project with great enthusiasm will carry you through many rough patches. However, without careful organisation and planning, it will only get you so far. It is crucial that the teachers clearly outline content, teaching methods and outcomes together. This reflects O'Dowd's descriptor concerning teachers' competencies in which the teacher needs to "negotiate effectively with the partner-teacher the structure and organisational technicalities of the exchange which take into account both institutional contexts (calendars, etc.) as well as the needs and interests of both sets of participants" (2015a, p. 67). While considering all of this, one must create tasks for the students that

take into account their interests, language abilities, technological knowledge, etc. Another aspect is the grading: will the students be evaluated for participating in the project and will it affect their grades, or is it voluntary participation relying on intrinsic motivation? Will evaluation be the same, or similar, in both countries, or will it be different? In our experience, the pressure of achieving a good grade has led to stronger communication efforts among our students. When the project was voluntary, we encountered issues with students dropping out of the project without notice leaving their partners to struggle by themselves.

As shown from the literature, and feedback from participants in our exchanges, cross-cultural communication projects offer enormous potential to enrich students' learning. However, there are potential hindrances, which we have outlined in this paper. Nevertheless, there are solutions: focus the course content on the project, and include language instruction at the discretion of the instructor. In addition, awareness raising tasks can be interwoven into the project to help focus students' attention to cultural biases and differences. In this way, hindrances can be reduced and cross-cultural communication projects can become more attractive to the teacher and the students.

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