Dos and Don'ts of an Effective Telecollaboration Project[*]

Etkili Bir Uzaktan İşbirliği Projesi İçin Tavsiyeler

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ABSTRACT: This paper is based on the reflections from a telecollaboration project between English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Turkey and native or non-native speakers of English in the USA. The main purpose of the project was to help the participants to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) via online (a)synchronous communication tools. Therefore, the participants were engaged in tasks, by which they could share their thoughts about cultural issues and expand their (inter)cultural knowledge. The findings showed that telecollaboration projects are potentially key to developing language users' ICC, helping them acquire and improve essential skills and attitudes. However, the study also showed that all the positive effects of the telecollaboration projects cannot be given to the project itself. The efficiency of such projects relies on certain dos and don'ts with which whoever will perform such projects in the future requires to be careful. This paper intends to provide precise guidance about designing telecollaboration projects together with an understanding of its constraints.

Keywords: Telecollaboration, language teaching, communication, efficiency.

ÖZ: Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrenciler ve Amerika'da İngilizceyi anadili veya ikinci dil olarak konuşanlar arasındaki uzaktan işbirliği projesinden elde edilen deneyimlere dayalıdır. Söz konusu çalışmanın temel amacı, katılımcıların kültürlerarası iletişim becerisini eşzamanlı olan ve olmayan iletişim araçlarını kullanarak geliştirmekti. Bu amaçla, katılımcılar kültürel ve kültürlerarası bilgilerini paylaşabilecekleri ve geliştirebileceklerine yardımcı ödevler yapmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, uzaktan işbirliği projelerinin dil kullanıcılarının gerekli beceri ve tutumları edinmelerine yardımcı olarak kültürlerarası iletişim becerilerini geliştirmeleri için önemli olduğunu göstermiştir. Bununla birlikte, çalışma gösterdi ki uzaktan işbirliği projelerinin olumlu etkileri yalnızca projenin kendisine bağlı değildir. Bu projelerin etkinliği ileride bu tarz projeler yürütecek olanların dikkatli olması gereken belirli tavsiyelere bağlıdır. Bu çalışma, uzaktan işbirliği projelerinin kısıtlı yönlerine dair bir anlayış sağlamakla birlikte bu tarz projeler oluşturmak için rehberlik sağlamayı hedefler.

Anahtar kelimeler: Uzaktan iş birliği, dil öğrenimi, iletişim, etkinlik.

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Computer-mediated communication is a broad term which also refers to telecollaboration, online communication, or virtual exchange. Corbett (2003) states that computer-mediated ethnography has two modes: virtual and joint. In virtual ethnography, an individual learns a culture by means of videos, e-mails or computer software, whereas joint ethnography involves individuals' communication with each other through the various tools of the Internet (Corbett, 2003). Telecollaboration projects are given as an example of joint ethnography.

Telecollaboration has two prominent models. The first model is e-tandem models, in which the main interest is to develop learners' linguistic competence. In these models, a language user is paired with another one and she/he is asked to give feedback to each other's writings (Anikina, Sobinova, & Petrova, 2015). The second model of telecollaboration is CULTURA model, which dates back to Furstenberg and his colleagues' project in 1977, involves two groups of language users' collaboration on the same materials so that they can develop a better understanding of each other's cultures (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001). As defined by Wainfan and Davis (2004), virtual collaborations involve the teamwork and responsibility share of people who are from different regions and cultures for outcomes such as "a shared understanding, evaluation, strategy, recommendation, decision, action plan or other product" (p. XI). Taking the findings and experiences in the present research into consideration, this paper aims to cast light on how to make the most of the telecollaboration projects for prospective practitioners.

Literature Review

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) entails synchronous and asynchronous forms of communications between people and "among groups" using "networked computers" (Santra & Giri, 2009, p. 103). In asynchronous communication, people who engage in CMC can communicate at different times and this may be done without any need for face-to-face communication; on the other hand, in the synchronous form, individuals communicate at the same time and react to each other. Synchronous online communication provides users with the opportunities of "instant interaction" together with "text-based communication", which makes it effective pedagogically (Kim, 2014, p. 26). Kim (2014) proposes that synchronous online communication creates a new social environment for communication and this differs from face-to-face communication or even from asynchronous communication involving the use of messages or e-mails. According to Wainfan and Davis (2004), individuals may benefit from virtual collaboration because when a virtual meeting, for example, is held; it is easier for an individual to join it than attend a physical meeting. Also, when the participation of a person is required, s/he is likely to be engaged in the meeting through communication in a short time. When such differences are considered, Wainfan and Davis (2004) also continue that virtual meetings would cost less compared to physical meetings.

CMC has a valuable place in educational settings for educators and learners. The use of CMC in education enables learners to contact the speakers of other languages; as a result, it contributes to learners' intercultural competence, improves their motivation to learn foreign languages, other cultures and to explore their own cultures more, and it affects learners' autonomy positively since the learners take initiatives to start a

conversation or ask questions to their partners (McComb, 1994; O'Dowd, 2011; Simpson, 2002).

CMC enhances the limited nature of the classrooms to expose learners to the target language, especially in foreign language classes (Simpson, 2002). As a result, it increases the probability of learners' engagement in interaction in educational settings (Thurnbury, 2006). In fact, it is highly possible in a classroom setting that language learners may be helped to adopt positive attitudes towards other cultures and to realize the differences in separate cultures integrating certain cultural materials designed to increase cultural awareness (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Qin, 2015; Shayakhmetova, Shayakhmetova, Ashrapova, & Zhuravleva, 2017). Nevertheless, those materials lack the sense the advances in technology could bring into the classroom and the opportunity of authentic communication for the EFL learners with the other speakers of English (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Qin, 2015).

In their review of the contributions of CMC to language learners, Alonso-Belmonte and Vinagre (2017) suggest that CMC has a positive impact on learners' linguistic competence, autonomy, thinking skills, digital skills, socio-pragmatic competences, motivation, intercultural awareness; and overall, their learning making it more active, reflective, and collaborative. When all these benefits are taken into consideration, educators become willing to integrate technology into their classes with the means of telecollaboration projects, as Alonso-Belmonte and Vinagre (2017) explain.

The Benefits of Telecollaboration for Learners

The recognized value of telecollaboration projects has been revealed in numerous research studies. Accordingly, telecollaboration has been found to have a positive influence on learners' motivation, cultural awareness, vocabulary knowledge and language skills (Anikina et al., 2015; Taskıran, 2019); academic achievement (Jaime, Domínguez, Sánchez, & Blanco, 2013); reflection upon cultures (Ramírez-Lizcano, & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020), intercultural competence (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016); pragmatic awareness (Marti & Fernandez, 2016). Also, Taskıran (2019) elucidates the positive effects of telecollaboration activity for learners saying that it increases the learners' awareness of language abilities, encourages them to be involved in language exchanges, and helps them gain confidence in their language skills.

Telecollaboration projects are particularly essential as a requirement of the globalised world, in which there are necessities for developing cultural awareness and being able to act appropriately in cultural environments (Alonso-Belmonte & Vinagre, 2017). This is mostly because learners are able to gain a genuine experience of intercultural communication thanks to telecollaboration projects (Marczak, 2013). For example, Jin (2015) puts forward that telecollaboration projects have the potential to develop learners' ICC (intercultural competence) depending on the findings from a 15-week computer-mediated communication between Korean and American learners using a well-known social networking site. In a similar manner, Lee and Markey (2014) revealed that engaging learners in communication with other learners from different cultures is effective in increasing their cultural knowledge and awareness using social networking sites, podcasts, or blogs. Another example showed that learners' exchanges

of their cultural thoughts using blogging positively affect their knowledge and skills (Lee, 2011).

The research in the literature shows that when language learners have an opportunity to read and discuss the cultural texts; for example, in their culture or other cultures with other language users from different cultures employing telecollaboration projects, they are able to develop their intercultural skills because such activities allow the learners to improve their cultural knowledge, and also positively affect their attitudes towards people from different cultures (Liaw, 2006). Jin and Erben (2007) support this finding with their research on a telecollaboration project which was based on instant messaging between speakers of Chinese as a foreign language and as a native language on the participants' intercultural awareness as they stated the project made the participants more respectful for the cultural differences. In a more recent study, Chen and Yang (2014) have come up with the finding that engaging language learners in communication with people from other cultures using e-mails, messages or video conferences contributes to their intercultural awareness. A similar finding showing the positive effect of telecollaboration on language learners' cross-cultural awareness was reported by Angelova and Zhao (2016), who performed a telecollaboration project using different forms of communication such as sending e-mails and having video calls.

The literature shows that doing telecollaboration projects is particularly effective for developing the learners' linguistic abilities and intercultural competences. Thanks to telecollaboration projects, the language users are able to gather for a shared purpose. Thus, they get a chance to communicate with people from different cultures and backgrounds, which would be unlikely in a classroom setting where the target language is taught as a foreign language. Considering the advantages of telecollaboration here, it is possible to suggest that telecollaboration is a requirement to be integrated into language learning programs.

Upon the Constraints of Telecollaboration Projects

Using online technologies and integrating them into the learning and teaching settings are recognized as basic twenty-first-century skills which are necessary for educators and learners to develop and own (Müller-Hartmann & O'Dowd, 2017). Knowing how to use those technologies is not sufficient; educators are required to know how to exploit them in pedagogical respect in their classrooms (Müller-Hartmann & O'Dowd, 2017). As explained by Giralt and Murray (2019), despite the success of telecollaboration projects, some drawbacks such as the mismatch in the partners' (telecollaborators) knowledge, motivation or needs; problems with time management might occur.

Caluianu (2019) states: "a collaboration may fall short of its main goals even when it is carefully planned and enthusiastically carried out and the complexity of the design may harm a project" (p. 12). A cross-cultural encounter with people from different cultures might seem to be fostering intercultural awareness as part of the normal process, yet cultural activities in which the users are engaged do not result in a better understanding of cross-cultural similarities or differences.

Orsini-Jones and Cerveró Carrascosa (2019) have revealed that telecollaboration was found to be effective to enhance ICC and reflective practice. The researchers add that not all the users are the same, so not all the students can be expected to be involved

in the telecollaboration projects equally. For instance, some learners might lack the necessary language skills and confidence to speak to other people. In alignment with this, Bueno-Alastuey and Kleban (2016) stress that when learners, for example, lack good computer skills; they are prone to experience some technical problems. Therefore, it is hugely important to teach the individuals who are involved in telecollaboration projects how to use the particular means of technology which is going to be used in the project (Chun, 2015). Otherwise, certain difficulties related to the digital platform or the use of technology may lead the users to have negative attitudes towards telecollaboration projects.

Telecollaboration projects are great for bringing learners together whose native languages and cultures are different from one another and helping to develop their ICC; however, putting individuals with different cultural backgrounds and communication expectations together might pose some challenges (Kern, Ware, & Warchauer, 2004). Watson (2019) notes the importance of the time allocated for the project and the clarity of what the collaborators are supposed to do. The effectiveness of a telecollaboration project depends on the fact that all the possible constraints are widely anticipated before the project is given a start (Chun, 2015). Regarding this issue, Chun (2015) asserts that it is essential to set realistic goals which are appropriate for the learners' proficiency level. Additionally, all the requirements of the tasks which will be assigned to the participants, the methods to be used to assess the participants' performance, the time to be allocated for the research are to be considered beforehand carefully (Basharina, Guardado, & Morgan, 2008).

When the constraints here are considered, it might be suggested that carrying out a telecollaboration project is not a seamless process. Besides being advantageous for language learners to a certain extent, it is evident that telecollaboration is to be designed carefully. Like all the other means of technology, the particular means of communication used in any telecollaboration project is likely to cause problems that would be difficult to prevent after the projects have started unless meticulous care is given. Below are the details of the current telecollaboration project on which this paper is based presented.

The Current Project

The project, the details of which are presented below, involved the telecollaboration of Turkish EFL learners and native or non-native English speakers of English basically by means of synchronous online communication. The project aimed to find out whether the telecollaboration between speakers of English affects language users' intercultural communicative competence or not.

Settings and Participants

Two groups of participants joined the project on a volunteer basis. In one of the groups, there were 15 Turkish learners who were learning English as a foreign language at a private university in Turkey. Their English proficiency level was pre-intermediate, and ages ranged from 18 to 22. All the participants in this group had been learning English at the preparatory school for about five months when the project started. The university which the participants affiliated to had English medium instruction, and in order that the participants could be ready to start their education in their departments,

the participants needed to pass the proficiency exam which they would take at the end of the preparatory school with a score of 60 out of 100. The Turkish EFL learners had not known any of the participants in the second group with whom they would engage in communication via computer-mediated communication means. Although most of the Turkish participants stated that they had not communicated with the speakers of English who were not from the same culture or did not speak the same mother tongue as them by means of CMC before, only a few stated to have had contact with foreign speakers of English from different cultures using the Internet. Their previous contact was not on a regular basis and long-term compared to the communication they were involved with the foreign participants in the current study, though.

In the second group, there were nine native or non-native speakers of English (who are also referred to as foreign participants in this paper) from Florida International University, Miami, USA. They were studying at different departments of social and numerical sciences at university, and their year of study ranged from freshman to senior. One of the foreign participants was Indian; the others were American, Guyanese, and Hispanic American. Like the Turkish participants, their ages were between 22 and 24. The participants were mostly not familiar with the Turkish culture, but two of the participants mentioned they knew Turkish culture since one had a friend from Turkey at school, and the other had a short visit to Turkey a long time ago.

The Arrangements of the Sessions

The project lasted eight weeks in total (excluding the time allocated to the recruitment of the participants). Each week throughout the project, the participants joined a live video session on *Google Hangouts,* each *of* which continued for at least 45 minutes. Since the optimum number of the participants who could join a video session on *Hangouts* was up to ten participants at a time, each session was arranged in a way that both Turkish EFL learners and (non)native speakers of English would join the session at the same time. Hence, it was aimed to take the advantage of bringing people from different cultures together to exchange their ideas on the weekly themes and topics on cultural terms.

The present project basically depended on synchronous online communication which was carried out via *Google Hangouts*, a free and user-friendly platform all the participants could use with no difficulty. Additionally, an online educational platform, *Eliademy*, was employed to enable the participants to be in contact in asynchronous ways. On the platform, an online course was created, and all the participants were enrolled there. Using this platform, the participants were acknowledged about the theme of the week, answered some awareness raising questions related to the topics they would discuss in the video session. On the *Eliademy*, the participants were asked to comment on the pre-video session questions and respond to other participants' comments writing on the platform using its *discussion forum* function. Thus, the use of the *Eliademy* aimed to support the participants' asynchronous communication with one another. Besides, once the weekly video session was over, the participants were requested to write a reflection paper (regarding what they had taken from their telecollaboration experience) and submit it using the *Tasks* function of the platform. Following the same sequence each week, the participants were engaged in activities and tasks in which they could exchange their ideas about the culturally-themed topics.

Tasks and Activities

The tasks and activities that the participants performed were adapted from *Mirrors and Windows Textbook* by Huber-Kriegler, Lazar, and Strange (2003). Each week, the tasks and activities were assigned under a predetermined theme to the participants. In the selection of the themes, the cultural sensitivity towards the topic, the participants' interest areas, and age groups were taken into consideration. Some of the themes chosen are exemplified as how timing is perceived across cultures, what sorts of food and eating habits people have in different cultures, what gestures and speaking aloud mean in different cultures, how children are raised across cultures etc. Based on the theme, the tasks involved getting into a discussion about one cultural concept across cultures, relating it to a person's own culture and others' cultures; talking about the similarities and differences in the cultural concept across countries etc.

Regarding the Effect of the Project

To understand the effectiveness of the project, a 20-minute-semi-structured interview with each participant was carried out shortly after the project ended. In the interviews, the participants were addressed questions related to their experiences throughout the project. Later, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews and weekly written reflection papers were uploaded onto Maxqda, a qualitative data analysis software, whereby the data were coded efficiently. In order to eliminate the subjectivity risk which may be involved in the qualitative data analysis, two coders analyzed the same set of data using the same codes. Then, two sets of data were compared on the Maxqda, and the results showed that the inter-coder agreement was 87.5.

In the coding process of the data, a deductive (top-down) approach, which involves the use of already existing codes/ themes in the literature (Riazi, 2016), was adopted. While coding the qualitative data, the codes and sub-codes were grouped under four main themes, specifically learners' attitudes, knowledge, skills and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). The (sub)code(s) 1) for *attitudes* are *appreciating cultural differences*, *being willing to learn other cultures and interested in them* and *being open to adjust behaviours*, *to contact with people from different cultures*, *to believe something about a person's own culture and other cultures might be true even though it seems impossible*; 2) for *knowledge* is *expanding the information about one's home culture and the cultures of people from different countries/ nationalities*; 3) for *skills* are *being able to relate and explain what a particular action, performance etc. means* and *being able to interact and explore*; 4) for *awareness* is *fostering what a person is aware of his/ her own culture and other cultures* (Byram, 1997, 2002).

The findings based on the participants' reflections revealed that the project affected learners' attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness in a positive way. To illustrate, the participants mentioned a positive effect on their attitudes as a result of the project. All the telecollaborators (EFL learners of English from Turkey and native or non-native speakers of English in the USA) said to be able to develop a view aspect to the cultural events in the sessions in which they carried out the tasks assigned to them. They stated to become more willing to learn other cultures and to embrace cultural differences in a more understanding and tolerant manner.

Also, as the participants had an opportunity to discuss the cultural differences in their cultures and other cultures throughout the project, they said to have explored more about other cultures and their own cultures. It is worth stressing here that the project did foster the participants' awareness of cultural differences and/or similarities not only with the participants from dissimilar cultures but also with the participants from the same culture as them. As a result of the participants' extending knowledge, it was found that their awareness of the similarities and differences across cultures increased.

Additionally, it was revealed by the research that discussing cultural topics, exchanging ideas about cultural issues, and exploring the similarities and differences across cultures helped learners to increase their skills of relating and interpreting. Additionally, the findings showed that both groups of participants seized the opportunity to communicate with people from different cultures, thereby bolstering their confidence to speak to the other speakers of English.

Generally speaking, the findings have indicated that getting learners from different cultures to perform tasks by means of online communication presents advantages for the learners. Telecollaboration seems to be one of the best alternatives in order to bring authentic communication opportunities into the classroom for language learners in EFL settings in countries such as Turkey, where English is taught and learnt as a foreign language. Learners generally have low possibility of being exposed to English on authentic terms.

Despite the fact that such telecollaboration projects seem ideal for raising cultural awareness, developing learners' intercultural competence and also improving learners' skills of communication and interaction, they are not easy to set up. Therefore, the following section aims to help the individuals willing to run similar projects to have a better understanding of how to plan, launch and carry out a telecollaboration project.

Dos and Dont's for Taking the Full Advantage of Telecollaboration Projects

Telecollaboration projects produce a number of positive outcomes for the users notwithstanding the fact that it is highly likely for the practitioners to suffer from certain hindrances which have not been anticipated in the process of designing such projects. Still, the problems are possible to mitigate when such projects are run with real care and schedule.

This section provides a precise understanding of the points to be careful in such projects, to guide educators and researchers and design effective telecollaboration projects. Below are the recommendations based on the experiences from the current project specified.

Setting a Clear Goal

While initiating a telecollaboration project, setting clear and realistic goals is essentially important to reap the potential benefits of bringing learners together for telecollaboration (Chun, 2015). In particular, the focus and the direction of the project ought to be defined obviously. It is necessary to inform the learners about what is aimed at with the online collaboration project and the learning objectives require to be possible to do for the students (Dooly, 2008). Dooly (2008) also underscores that the objectives of the project need to be compatible with the students' objectives. Although the online collaboration will seem to be novel and interesting for the students at first, if the

students cannot expand their knowledge with their online collaboration, their motivation to continue their participation in the project will decrease (Dooly, 2008).

Considering that the purpose of a telecollaboration project is just to make certain groups of learners put together so as to expose them to the target language would be undervaluing the importance of such projects. They might result in even failure for the practitioners. For instance, an unplanned project might cause loss of motivation, cultural misunderstanding, or sense of academic inadequacy from the learners' side. The learners might not want to participate in a project without clearly defined goals while they are struggling with loaded school work. Thus, they are likely to have difficulty in maintaining their motivation and completely lose their interest in being a part of such a project. From the educators' side, setting goals is crucial because it would be possible to have measurable improvements in the study, and the project could be duly completed with the lowest probability of problems.

It is evident that goals help draw an accurate map for the project as long as they are reasonable to accomplish and precisely defined. It is necessary and important to plan a collaborative activity together with the subjects, tasks, the organization of the learners carefully (Dooly, 2008). The present study was particularly planned to reveal the effect of telecollaboration on language users' ICC. In alignment with this, whom to be recruited in the project, how and when the project would be carried out, how long it would continue, what particular measurement instruments were used, how the tasks and topics would be selected and designed were all planned carefully.

Recognizing the Participants

The participant groups were preferred from the same age groups in the present project. This was considered to be more effective for the participants as they would communicate more easily and comfortably with their peers. In the literature, there is telecollaboration research in which university learners, for example, are paired with other telecollaboration partners who are older than them (Keranen & Bayyurt, 2006). On the other hand, having randomly chosen participants without any care for their ages and proficiency levels may cause the inefficiency of such projects. The communication between the participants who are not from the same age group might not bring about a shared outcome of the project as their interest areas would differ from each other.

In a similar way, the proficiency levels of the participants are required to be taken into consideration for the ease of communication and prevent the participants from feeling inadequate academically while talking to other speakers of English. Dooly (2008) explains that the activities to be carried out in an online collaboration should be suitable for the students' skills. In this particular way, first of all, the participant groups were aimed to be known well in the present study. The main researcher in the project had known the Turkish participants in the study for more than four months before the project started, so she had a full understanding of the participants' English proficiency levels and abilities which were necessary for them to carry out the tasks in their telecollaboration with the foreign participants, along with the participants' expectations as a language learner and their interest areas.

The process of finding partners for a telecollaborative project might pose some challenges for the researchers, as also mentioned in Ramírez-Lizcano and Cabrera-Tovar (2020). Therefore, particular attention was also paid to know the foreign

participants in the present project. The participants were specifically preferred to be in the same age group as the Turkish participants in the project so that they could share interest areas and an incentive to communicate with each other. A contact person from the same university as the foreign participants and who knew the profile and culture of the foreign participants well assisted in this process. She talked to the foreign participants individually, acknowledged them about the project and helped the main researcher to get in contact with them easily.

Designing the Tasks

It is essentially important for the educators and project designers to show care for selecting the task topics, the number of the tasks to be assigned, and the time to be allocated for each task. Barbier and Benjamin (2019), for example, experienced some challenges regarding the tasks as they found out the tasks limited the learners' communication in their study, so they were required to alter the tasks with more creative ones.

The participants' interest areas and the suitability of the topics to discuss served as a basis for designing the tasks in the project mentioned in this paper. In alignment with the purpose of the project, all the tasks were themed under the topics such as raising children, feelings, timing, communicating or eating which may show changes across cultures. Thus, eight sessions with a different theme were held with different kinds of tasks for the participants. The tasks involved discussion, idea exchanging, interpreting given cases from different cultures, or relating one cultural issue to their own culture or other cultures. Despite the fact that in the beginning, a long list of cultural themes and tasks related to them were compiled, later some topics, for example, regarding political, gender related or religious issues were eliminated from the list because they were thought to be insulting for some of the participants during the conversations, or some of the topics were not included because they involved too much technical vocabulary to mention, which would have been hard for the participants in the project to talk about.

In addition to the topic selection, the number of the tasks assigned in each session is to be determined meticulously. While deciding how many tasks to include in each session, especially the time length of each session is to be taken into consideration (Basharina et al., 2008). The participants ought not to be assigned tasks which they will not be able to complete in the time announced to be allocated weekly for a session. This would negatively affect the participants' motivation to be a part of the project creating distrust in the project. So as to avoid such inconveniences, the first three weeks of the project were piloted with a small group of participants sharing similar proficiency profiles with the participants in the actual study. Depending on the feedback obtained from the participants in the piloting group, the number of the tasks and the topics were determined more accurately and the numbers were kept at a minimum. Yet, it should be added that not all the participant groups can be the same. Some tasks might be completed more rapidly before the allocated time. Therefore, putting some extra tasks aside to use in case would be very useful for the researchers in similar projects.

In the present study, the time allocated for each task was done carefully, and all the participants were informed about the expected time to spend for each session from the very beginning of the study. This was particularly important because engaging the

participants in a task which would last more than expected could have caused learners to be unwilling to continue their participation in the project. Although the time allocation for each session was 45 minutes in total, some sessions lasted one hour, but the participants knew this is a choice more than an obligation.

Giving the participants a sense that engagement in that project is effective to foster their cultural knowledge, to help them start friendship with individuals from different cultures and have an opportunity to improve their language skills was especially useful. In this way, the participants may strengthen their motivation to be involved in that project for their own benefit. Participation in this project did not entail giving any scores or rewards to the participants, which was highly recommended in telecollaboration projects for the continuity of the participation. The present research findings showed that prizing the participants or giving them extra credits is not the only way out for success in providing the continuity of the participation. Instead, it would be sufficient to arrange sessions carefully considering the appropriacy of the students, to guarantee their participation would not cause any negative effects on their school performance as long as the participants have the motivation to pursue their communication with one another.

Choosing the Communication Means

It is certain that depending on the purpose and the skills to be developed, choosing the right means of communication bears crucial importance in telecollaboration projects. The previous literature suggests the means of technology might affect the users' anxiety level in a negative way. Fondo and Jacobetty (2020) depict in their research that while a particular means of communication tool was being used in their project, the participants felt anxious because the means was new for them. As a result, the researchers had to alter the means with the ones which the participants were familiar with.

Although some literature reports show that technical problems could occur during telecollaboration as a result of lack of internet access, technical skills or equipment (Bueno-Alastuey & Kleban, 2016), almost no technical problems were encountered in the present study. The only obstacle which several participants came across in the study was the slow Internet connections, yet they were not long-lasting. The participants were able to connect to the Internet and engaged in communication again in a few minutes. Also, the participants did not need any special equipment for communication. They were able to join the sessions even using their smartphones without any restrictions of place. Regarding this, it might be thought that advances in technology today are a lot more developed when compared to the past. Therefore, educators or individuals who are planning to set up a telecollaboration project do not need to hesitate to start it because of concerns such as technical glitches as long as the means of communication is chosen carefully to reach their research goals.

Considering that too much complexity while using the means of online communication might confuse the users, the basic idea behind the selection of the means in the current study was to employ a user-friendly tool which the participants would not worry about whether they need any special training to use that communication means or not. All the functions which the selected communication means would serve to fulfill the objectives of the research (such as the possibility of

storing the data and protecting the participants' privacy, having easy access and being affordable) are to be taken into consideration while deciding on whatever tools are going to be employed.

Taskıran (2019) found out that the least developed skills in the telecollaboration activity she conducted were listening and speaking, which the researcher underscores that such a result could be the outcome of the selected means for online communication. Since the preferred means of communication was basically relied on online written chat application, the students preferred texting to their telecollaborative partners and as a result, an improvement in reading and writing skills was observed. Hence, Taskıran (2019) makes it clear that the selected means for a telecollaborative activity is highly likely to influence the outcome to be yielded from the activity.

In a telecollaboration project, the participants in distantly located places gather for a shared outcome. Relying on only a single tool for communication may not be sufficient to reach all the participants at a time. Therefore, it might be good to use more than one means of communication to stay in contact with all the participants. Considering this, all the participants in the present project were requested to provide their personal phone numbers so that a group could be formed on a messaging application already set up on the participants' smart or mobile phones, *WhatsApp*. This enabled the researcher to reach and communicate with the participants quickly. Besides this application, an educational platform, *Eliademy*, was used for acknowledging the participants about the following sessions, getting their reflection papers, and enabling them to write their comments on the pre-discussion topics.

Meeting the Institutional Requirements

After deciding the institutions where the telecollaboration project will be carried out, it is particularly important to learn their requirements in detail because this will help to initiate the projects at the planned time. For instance, two different institutions were involved in the current project, which first required approval from the institutional review boards and ethics committees of the both institutions. In this process, the corresponding institute (FIU) in the present project did request to present a certificate to show the eligibility of the researchers to do research on human subjects, which was not a necessity in the university in Turkey to be certified.

The researchers who intend to do similar projects should be aware of this kind of requirements and search in detail while deciding on the institutions to be working with. The approval is unlikely to be received from the Review Boards of both institutions concurrently. Therefore, before the projects commence, such factors should be searched in detail, and the requirements are to be fulfilled. What documents are to be prepared while applying to the board and how long it takes to get the approval are to be considered beforehand. This is especially important to give a start to the projects at the time as planned. Otherwise, the project has to be started with a time delay, and this will make the researchers start over all the preparations of the project.

The procedures followed in the current research were in compliance with the ethical standards of the institutional review boards of both universities. The Social and Behavioral Institutional Review Board of FIU approved the research on 04/05/17 with 105533 reference number. The Ethics Committee approval from the Turkish University

numbered as 55853172/433-173 was obtained on 12.01.2017. After the approval procures were completed, the recruitment process was given a start.

Piloting the Procedures

The lack of technical knowledge or practice might result in some unexpected delays, even a detrimental effect on the participants' enthusiasm to carry out the projects. Fondo and Jacobetty (2020) underscore that interaction in online settings is likely to be a source of anxiety. Hence, the individuals who are involved in online interaction are to know how the technologies they would use work so that they can have an understanding of how much they are required to wait for the response in communication, how to react when their speeches overlap. Piloting is vital in research since it enables the researchers to see if the idea will work, eliminate the problems, and save time while carrying out research (Bonyton, 2005). Therefore, piloting the procedures with the online means of communication in the telecollaboration project might give first-hand experience and a comprehensive understanding of the possible problems which could happen after the project starts.

In the current study, all the means of communication were piloted using the same tasks to be involved in the actual project. Four language learners who did not take part in the real project, but had similar language proficiency levels and profiles with the participants in the real project volunteered to take part in the piloting sessions. In total, three rehearsal sessions were held in three weeks, and they provided with valuable knowledge and understanding of the possible handicaps the participants could encounter during the project. Also, the piloting procedures helped to figure out the time necessary to be allocated for each session, the number of the tasks to be given in each session, and the possible technical problems which the participants could have while performing the tasks or using the means of communication. Therefore, piloting all the procedures is vitally important for success in telecollaboration projects.

Recruiting the Participants

While recruiting the participants, knowing their profiles and explaining the contribution along with the requirements of the projects beforehand are crucial. In this way, the participants could comprehend the possible contribution of the project to their language learning process.

In the recruitment of the participants, the presence of a contact person who knows the school and general culture of the participants in the corresponding institute builds the credibility for the projects and also, eases the process as the contact with the foreign participants becomes easier and much more effective.

In the current study, the participants with whom the Turkish participants were partnered were native speakers or non-native speakers of English. These participants did not have the same motivation as the Turkish participants who were learning English as a foreign language and willing to improve their language skills together with their intercultural awareness. In addition, the participants were not given any credits or extra rewards for their participation in the study. Therefore, recruiting highly motivated participants was very important since; otherwise, the participants could end their participation in the project, which would mount the challenge to come to an end in this project.

Also, the researchers who would like to perform similar projects are to pay attention particularly to the number of participants to be recruited. In the project mentioned in this paper, it was experienced before the project started that a few recruited participants from the Turkish and foreign groups stated that they wanted to withdraw from the study for personal reasons. Therefore, in such projects, it might be good to recruit more participants than planned in case that some problems could occur, and some participants might have to withdraw from the project before it starts or while it is being performed.

Establishing Rules and Adhering to Them

It is recommended that certain rules ought to be established in order to proceed effectively in a telecollaboration project. Three rules adhered in the current project were based on the time bound to which the participants had to pay attention while submitting their reflection papers, the participants' attendance at the sessions, and the respect they had to show each other.

The present study required the participants to write their reflections on the sessions before the new session began. It was necessary to collect the participants' feedback accurately and reliably on time because if not, the participants might be unable to remember the difficulties or strengths of the sessions. For this purpose, the participants were informed that they had a time limit for submitting their reflection papers. No sanctions were announced to impose, but the participants agreed to join the research knowing that this was a requirement from the beginning of the project.

Another problem during a telecollaboration project might arise due to the irregular attendance of the participants. However, it is for sure that this may be prevented when clear rules are set out. The participants are precisely acknowledged about the importance of their participation at the beginning of the project. For instance, in the present study, all the participants were informed about the rules before the project started. They knew that it was required to participate in all the sessions. When they were not able to attend a session for any reasons, they were requested to acknowledge their partners and also the researcher beforehand.

In telecollaboration projects, people from different cultures come across, and a misunderstanding is likely to arise because of the deep sensitivity which a participant may show to a cultural issue discussed in a session, and the participants may be involved in an argument with each other, which would affect the project negatively leading to a detrimental effect on the other participants in the project. Therefore, the educators' close control of participants' exchanges and dialogues to resolve any misunderstanding is necessary (Chun, 2015). In the present project, the participants did not have such a negative experience. However, it should be underscored that in order not to get into such troubles, the researcher of the project attended all the sessions personally. Also, at the beginning of the project, all the participants were informed about the necessity of being respectful for others and their ideas in the project and not being involved in an argument with one another. They were requested to notify the researcher personally in case that they were disturbed by an event, action, during their involvement in the project.

Running the Sessions

While the participants were being recruited into the project, their personal telephone numbers were requested to communicate with the participants effectively and instantly. Thus, an instant messaging group on *WhatsApp* was formed, and the Turkish and Foreign participants were invited to the group. Throughout the research, the messaging group was actively used to acknowledge the participants about the situations regarding the research on short notice. For example, the call for the session was made using this message board rapidly. Sometimes it became the case that one participant was late for the session; at such times, s/he expressed her/ his excuse using the instant messaging group. In this way, the contact with the participants was established by the researcher easily.

When the participants convened in the sessions, expecting to establish effective communication between the participants would be unrealistic especially at the first sessions of the project in which the participants did not know each other. O'Dowd (2011) underscores that the educators who organize telecollaboration projects play a prominent role in helping learners to make the most of such projects. Therefore, the researcher or the person who carries out the project undertakes a big responsibility as an initiator of the sessions. In the current project, the researcher joined each session personally, and when the number of the groups is taken into consideration, it is evident that the researcher was to attend three sessions each week. The effect of this situation is two-sided. On one side, it positively affected the research process since the participants could have been given avid interest and the continuity of the contact with the participants, and the attendance in the sessions could have been ensured. On the other side, having more than one session with only one researcher posed a challenge in the project for the educator or researcher because participating in all the sessions and taking all the burden of a project was admittedly tiring. Therefore, involving more than one researcher in the project would have helped the process to be handled more effectively and with less difficulty.

The arrangement of the sessions is also another challenge. In the current study, the participants from different groups were brought together in sessions on *Google Hangouts* for synchronous online communication, which is eligible for small group communication (up to 10 participants). Each week sessions were required to be arranged so that both Turkish and Foreign participants could meet online. Because the participants were readily university students who had a busy schedule in their schools, it was aimed that the participation in the project should not lead the participants to struggle under extra burden with the project. For this purpose, the participants were given a chance to choose the day of the week and the time slot when they would like to take part in the session. As a result, three days with three different time slots could have been arranged. Its advantage is that in the projects, the time length of which is relatively long as in the research discussed here, the participants are likely to quit participating with or without showing any reasons, yet when they are presented a choice to attend a session at a time which will not make their schedules busier, they could comfortably attend the sessions.

A researcher intending to carry out a telecollaboration project would possibly grapple with a difficulty related to time zone differences of the locations where the participants engage in the project. Çiftçi (2016) explains that most of the studies on

telecollaboration projects are mostly based on asynchronous online communication between the participants and involve very few synchronous communication sessions. As different from those studies, the present research basically relied on the participants' synchronous communication with each other, which meant the participants attended the sessions simultaneously. Considering that the participants were joining the online sessions from Turkey and the USA, and the time difference between these two locations was seven-hours, careful planning was required to arrange a schedule for the sessions. For this, the participants were asked about their preferences in the time slots they could join the sessions, and depending on their choices the alternative time slots were created.

Conclusion

In places where English is taught as a foreign language, and the language learners rarely have an opportunity to speak the target language on authentic terms outside the classroom, the language learning process and the learners' communication skills are negatively affected. However, it is evident in the literature and shown in the current study that telecollaboration projects close that gap. Thanks to advances in technology, language learners can meet other English speakers and communicate with them using written and verbal communication.

There is no doubt that developing technological competences is highlighted as a basic requirement in the modern world, which is under the effect of globalization and high technological advances. Besides, how technology has become an integral part of education has been witnessed recently. The sudden and unexpected outbreak of the pandemic, the Covid 19, has urged a shift from face-to-face instruction to online instruction, which caused educators to change their ideas regarding teaching and develop their competence and literacy of technology for an effective online teaching (Gao & Zhang, 2020). Even though the sudden change with the pandemic outbreak has brought a bunch of challenges for education system, it has offered a chance for a bigger number of students to meet online education, which has the potential to change how learners think about the online education and will lead to an increase in adoption of online education even after the pandemic (Xie, Siau, & Nah 2020). CMC has provided with support to continue the interaction in online learning especially by means of digital platforms assisting the learners and educators for delivery of the instruction and the material and the communication in learning (Marani, Subarkah, & Wijaya, 2020). The online teaching via digital platforms has enabled learners and educators to interact synchronously without any boundaries of time and place (Xie et al, 2020). They have even had a chance of asynchronous education, which gave flexibility for the schedules or the opportunity for the students to progress at their own pace (Xie et al., 2020). As a result, it is possible to speculate that the pandemic might change our traditional education understanding and make online education and CMC an indispensable part of education.

Being creative, thinking in a critical way, communicating and being able to work in an effective and respectful way with other people are the skills which are essential to develop in the 21st century, and teachers take on the responsibility to help learners to equip with these required skills (Cretu, 2016). Therefore, it is fundamental to integrate technology into learning and teaching environments since this will help educators to attract and hold learners' attention to the subject, also to develop their

critical thinking skills and creativity (Barreto, 2018). Additionally, the use of technology will foster students' collaboration and autonomy in the classroom. Also, the use of technology brings novelty to the learning, in which the learners take a central role in his/her learning experience; as a result, motivation increases and learning is boosted in the classroom (Tavakoli, Lofti, & Biria, 2019). Tavakoli et al. (2019) stress that technology-enhanced learning makes learners more comfortable or less nervous in their communication with other people; they are not beset by the worry of making mistakes or errors.

Considering all the great potential of technology in learning programs, it remains imperative to encourage its integration into learning and teaching processes. Thus, the learners will catch up with the needs of the globalized world, and the educators contribute to the development of competences which learners are supposed to possess. Engeness (2021) stresses that in the 21st century, teachers require to be equipped the ability to employ educational technologies and design the digital settings in order to fulfill the students' requirements, which is because the students in this century are exposed to the technology in their daily life, and they expect to get the same level of technology in their education as well. Hence, the teachers undertake the responsibility for cultivating digitally informed and agentic lifelong learners (Engeness, 2021). Telecollaboration or with its broader name, computer-mediated communication, provides learners with new perspectives helping them to engage in communication with people from different nations and cultures.

This paper has presented the reflections from a telecollaboration project which took eight weeks in total and provided the practitioners with its significant advantages. The primary concern of the present project was to investigate the impact of the telecollaboration on the participants' ICC. The findings unveiled that the project strengthened the participants' motivation to use the target language with people whose mother tongues were different from theirs, increasing their intercultural awareness, knowledge, and intercultural and language skills and positively affecting their attitudes towards people from other cultures. In this way, the project provided the participants with invaluable benefits and can be considered as a real blessing; on the other hand, it should not be regarded as an easy process. The process could have entailed different kinds of problems such as non-attending participants, wrong choice of communication means, poorly designed tasks, ineffectively planned activities, technological problems etc. However, they were managed to be prevented with special care with the whole process from beginning to the end. Drawing conclusions from the experiences in the research mentioned here, this paper has aimed to give information regarding the actions or activities which the practitioners should or should not perform so that they can make the most of such telecollaboration projects.

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