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Overcoming Barriers: Engaging younger students in an online intercultural exchange

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This paper reports findings from a small-scale project involving an online school exchange between two classes of 11/13 year olds located in the North of England and the Ruhr area of Germany. The overarching aim of the project was to develop intercultural understanding (IU) in foreign language learning through communication in an online environment. Analysing data from website posts, lesson observations, student questionnaires and interviews, the study documented emergent practical and pedagogical issues.

Keywords: intercultural understanding; telecollaboration; beginner foreign language learning; secondary education, ethnographic learning.

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Introduction

The impetus for a project based on virtual exchanges among students of lower secondary age studying German in England and English in Germany originated from

the intention to move from the theoretical and policy rationale for developing intercultural understanding toward the development of pedagogical practice. I wanted to investigate whether, as argued by Thorne (2006), telecollaboration could provide a vehicle for enabling the so-called 'intercultural turn' in foreign language education. The inquiry set out not only to contribute to the research on online intercultural learning, which is still in its infancy (O'Dowd 2007), but to offer new insights into such projects with younger students, as telecollaborative endeavors have been conducted predominantly in Higher Education (HE) or, in some cases, with upper secondary school students (e.g. Bauer et al. 2006; Lázár 2014). With the exception of Dooly and Ellermann (2008), Dooly (2011) and Yang and Chen (2014), there has been relatively little research into telecollaboration with younger students. Furthermore, the latter four projects were conducted using English as a lingua franca, rather than the respective partners using their own and each other's language.

The project was also inspired by the fact that Peiser and Jones (2013) discovered that the development of intercultural understanding (IU) amongst younger secondary school learners in England seems constrained if they come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Students in this group were found to attach less significance to IU as it can seem irrelevant to their current or future lives because they are less likely to have travelled and find it more difficult to imagine living, studying or working abroad. To develop learning beyond the classroom, particularly IU, most Modern Language (ML) departments in English schools offer trips abroad to target language countries. But young people from poor backgrounds are less likely to participate (Peiser and Jones 2013). Furthermore, the participation of pupils from all socio-economic backgrounds in school exchanges is minimal as teachers may be concerned about litigation and child protection. Waters and Brooks (2010) established that even in HE, British students who

opted to spend extended periods studying abroad most frequently come from more privileged backgrounds, illustrating how internationalisation in education remains largely an elite practice.

A virtual exchange, i.e. an on-line interaction among learners of English in Germany and German in England, was considered a potential vehicle for transcending socio-economic and legal barriers. It might overcome the reticence of disadvantaged learners, offer an alternative to teachers who are hesitant to organise exchanges, and develop IU in new ways and forms. This rationale and the aims of this study were informed by three research questions:

- (1) Can intercultural understanding (IU) be facilitated by virtual exchange, and if so what kind of IU?
- (2) What do students perceive as the benefits or limitations of a virtual exchange?
- (3) What does the foreign language teacher regard as the benefits or limitations of virtual exchange?

Theoretical and policy context of the research

Applied linguists have identified an inseparable relationship between culture and language for many years (Risager 2006), thus, the study of culture has always been organic to foreign language pedagogy. Historically, this took place through the study of literature, although in the 1960s, pedagogy began to focus on the study of society and societal structures. Through the study of culture, language learners expanded their knowledge of cultural practices of people from a particular group, and the values that influenced those people's beliefs. Both societal and literary approaches, however, tended to take a national view of culture as a homogenous and static entity. In the

1990s, there was growing recognition of the more dynamic nature of culture, which had developed due to mass migration and the flow of commodities and ideas, prompting a shift from a national to transnational culture pedagogy. Scholars who advocated the new paradigm argued that language teaching that focuses primarily on communicative competence, without consideration of socio-cultural competence, is greatly limited. As Risager (2007, 137) explains, these academics were interested in “deal[ing] with intercultural issues and [...] the learning processes that bridge cultural differences”.

In the context of the European Union, Byram and Zarate (1994) and Byram (1997) argued that transactional communicative competence, while sufficient for task accomplishment, was inadequate for building harmonious relationships between immigrants and host communities. In order to understand others and to be able to manage relationships, Byram and Zarate (1994) and Byram (2007) contended that foreign language learners should develop intercultural communicative competence, and from this premise, they developed a pedagogical ‘savoirs’ model for socio-cultural competence. Byram’s (1997) model comprised of: (1) *savoirs*: knowledge of social groups and products and practices, and knowledge of social processes of interaction in the native and interlocutor’s country; (2) *savoir être*: attitudes of curiosity which are open to decentering from ‘national’ values, beliefs and behaviours and willingness to take seriously those of other countries or cultures; (3) *savoir comprendre*: skills of interpreting and relating data from one’s own and another country or culture; (4) *savoir apprendre/faire*: skills of discovery and interaction; and (5) *savoir s’engager*: skills of critical cultural awareness, i.e. questioning and critiquing the values, beliefs and behaviours of one’s own and other countries or cultures. Further pedagogical models for intercultural language learning have been developed in Europe, inter alia, by Sercu

(2002) and Guilherme (2002), and in the United States and Australia by Kramersch (1993, 1998) and Lo Bianco, Liddicoat and Crozet (1999).

Whilst there are many descriptions or models of intercultural competence (IC) (see Deardorff 2009), these generally encompass knowledge/ cognitive competencies, affective competencies and behavioural competencies. The result of the diverse backgrounds and goals of the scholars who have attempted to define and model these dimensions has given rise to multiple terms and definitions, one of which has been intercultural understanding (IU) (Perry and Southwell 2011). As Perry and Southwell (2011) point out, the terms intercultural competence (IC) and intercultural understanding (IU) are often used synonymously, although the former places more emphasis on human interaction or the behavioural competencies. IU encompasses concepts related to the cognitive and affective domains, whilst IC “builds on intercultural understanding by including behaviour and communication” (Perry and Southwell 2011, 454).

Hill (2006, 12) also conceptualises IU in cognitive and affective terms, but emphasises that the affective dimension, characterised by empathy, respect and open-mindedness, should be the “ultimate goal”. Bredella’s (2003, 38-39) description of IU places similar stress on an attitudinal element as he defines the concept as the “flexibility of mind which allows us to cross borders and accept differences”.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to differentiate between the theoretical concept of IU and its pedagogical development. Pedagogical development of IU typically involves engagement with other cultures through exploration of different media. In the foreign languages curriculum, such texts or media are in the target language (Bredella 1992; Kramersch 1993, 1998). Ideally, the development of IU also entails experiential learning. As Walton et al. (2014) suggest, IU is best cultivated when

individuals engage in “culturally reflexive processes through skills such as perspective-taking and empathy” which are facilitated by “affective interpersonal experiential learning” (p.220). Irrespective of how exactly IU is developed, the learning process occurs through the practice of certain skills that are articulated in Byram’s (1997) model, i.e. *savoir comprendre*, *savoir apprendre*, and in some cases, *savoir faire*.

In many instances, the theoretical thinking about the role of foreign language learning in fostering IU or IC has been echoed in international and national education policy. Over the last two decades, education policies have stressed the need for young people to become accepting of other cultures, through the school curriculum in general, and through the modern languageⁱ curriculum, in particular. The research reported in this paper is located in England where the national curriculum for ML designates ‘intercultural understanding’ as one of the key concepts underpinning the study of languages and one of the expected learning outcomes (QCA 2007).

However, the re-conceptualisation of language teaching as encompassing both linguistic and intercultural elements has been easier to articulate in documents than to realise in practice, and this situation is not unique to England. Risager (2007) highlighted that whilst the intercultural approach promotes the integration of linguistic and cultural learning, these two aspects often exist in a dichotomous relationship, where the latter is taught in the mother tongue. Explanations for this have been attributed to the absence of a common teaching methodology and inadequacies in teacher preparation (Garrido and Álvarez 2006). Peiser (2012) contended that in the case of beginner foreign language learners, some difficulties are also related to the linguistic demands of more complex cultural texts. In this project, it was hoped that texts created by the learners’ peers would promote linguistic accessibility.

Telecollaboration and intercultural language learning

According to Dooly (2011), telecollaboration in foreign language learning is broadly understood as internet-based exchange aimed at developing both language skills and IC. Indeed, scholars have argued that telecollaboration provides an ideal vehicle for enabling the so-called ‘intercultural turn’ in foreign language learning (see Thorne 2006), as it enables learners to communicate regularly with people from other cultures and to reflect on and learn from the exchange within the context of the foreign languages classroom (O’Dowd 2013). O’Dowd and Waire (2009) identify three main categories of telecollaborative tasks, which may either stand alone or overlap with one another: information exchange tasks, comparison and analysis tasks and collaborative tasks.

O’Dowd (2007) argues that in contrast to the more ‘factual’ representations of culture provided in textbooks, telecollaboration gives learners access to more personalised and subjective representations of culture. When communication between partners is asynchronous, there are also opportunities to explore, interpret and reflect upon these presentations in the classroom. Thus, telecollaborative projects offer great potential for the development of the whole range of skills and attitudes needed for IC (O’Dowd and Ritter 2006).

Many academics who have highlighted the benefits of telecollaborative communication have also researched such projects. They discovered that while in theory telecollaboration may be advantageous for intercultural learning, in practice it may exacerbate rather than reduce feelings of difference and lack of understanding, especially when contentious social, political or historical issues are discussed. For example, Ware and Kramersch (2005) uncovered emerging tensions and negative evaluations of virtual partners when American and German students discussed post-war

German history. In both cases, students' lack of intercultural competence and knowledge led to cultural misunderstanding.

Failure to communicate can also frequently occur due to structural or logistical challenges, such as different academic calendars, contrasting assessment and course content demands, and differing language proficiency of students or inappropriate online communication tools. All of these can contribute to irregular or brief interaction, which may subsequently be interpreted by students as lack of interest by their partners (O'Dowd and Ritter 2006; O'Dowd and Waire 2009). Lack of project success can also occur when there is too much focus on logistics at the expense of pedagogical considerations (O'Dowd and Waire 2009).

In order to anticipate some of these difficulties, teachers and students must be clear about which language will be used for each 'activity', how the tasks are designed and how students are partnered. Several studies stress the need to engage students in online 'ice breaker' activities such as sharing mini biographies, photos or video streams, in order to encourage affective engagement (O'Dowd and Eberbach 2004; O'Dowd 2005; Müller-Hartman 2006).

Contrary to widespread perceptions that the teacher's role diminishes in telecollaboration, research reveals that pedagogical involvement becomes all the more crucial with more complex issues. Educators need to guide students to provide insightful descriptions of their own culture and to engage in sensitive ethnographic interviewing (O'Dowd and Eberbach 2004; O'Dowd 2006), whereby learners both supply and seek viewpoints from an insider's perspective. In so doing, the teacher adopts the role of "model and coach", demonstrating how to create and analyse communication, and become a "source and resource", helping students to locate the information supplied by project partners in a wider cultural context (O'Dowd 2007).

Ware and Kramersch (2005) suggest that in order to minimise cultural misunderstandings, teachers should ask their students to peer review posts before they are sent to the partner class and organise class discussions to analyse potentially provocative messages.

Toward these ends, Müller-Hartman (2006) and O'Dowd (2007) recommend making use of experiential learning where teachers are engaged in telecollaborative exchange. This first-hand experience can engage teachers affectively and develop the necessary know-how for their modelling and coaching role. More recently, O'Dowd (2013) has developed a model for the competencies of the telecollaborative teacher which encompass organisational, pedagogical and ICT/ digital competences in addition to intercultural attitudes and beliefs.

Methods

The project was established in 2013 and lasted four months during the summer term. An English comprehensive school was approached by the author through a professional link with its ML department in a school-university partnership for initial teacher education. The school was selected as an ideal project partner as it is located in an area of severe economic deprivation. Through European town twinning, this school already had a link with a grammar school (Gymnasium) in the German Ruhr area, which was invited to become the exchange partner.

The students in the English school were in the most academically able sub-group of Year 8 learners of German with 24 students (age 12-13) who were in their second year of learning German. In this school, ML study is compulsory until the end of Year 9, with students studying either French or German, with more or less equal distribution. For some, the choice of language was determined by the one which they had studied in primary school or parental wishes. The German students learning English lived in a relatively middle-class area and were in a Year 6 class (age 11-12). Although the

German students were also in their second year of language learning, their English language competence was more developed, as they had seven lessons of English a week compared to their English peers who had only two German lessons. In the German school, it was compulsory for all students to study English for the entirety of their school careers. Both language teachers were male, German nationals and each had approximately 10 years of teaching experience. The German teacher in England had completed his teacher training course in England.

It was decided that, in view of limited productive language competence that may make it difficult to provide 'culturally rich' information, students should create website postings in the language of schooling, which for all but three students in Germany, was also the mother tongue. This enabled students to practise their receptive skills by reading and listening to their partners' material. The exchange was set up on an *Edublogs* blogging site, specifically built for educational purposes. The students were partnered in groups of 4-6, the rationale being to stimulate group discussion about the types of questions to ask and the representation of culture. The activity themes dovetailed with the curriculum in both countries and encompassed the topic areas of interests, hobbies, holiday activities and school. Within the *Edublogs* site, each set of partners had their individual webpage for the information exchange activities.

The task design was initially planned by the author and the teacher in the English school and then shared and finalised in email and telephone communication with the teacher in Germany. After the planning stage, the author remained in regular contact with both teachers, advising, on occasion, from the 'sidelines'. On two occasions I participated in and observed lessons dedicated to the exchange in the English school. Before the main activities, the students explored each other's school websites and, as an 'icebreaker' activity, sent each other class photographs.

The three main activities involved asynchronous communication in the form of files (text and video) uploaded to the website and posts on discussion boards. In the first activity, students were asked, in their groups, to formulate introductory questions for their partner groups. These were uploaded to the group pages, answered collectively, and then followed up with posts from individuals on the group discussion boards. The second activity involved the Germans posting reports about a school trip to Oxford and the English students reporting about their half term holidays. Students were then encouraged to discuss their experiences with one another. In the final activity, videos were created that responded to each other's questions about school life. Most activities took place during lesson time, with some students participating during their free time.

Research approach and data collection

Data were collected from website posts, lesson observations and an interview with the English teacher. This was supplemented with responses to pre (n=25) and post (n=24) project questionnaires and a group interview with students (n=6). For practical reasons, it was only possible to administer the questionnaires and conduct lesson observations and interviews with the English participants. Thus, the second and third research questions were addressed as related to the English participants.

Whilst IU includes knowledge and affective dimensions, its pedagogical component involves the practice of certain skills, such as *savoir comprendre* (interpreting and relating), *savoir apprendre* (discovery), and in some cases, *savoir faire* (interaction). As a consequence, Byram's (1997) 'savoirs' model was used as an analytical tool to categorise data relating to the first research question (Can intercultural understanding be facilitated by the virtual exchange?). A thematic analysis was also completed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Research findings

RQ 1 Can IU be facilitated by virtual exchange, and if so what kind of IU?

All three activities prompted students to develop the skill of knowledge discovery (*savoir apprendre*) by asking each other questions. It was hoped that the students' answers and additional posts would then provide material to practise *savoir comprendre*, i.e. interpreting and relating the content of the 'text' to one's own culture. The data analysis suggests, however, that the potential for developing *savoir apprendre* was sometimes dependent on students' curiosity, or their ability to pose more sophisticated questions. Many questions posed suggested that the students were more interested in the visible practices element of the *savoirs*, than the less observable knowledge of social groups, social processes or beliefs. In the discussion of hobbies, the skill of *savoir comprendre* was also implemented fairly superficially. Although comparisons were made, the steps of interpretation and explanation of cultural differences, which is part of this skill, were less developed, probably due to the fact that lifestyle features the students shared did not vary very widely as they are all Europeans. Thus, the knowledge dimension of IU was developed at a fairly basic level.

The smaller number of students who were able to ask abstract questions about their partners' opinions of the two different cultures, e.g. what they thought of English people and what they liked about both England and Germany, were, in theory, more likely to develop more sophisticated knowledge. These questions demonstrated student efforts at perspective taking (Bredella 2003; Walton et al. 2015). However, it became apparent that the potential for students to view life from another perspective, and to more fully develop the affective element, not only depended on the quality of questions posed, but also on the quality of responses and subsequent interpretation of both.

This issue became evident again after the German students posted reports about their trip to Oxford and the English students wrote about their half term holidays. Rather than conveying opinions about impressions, or perceptions about similarities and differences between Germany and England, the Oxford reports included simple descriptions of activities. The English students' reports were also relatively basic.

In order to compensate for this 'lost opportunity', the researcher suggested to the teacher that the English students ask their partners more 'searching' questions about their experiences in England. An analysis of these posts revealed that they coped ably with this task, posing questions such as: Did Oxford surprise you in any way? Was England as you expected it to be? Were the families [who hosted you] welcoming?

Unfortunately, however, due to end of term tests, only one German student responded to these questions in full, saying that he had not expected the buildings and towns to all be so different and that he did not always like English food. Nonetheless, this response and indeed the questions written by the English students, illustrated the possibilities of information exchange and discovery within a virtual exchange. The English students were placed in a decentred position with respect to their own country and stimulated to see it from their German counterparts' perspectives (*savoir être*) whilst the German student made direct comparisons of life in England with his life at home (*savoir comprendre*), which could have been further explored in the classroom in a broader cultural context.

In the final activity related to school life, some of the students' questions provided indicators of IU in their own right. The Germans asked if their partners had a school zoo, whether they had extra-curricular clubs ("Arbeitsgemeinschaften" or "AGs" in German) and a "Selbst-Lern-Zentrum", an independent study centre, illustrating what they assumed to be specific to their own school culture and the beginnings of an ability

to decentre, *savoir être*. Furthermore, the contemporary vocabulary, which is an expression of German school culture, provided the English students with opportunities to access more complex cultural knowledge as the language enabled them to know a culture from within (Kramersch, 1993). In their videos, the English students were keen to show off their new building with open spaces designed for project work and their canteen; again, demonstrating their ability to decentre and consider what might be strange for others, another indicator of *savoir être*. The Germans paid particular attention in their film to their 'AGs' in a similar way. On both sides, the videos were produced and received with great curiosity and enthusiasm. As one English student posted on the website:

Hi. Your video was cool! We really enjoyed it. We hope you found our video interesting and we hope you learned something about our school. All of our groups had fun participating in the video and making something for you to enjoy! Hope to hear from you after the holidays!

Several German students enthused about the English videos on the *Edublogs* site in a similar way. Collectively, their comments illustrated appreciation of one another, positive disposal to another culture, and the ability to take a different perspective, which for Hill (2006), are all fundamental to the affective dimension of IU. Listening to the students' voices in the videos also seemed to be significant in altering stereotypical images of Germans for one English girl, prompting her to suspend one of her own beliefs:

I used to think that Germans were dead like harsh. I was with a German on holiday and he spoke dead strict if you know what I mean. And then on that video, they just speak normal. (Post project group interview)

As far as knowledge is concerned, the video exchange helped students in both countries to see each other's schools from the inside, learn about extra-curricular activities, and school dress. The teacher and researcher realised in hindsight, that supporting tasks,

which engage students in interpreting and relating, would have greatly deepened and extended their cultural knowledge.

Collectively, therefore, the project data indicate that the exchange provided several opportunities to develop IU. If IU is conceptualised in terms of knowledge and attitudes, however, it was probably more successful in cultivating the latter. Within the parameters of the exchange and considering the students' ages, it was hoped that the students would learn about cultural similarities and differences in products, practices, processes (which are not always visible), and to some extent, beliefs. However, the data suggest that they learned mostly about a more observable culture. A possible explanation for this is that the majority of students appeared to lack interest in presenting or discussing more abstract issues, an interpretation that resonates with Zhu Hua's, Jiang's, and Watson's (2011) study which established that young people take a more practical approach to intercultural learning, "objectify[ing] culture as something more visible, something that relates to their everyday life" (155-156).

On the other hand, the fact that a small, but significant group of students did pose more searching questions, and provide 'richer' replies, could suggest that a focus on the 'visible' did not necessarily occur due to lack of interest, but instead because some students may have struggled to communicate in this way without explicit guidance from the teacher. From this premise, it can be concluded that careful teacher scaffolding, whereby the teacher adopts the role of 'model and coach', demonstrating both how to ask questions, and how to create and analyse communication (O'Dowd 2006; O'Dowd 2007; O'Dowd and Eberbach 2004), is of utmost importance and particularly pertinent in a virtual exchange for younger learners.

It could also be argued that an alternative choice of topics may have been more successful in prompting students to acquire a deeper knowledge about cultural processes

or beliefs. However, as one of the aims of the project was to engage students in interactions pertinent to their interests, it is debatable whether it would have been wise to present them with more challenging themes. Indeed, the students' discoveries about their similar hobbies at the start of the exchange seemed crucial in spurring further interaction on discussion boards outside of lesson time.

The data which demonstrate how the exchange developed students' attitudes resonate with the way in which the attitudinal facet of IU is understood by Hill (2006), because they conveyed empathy, respect and open-mindedness. The data also suggest the early stages of Byram's (1997) *savoir être*. Whilst students might have developed some "flexibility of mind", it is difficult to say whether this would "allow [them] to cross borders and accept differences" (Bredella 2003, 38-39) as the students did not experience any 'culture clashes'. Concurrent with the findings of Zhu Hua and colleagues (2011), this study suggests that the most significant aspect of intercultural learning for children of pre-teen age seems to be friendship rather than illuminating differences between 'us' and 'them'. Indeed, the exchange seemed to cultivate IU in the form of 'online friendship'.

Sheer (2011) explains how a virtual communication space can provide a less threatening environment in which both extroverts and introverts are more likely to communicate and self-disclose, particularly when the information exchange is straightforward, and enhances online friendship. This explanation seems applicable to the virtual exchange, where young people, who may lack confidence in communicating with people from other cultures, were less inhibited. Indeed, the beginnings of online friendship seemed to lay foundations on which the students were interested in building more in-depth relationships. This became apparent when they were questioned about the opportunities and limitations of the exchange.

RQ2 What do the students perceive to be the benefits or limitations of a virtual exchange?

In the pre-project questionnaire, the students expressed great interest in “meeting” their partners. For example, individuals commented that

We can learn how different life is for children in Germany.

We would be able to find out what kids our age think about Germany.

One student remarked that they would like it “if they like us as friends”. Four months later, a student observed that, “it is enjoyable the way we try to understand them and the way they try to understand us” and that it had been advantageous to “be able to talk and respond to actual German people and see how they understand English”, suggesting a high level of appreciation of how the exchange had enabled an insider perspective of another culture.

There was also regard for how learning another language involved more than just linguistic learning, with one student observing how they had seen “another side of learning German, instead of just words and sentences”. It was also clear that the students had recognised how the exchange enabled them to draw some comparisons between their lives and those of their partners: “We got to see how their life is and how it is different to ours.”

Responses to the post-project questionnaire also suggested that the English students would like to participate in a real rather than virtual exchange with fourteen out of twenty-four youths responding positively to a question about this. As one student commented, “the internet has its limits” and another remarked how “it would be fun to know them in person”. Several students expressed additional enthusiasm about the importance of one-to-one contact in the group interview. These data suggest that a virtual exchange may be a supportive mechanism for developing the confidence of

young people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds to communicate interculturally in face- to- face situations in the future.

The only frustration students expressed was with the limited communication tools and infrastructure on the *Edublogs* site, where they wanted to engage in instant messaging or video chat. As one student remarked “I think it would be better if you could talk directly to just one person [...] You had to post it for everyone to see and sometimes you got confused with who everybody was and who was in your group.”

RQ3 What does the ML teacher regard as the benefits or limitations of the virtual exchange?

The ML teacher felt that the children had benefitted linguistically and the experience had not only enabled learning about culture, but was also very different from language content in textbooks. For example, the instructor praised access to “real life materials” that discussed aspects of German culture and were easily understood by the students.

He also felt that the project had been beneficial for developing more autonomous modes of working where “the children took charge of their own learning”.

He said that,

all came to good results in each lesson. They did find something out about German culture or about German every time [...] Some of the groups, especially the girls, have done tremendous work on their own in trying to get the information across that they wanted to tell.

It is possible that he commented only on language and autonomous learning because the project had proceeded without equipping him with a theoretical frame for thinking about the benefits in intercultural terms. Interestingly, he noticed that the girls were more adept in presenting aspects of their own culture to their partners, managing to

operate without explicit modelling support from the teacher. For example, they provided background information about their favourite celebrities, whom they thought their partners may not know, explained how they celebrated family birthdays and talked about their hobbies and interests in much more detail than the boys. The reasons for this are consistent with the research findings of Mendoza (2007) and Tufte (2003), who established that girls more readily engage with the internet for purposes of social communication and self-expression than boys.

As for limitations, the teacher expressed reservations about the website's potential for facilitating one-to-one communication. Whilst on a technical level this has implications for website development, it also resonates with recommendations from Dooly and Eberbach (2004), O'Dowd (2005) and Müller-Hartman's (2006) conclusion that ice-breaker activities should focus on personal relationships and encourage affective engagement.

Another limitation, although not inherent in the exchange itself, was the need to ensure that students continued language studies beyond the obligatory stage and went on to the GCSE examination at age 16. With fewer children in his school choosing to study German at GCSE, thereby threatening the survival of his subject department, he felt that during the following autumn term he would need to dedicate more time to the traditional curriculum so that students would feel more equipped for future study.

Discussion

The experience of the virtual exchange project has shown that it has great potential to promote the attitudinal dimension of intercultural understanding amongst younger learners because it facilitated curiosity and openness to another culture, and for some students, the ability to view their own culture from another perspective (Byram 1997;

Hill 2006). Through online communication, the children learned that they had a great deal in common, and this helped to develop positive attitudes and dispel stereotypical images of the partners in the other country. In contrast to some of the experiences of telecollaboration in HE, there was no indication that this project provoked cultural misunderstandings. A reason for the emphasis on similarities rather than differences, however, is likely due to the fact that Germans and Britons are both Europeans. Furthermore, the familiarity of the German students with English norms probably coloured the exchanges.

The positive interactions can also be explained by Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory. Allport explains that intercultural contact is most likely to be successful if the participants are of equal status, have common goals and perceive that they have common interests and institutional support. Whilst Allport originally discussed these conditions in relation to face to face encounters, these circumstances were applicable to the online exchange. The online context, supported by both schools, seemed to provide a scaffold for intercultural communication, minimising contact anxiety and enabling students to develop confidence in engaging in dialogue with peers from another culture.

However, it may simultaneously be argued that although the intercultural 'contact' was successful, the nature of intercultural understanding, as far as the knowledge dimension was concerned, was fairly superficial. Students developed some knowledge about visible practices, but less awareness of beliefs, more nuanced cultural processes, or variations between cultural groups who live within the same society (Byram 1997; Hill 2006). Although students made simple comparisons, they had fewer opportunities to interpret and compare their experiences. The reasons identified for this are: the lack of detail provided by the students about their own cultures, the selection of non-contentious themes for discussion, an absence of more directed support for students

in writing about their own lives and formulating meaningful questions to ask others, or missed opportunities for supplementary learning that could have contextualised some of the online communication.

It is not the case that the virtual exchange lacked potential for cultivating the knowledge aspect of IU. Rather, in line with lessons learnt from telecollaborative projects in HE, some of the less successful aspects were perhaps due to paying more attention to the logistics of exchange than to pedagogy. If future projects draw on the expertise derived from telecollaborative projects in HE, careful consideration should be devoted to crafting suitable adaptations for supporting younger learners, particularly in the field of ethnography.

Currently, some helpful suggestions come from Pryor (2004), who found that children can be taught ethnographic writing skills, through encouragement to “pay attention to the pictures in [their] minds when [they] write” (400). Corbett (2010) and Lázár (2013) provide teachers and students with similarly practical advice, with the former suggesting that online discussion is more effective when participants demonstrate modesty, sincerity, politeness, show an interest in their partner’s answers, and also offer opinions. Lázár (2013) provides an “AAA [framework] of good communication”, whereby learners should be prompted to answer/appreciate, add something and ask.

The potential for developing more sophisticated IU will also depend on intelligent task design. If educators are to help students to write in a way that reveals an insider’s perspective of their culture and to interpret information in wider cultural context, it could be argued that information exchange should be based on more complex issues. The challenge posed here in relation to the lower secondary school, is the balancing act between appropriate task complexity, motivational content, maintenance

of student relationships and pitching activities at the linguistic and developmental level of the students. In so doing, attention should be paid to the work of Barrett (2013), who explains that young people's ability to process and retain concepts related to cultural complexity can depend on their stage of cognitive development and salience of content to their motivational needs.

Further work must be done on developing a web platform with 'media richness' (Sheer 2011) to further facilitate online friendships. Younger students are likely to appreciate a multi-media website that facilitates different kinds of one-to-one communication in a social networking type format that is appropriate for their age. The software for this should be developed with educators who have telecollaborative expertise and at the same time, guarantee internet safety.

A response to all of these issues is necessary if we are to harness the openness and curiosity towards other cultures expressed by younger students and the ability of the internet to transcend social and cultural borders. In contrast to traditional exchanges, which can make huge demands on hosting families, who feel under pressure to be the perfect host to their child's exchange partner – a demand which seems to be particularly problematic for socio-economically disadvantaged families – telecollaboration has the potential to be a more democratic exchange model, addressing issues of equity and social inclusion. In a similar vein, this alternative type of exchange enhances equal access as it removes the financial cost of going abroad, which, for many students still poses a barrier to cross-cultural learning.

In terms of providing new insights in the field of telecollaboration, this study has demonstrated how children between the ages of 11 and 13 are at a stage of their development where they are particularly open and enthusiastic about learning about other cultures, perhaps even more so than older students, thereby increasing the

potential of telecollaboration to develop IU in terms of affect. This finding would suggest that virtual exchanges should start at an earlier age and become more widely embedded in the lower secondary school. However, in order to maximise full potential for developing IU, we must also develop appropriate pedagogies and task design. We should draw on expertise in HE and make careful adaptations so that more young people have the educational opportunity to learn about ‘otherness’, grow in their ability to communicate interculturally and develop respectful relationships with people from other cultures.

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Appendix

HE higher education
IC intercultural competence
IU intercultural understanding
ML modern languages

ⁱ The terms foreign languages and modern languages are used synonymously. With reference to curriculum, the latter term is used to differentiate between ancient and modern languages.