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Breaking language and cultural barriers: A case study in telecollaboration at an EFL class in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of a telecollaboration program with students of an English Pedagogy Program at a private university in Chile. The aim is to analyze this experience through the opinions of the Chilean participants between the years 2016-2017. To do so, a post-course survey was applied to a group of 54 students. The analysis of the qualitative data shows that students reported two main benefits: a raise in intercultural awareness and an increase in their linguistic abilities in the target language. Virtual exchanges through information and communication technologies (ICT) provided learners with authentic linguistic input and authentic situations, which in turn increased their motivation to engage in second language conversations. Despite certain limitations discussed in the paper, the telecollaboration experience was highly valued by the students.

Keywords: Telecollaboration; virtual exchange; intercultural competence; higher education; EFL.

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Rompiendo barreras lingüísticas y culturales: Un caso de estudio de un intercambio virtual en una clase de inglés como lengua extranjera

RESUMEN

Este trabajo presenta un estudio de caso de un programa de intercambio virtual con estudiantes de un Programa de Pedagogía del Inglés en una universidad privada de Chile. El objetivo es analizar esta experiencia a través de las opiniones de las y los participantes chilenos en esta iniciativa entre los años 2016 y 2017. Para ello, se aplicó una encuesta posterior al curso. El análisis de los datos cualitativos muestra que los estudiantes reportaron dos beneficios principales: un aumento de la conciencia intercultural y un incremento de sus habilidades lingüísticas en la lengua meta. Los intercambios virtuales por medio de las tecnologías de la información y comunicación (TIC) proporcionaron a los estudiantes insumos lingüísticos auténticos y situaciones auténticas, lo que a su vez aumentó su motivación para participar en conversaciones en una segunda lengua. Al margen de ciertas limitaciones examinadas en el documento, la experiencia de telecolaboración fue muy valorada por los estudiantes.

Palabras Clave: Telecolaboración; intercambio virtual; competencia intercultural; educación superior; inglés como lengua extranjera.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, Chile has become a more multicultural country due to an influx of migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, bringing in different customs, habits, cultures and even different languages. This recent migration phenomenon has brought a series of challenges to the educational system and teacher trainer programs (Pavez-Soto, Ortiz-López, Sepúlveda, Jara and Olguín, 2019; Stefoni, Stang and Riedemann, 2016). In just three years (2015-2018) there was a significant rise in migrant enrollment in schools from 0.9% to 3.2% (Fernández, 2018). Recent studies indicate that there is a lack of training and teaching staff are unprepared for optimal reception and integration of migrant children in Chile (Poblete and Galaz, 2017; Stefoni et al., 2016).

Indeed, teachers have reported that one of the main areas of professional development they need more extensive training in is teaching in multicultural/multilingual settings (OECD, 2019). The challenge for teachers is clear: the inescapable need to develop intercultural skills that aim towards the inclusion of dialogue and cultural exchange. Though ethnic-cultural diversity in classrooms is not a new phenomenon in Chile, as we acknowledge the different indigenous communities that compose the country, interculturality and the development of this skill has gained much attention from policymakers and academics (Berríos Valenzuela and Toro Collantes, 2019).

Closely connected to this is the fact that intercultural communication requires a lingua franca, but arriving at a mutual understanding in a language that is not the native one requires a certain level of proficiency and opportunities. Opportunities to develop intercultural competence and opportunities to cultivate English, the world's lingua franca. However, for Chilean students, these occasions are few and far between. The evidence in this regard is

critical. The latest results of the “Estudio Nacional de Inglés” (National English Language Study) shows that the majority of high school students in Chile graduate with just a beginner level (A1) in reading and listening comprehension skills (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2018). Falling far short of the expectations, an intermediate level (B1), of the government. Among the main factors associated with the low results in the study are teachers’ low levels of L2 (English), the meager amount of hours devoted to English and the fact that English classes are being taught for the most part in Spanish (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2018).

Thus, for current pre-service English teachers the challenge is twofold: mastering the language and developing intercultural competencies that will enable them to face the challenges of an ever-increasing globalized world. This is where an English Pedagogy Program at a private university in Santiago, Chile came up with an answer to this challenge, in August of 2014, and has connected Chilean university students with peers from around the world.

The answer came in the form of a telecollaboration program established by Global Partners in Education (GPE). Numerous researchers, including O’Dowd (2007a), an authority on telecollaboration, have recognized the many benefits that online exchanges supported by electronic communication tools have on language and intercultural education. But the multiple constraints that telecollaborative projects face have hindered their implementation worldwide (O’Dowd, 2013).

Being a country with one of the highest levels of inequality among the world’s industrialized countries, only a small percentage of students in Chile have the money and opportunity to travel abroad and explore new cultures (PNUD, 2017). However, “virtual internationalization” provides students with “direct exposure to other cultures, perspectives, values and ideologies through engagement with speakers of languages they wish to learn, an experience that might otherwise not be available or financially possible” (Thorne as cited in O’Dowd and Lewis, 2016, p. x). For this reason, these experiences in the online classroom are an invaluable tool for pre-service teachers as their classrooms become more diverse.

The following paper aims at exploring the opinions of a group of participants in the virtual exchange program in relation to the two objectives the Pedagogy program had, that is, developing intercultural communication while implementing more hours of English into the classroom and using more authentic English. This paper is structured as follows: the first section presents a brief literature review of the main theoretical discussions that permeate educational telecollaboration practices, including an overview of intercultural competences and the relevance of employing authentic materials in the classroom. The second section presents the method while the third and fourth sections display and discuss the results of the surveys. The final part concludes with some limitations of the study and a reflection on the results.

2. Literature review

2.1 Telecollaboration through Global Partners in Education (GPE)

The virtual exchange program (telecollaboration) in Chile was framed in a course called Global Understanding (GU), which “is taught in a shared virtual classroom with students and faculty from more than 40 institutions, in approximately 25 countries” (“ECU”, n.d.). The course took place via video conferencing and live chat inside the classroom, while students continued to correspond by way of other technological means outside the classroom (Facebook, WhatsApp, e-mail, etc.).

The very first Global Understanding course was implemented in 2003 but it was not until the year 2008 when the membership organization Global Partners in Education (GPE) was founded. Since then, a wide community of colleges and universities from around the world have taken part in the program. GPE’s mission is “to create a worldwide Internet-based

community of colleges and universities that provides opportunities for students to engage in real-time collaborative courses, discussions, projects, and research around critical topics that promote global citizenship and advance higher education" ("Global Partners in Education", n.d.). Their approach to achieving this is through virtual collaboration or virtual exchange.

According to the Virtual Exchange Coalition (n.d.) "virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs". They are "technology-enabled" because online and digital resources are being utilized. They are "sustained" because they are usually guided by educational institutions and based on a curriculum. Finally, they are "people to people" because communication among people from different cultures is encouraged; and they answer to "education programs" because they respond to an objective, which should be measurable and in accordance with the curriculum followed.

Guth and Helm (2010) define telecollaboration in language learning contexts as "Internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence through structured tasks" (p. 14). Several studies have highlighted the relevance and benefits of telecollaborative initiatives as they enhance linguistic acquisition by exposure to authentic input in the target language and direct contact with the culture (Hauck and Youngs, 2008; Hollenbeck and Hollenbeck, 2009). According to Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) preparing students for how language exists in the real world signifies providing students exposure to natural, native-like speech. Other benefits have been studied in reference to the development of intercultural competence (Álvarez González, 2011; Byram, 1997; Sevilla-Pavón and Haba Osca, 2016) along with instrumental and interpersonal competencies (Pérez Cañado, 2013).

Over the course of the semester, university students in Chile were partnered with peer students from two to three participating universities (East Carolina University was a constant while the other two universities varied; however, every other partnering university was located in a different country). Thus, students were provided the opportunity to interact with peers from three different countries throughout the semester. Each connection with a partnering country concluded in a collaborative student project. O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) describe how students can combine foreign language skills and intercultural competence with e-literacies to perform an extensive number of activities. They refer to e-literacies as "creating a multimodal presentation in a foreign language, and the ability to communicate clearly and effectively in a foreign language through asynchronous tools (such as e-mail) and synchronous ones (such as videoconferencing)" (p. 7).

2.2 Telecollaboration and the intercultural competence

Telecollaboration provides a deviation in the aim of foreign language learning, from solely learning the language to learning the language and the culture (O'Dowd, 2011). Culture is a vital part of learning and teaching a second language. Communicating with a new language is not only about learning the language, but also about learning the customs, habits, lifestyles, norms, etc (Zhu, 2010). As Ali, Kazemian and Mahar (2015) explain, the process of learning a second language requires an individual to practice linguistic forms and to become familiar with the culture of the target language, ultimately resulting in their ability to interpret intercultural communication. They expound upon that idea, articulating that in order for ESL learners to become proficient in intercultural communication, they need to be provided with cultural context and awareness.

Similarly, [Kramsch \(1993\)](#) points out that culture is not an expendable skill, it is “always in the background, right from day one, (...) making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them” (p. 1). Therefore, learning a language entails more than the knowledge of grammatical rules, vocabulary and pronunciation, the learning of another language goes hand in hand with the learning of another culture. In order for students to use “language appropriate to particular contexts” ([Tseng, 2002, p. 11](#)), they need to “know the culture that underlies the language” ([Tseng, 2002, p. 12](#)).

Once students understand the culture, they can become successful language learners and transform words on a page into real meaning ([Kilickaya, 2004](#)). Communicating with different cultures enables students to bring their knowledge to life. As is seen, culture is an ever-adapting and living phenomenon, therefore, students need to have the chance to interact and receive firsthand experiences in order to fully grasp the content seen in texts.

According to [O'Dowd and Lewis \(2016\)](#), telecollaboration has been identified as “an essential tool for the development of intercultural awareness” (p. 21) and advocated to be used in language learning contexts. [Sercu et al. \(2005\)](#) state that an interculturally competent person is characterized by their abilities to communicate with people from other cultures and an openness to new insights, knowledge and attitudes, as well as an ability to recognize their own culture and self and be critical of both. Thus, by providing students with these online experiences we open up pathways to develop intercultural competence skills, foreign language skills and competences ([Guth and Helm, 2010](#)).

[O'Dowd and Lewis's \(2016\)](#) research shows that online intercultural exchanges have great potential to enrich students in higher education by enhancing the development of a student's intercultural competence through interactions with “real” informants from the target language and engaging them in using more authentic language than normally found in the traditional classroom setting. Interacting with real informants can lead to dispelling stereotypes and generalizations students bring with them before interactions commence. Stereotypes are “a form of categorization that organizes our experience and guides our behavior toward ethnic and national groups” ([Adler, 2003, p. 5](#)). While stereotypes help “reduce a complex reality to manageable dimensions” ([Adler, 2003, p. 7](#)), they can be used ineffectively by placing someone in the wrong group or by using the stereotype of the group to describe an individual or incorrectly describing the group as a whole.

Consequently, by communicating directly with people who are part of another culture, students are able to reach their own conclusions and are willing to consider other's beliefs. Just as stated by [Byram and Grundy \(2003\)](#), it is important “not to neglect the affective dimensions when people are educated and prepared to cope with strange cultures (...) it is necessary to develop empathy, tolerance, flexibility, open-mindedness, curiosity, etc.” (p. 78). In universities, online exchanges are seen to be “one of the main tools for developing intercultural awareness in the language classroom” ([O'Dowd and Lewis 2016, p. 3](#)). These abilities are essential for EFL teachers in order to be effective intercultural speakers while navigating culturally diverse classrooms and the culture of a second language.

2.3 Telecollaboration and authentic materials in the EFL classroom

As well as exposing students to new cultures, the GU program allows students to express and listen to different points of view through a lingua franca, English. [O'Dowd and Lewis \(2016\)](#) plant two main pillars of a telecollaborative exchange: “‘authentic’ interaction with native speakers or learners from other countries” and “first-hand experience of ‘real’ intercultural communication” (p. 275).

The definitions of authentic materials vary from author to author, nevertheless they hold similarities as they all reference the exposure to real language and as a motivational tool for students to use English. [Rogers and Medley \(1988\)](#) define the concept “authentic materials” as a natural way to use the language and “appropriateness” in terms of the context and cultural implications found when used by native speakers (p. 468). Further stating that as students become more adept at handling authentic materials and authentic situations, they become more interested and capable of working with these situations and materials. [Guariento and Morley \(2001\)](#) explain that students are highly motivated when using authentic texts because they are under the perception that they are learning the “real language”, the language that is used day to day by the community who speaks it. Additionally, [Richards \(2001\)](#) refers to authentic materials as those which are not “specially prepared for pedagogical purposes” (p. 252). He identifies some of the advantages of having authentic materials: the positive effect on learner motivation, the authentic cultural information they provide, the exposure to real language, the ability to relate more closely to learners' needs and the encouragement of teacher creativity ([Phillips, Shettlesworth, Clarke and Peacock as cited in Richards, 2001](#)).

The most convincing argument in favor of authentic materials is that students are more attentive and engaged when they are using meaningful communication in real-life situations. As Wilkins notes, authentic texts help students to “bridge the gap between classroom knowledge” and real-world scenarios ([Wilkins as cited in Guariento and Morley, 2001, p. 347](#)). Similar to an internship, students are able to gain alternative experiences and further their knowledge when they have to put into practice what they have seen in class. [Sibold \(2011\)](#) makes a similar comparison with vocabulary, emphasizing that by bringing in actual objects it is easier to make these abstract ideas or items more concrete for students. Therefore, when communicating with native and non-native speakers in English the abstract grammar and vocabulary studied in class may become more tangible and relatable.

Interacting with native speakers does not guarantee EFL students will improve their English, but it does encourage the use of English in ways that are not accessible in the traditional classroom. There is no one-size-fits-all formula for teaching a second language and teachers are constantly searching for innovative ways to connect to students. Furthermore, such telecollaborations provide students with first-hand experiences of communicating to different English speakers, allowing them to discover how English varies from country to country and the differences between fellow EFL speakers and native English speakers. Which in turn can lead to empathizing with fellow EFL learners and the hurdles faced when using a foreign language.

3. Methodological design

3.1 Data collection and analysis

The research conducted in this study was descriptive and exploratory and it had a cross-sectional design. As its objective was to analyze the experience of this telecollaboration initiative through the opinions of a group of undergraduate students at a private Chilean university, participants completed a brief anonymous online survey at the end of the telecollaboration project. The survey consisted of two questions:

- a) How satisfied were you with the program? Why?
- b) How did the GU program encourage your use of English?

The qualitative data was, then, thoroughly analyzed by two researchers for emergent themes and coded into categories. The analysis was carried out using an inductive approach which allows “research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” ([Thomas, 2006, p. 238](#)).

To reduce bias, each researcher independently identified salient themes based on the students' opinions of the telecollaboration project. After that, both researchers reviewed the themes and they were combined into three main categories, namely, intercultural awareness, linguistic competence and authentic materials and language. These themes constituted the primary framework for the findings. Accordingly, in section four student's comments are presented, in their entirety, in separate tables for each of the emergent themes.

3.2 Participants and context

The data was collected from August 2016 until November 2017. The students who participated in the surveys were students from the third, fourth and fifth year in an English Pedagogy program at a private university in Santiago, Chile. A total of 54 students, 36 females and 18 males took part in the study. The students ranged in age from 20-39 years old. The participants collaborated and had virtual conferencing with students from other universities around the world, including but not limited to university students from the USA, the Netherlands, Spain, Mexico, Algeria, Gambia and China.

The survey was applied to students following the last telecollaboration session of the semester. Surveys were applied via Google Forms. The 90-minute class in Chile was run concurrently with a mandatory course (Language and Communication) that the students had in their major. Hence, all students had a strong command of English as they were studying to become English teachers. Their proficiency levels in English were roughly equivalent to upper-intermediate (B2), for third and fourth-year students, and advanced (C1) for fifth-year students, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

Students were split into two groups during the telecollaborations, one large group chatting via video-conference while the other group chatted via messenger to their partners online, alternating groups each class. During classes, students were instructed to discuss pre-set topics (college life, family and cultural traditions, the meaning of life and religion, stereotypes and prejudices and an open topic, time permitting) of cultural relevance. Following the five to six virtual meetings, students worked together to create a collaborative project with their partner from the collaborating university, following a set of guidelines provided by GPE. As students had to work together, communication outside of the classroom was encouraged but not enforced.

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Intercultural awareness

The open-ended questions in the post-course survey provided insights into students' opinions about the level of satisfaction with the program. Regarding the level of satisfaction, participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with it. The reasons were varied but one prevailing idea was that the telecollaborations granted students an opportunity that is uncommon for the majority of Chileans, as two participant's comments illustrate: "it was a valuable experience. We do not always get the chance to interact with people from other countries" (Table 1) and "I wanted to learn more about people who are different from me" (Table 2). Indeed, telecollaboration provides opportunities to interact and learn about new cultures, instances that students may not have been afforded otherwise (O'Dowd, 2007b). Another student reinforced this idea "[the program] gave me the chance to know people from other cultures, learn from them and increase my knowledge on the topics" (Table 1).

As is well-known, the awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices around the world is a fundamental step in developing intercultural awareness (Sercu et al., 2005). Intercultural awareness was prevalent throughout student's comments as one participant revealed that the program "opened my mind to other realities" (Table 1), while another participant remarked that "it is interesting [to] communicate with people of other cultures, because they see the world in a very different way" (Table 1). Even more participants indicated similar feelings: "I learned a lot from my partners also I think it is pretty important to get to know people from other places and try to understand the different cultures" (Table 1). These comments are indicative of a development in intercultural competence, as students began to realize there are varying world-views while simultaneously acquiring knowledge of diverse cultures.

All in all, these comments further support the idea that openness to new insights and building relationships with peers from other cultures is paramount to the development of intercultural competence (O'Dowd, 2007b; Sercu et al., 2005). Furthermore, since the students had been exposed to more diverse ideas, they became more aware of the presence of stereotypes and misrepresentations of cultures. One student commented: "Sometimes you get ideas about a certain country but when you actively know someone from that country your perception about that specific country changes" (Table 1).

Students' interactions with their partners varied from positive to negative, ultimately impacting their satisfaction with the program. For some, the importance of having a communicative and friendly partner had a direct impact on their assessment of the program. For instance, one participant claimed to have "enjoyed [the program] very much" since he had had "very good partners in both video-conferences" (Table 1). Another student's value of the experience was indeed in direct relation to the quality of interaction with their partners: "It was such a great experience! I made new friends in the USA and [the] Netherlands" (Table 1).

While the majority of comments were positive, there were the occasional negative comments related to the attitude of partnering students. As one student said, "With the people of [the] US a little bit disappointed because of their lack of interest in our culture but with the people from the Netherlands very satisfied" (Table 1) or another student who articulated, "Because the communication felt forced, [e]specially when talking with my partner of the us [USA]. Moreover, I believe that they didn't feel interested in our culture, they just wanted to get a good grade" (Table 1). Two other participants observed that "it was difficult for me and I think that for all my classmates to work with [the] Mexicans, they weren't keen on the program" (Table 1) and "At first I was not satisfied at all since I had a partner who did not participate that much" (Table 1). These types of instances unfortunately might lead to confirming pre-existing stereotypes or making new ones about the culture as a whole based on one or two people (Adler, 2003).

Table 1*Sample of Intercultural Awareness*.*

Age	Gender	Year	How satisfied were you with the program?	Why?
22	Female	Fourth	medium	because it was difficult for me and I think that for all my classmates to work with Mexicans, they weren't keen on the program :(
23	Female	Fourth	Very satisfied, I enjoyed it a lot talking with people far away from us	Because it opened my mind to other realities.
20	Female	Third	very	Because I learnt a lot of other cultures. I would like to travel abroad so this is my moment.
21	Male	Third	I enjoyed it very much	I had very good partners in both video-conferences and as we enjoyed this very much, I believe, we learnt a lot from the different cultures we (as a class and individuals) were exposed to.
21	Male	Third	very satisfied	At first I was not satisfied at all since I had a partner who did not participate that much, but at the end with my partner of the Netherlands I felt totally satisfied, since I got to know much more than I ever imagined about her and her culture.
22	Male	Third	A lot	It was a valuable experience. We do not always get the chance to interact with people from other countries.
24	Female	Fifth	I'm pretty happy, so I think I'm very satisfied with the program	It was such a great experience! I made new friends in the USA and Netherlands. I learned a lot from my partners also I think it is pretty important to get to know people from other places and try to understand the different cultures.
21	Female	Third	I was very satisfied because I learnt things that I did not know about them (for example, I didn't know that they have a King)	N/A
21	Female	Third	I was very satisfied with the program	Since it gave me the chance to use and improve the language in real situations and also because it gave me the chance to know people from other cultures, learn from them and increase my knowledge on the topics seen.
21	Male	Third	:)	It is very interesting communicate with people of other cultures, because they see the world in a very different way.
21	Female	Third	I'm so satisfied, I really like the program, it was a challenge to me	Because it was a challenge for me to overcome my fears when I had to talk in English with different people.

21	Female	Third	Very satisfied with how it worked with our partners from the Netherlands	Because they were more interested in talking and getting to know each other than the people from the USA.
21	Female	Third	N/A	With the people of US a little bit dissapointed because of their lack of interest in our culture but with the people from netherland very satisfied.
22	Female	Third	hugely satisfied	Because it is a great opportunity to know different people and cultures in real life. Sometimes you get ideas about a certain country but when you actively know someone from that country your perception about that specific country changes. It was also a great way to practice English and interact.
21	Female	Fourth	Fairly satisfied	Because the communication felt forced, specially when talking with my partner of the us. Moreover, I believe that they didn't feel interested in our culture, they just wanted to get a good grade.

*Students' original comments.

4.2 Linguistic competence

Overall, the most noteworthy finding to emerge from the analysis is that students felt encouraged to use English both inside and outside of the classroom. What is more, students reported this sentiment because they acknowledged that there were no other alternatives but to speak in English. In one case, the participant shared, "I had to use English to communicate with my partners. It was a necessity" (Table 2), while another commented that, "this [program] create[s] a necessity of communication that motivate[s] us to try to do it in the most proper way possible" (Table 2).

In Chile, a largely monolingual society, there are few opportunities to speak English outside of the classroom. When students leave the classroom their exposure and the likelihood of using English becomes limited. On the other hand, these exchanges provide opportunities for autonomous learning and supplemental language practice (O'Dowd and Lewis 2016). This is reflected in two students comments: "Because when we spoke to our partners, it was always in English, even though we weren't in language classes" (Table 2) and "because it kept me thinking in English and also because I still chat with a partner, so I used the language via Facebook or email" (Table 2).

Apart from being encouraged to use English, a development of linguistic competences -specifically speaking and writing skills- was evident based on the students' comments. As a participant highlighted, "inside the classroom we could improve our speaking skill[s] and outside the classroom we could improve our writing skill[s]" (Table 2). However, it was also apparent that not everyone felt comfortable speaking face to face in the videoconferences. Some preferred the affordances of using social networks to communicate: "I think it was a good opportunity to talk, even though when I didn't really talk a lot. I felt more comfortable talking by Facebook or email, so I think I developed more writing skills" (Table 2).

A further discovery was that the majority of students felt more confident in their communication and presentation skills in English. One student reported, "Because in the collaborati-

ve project we need to use a lot of English and I felt really confident" (Table 2). Evidently, when students are exposed to English for extended periods of time and encouraged to use it, they start to feel more confident: "Now I can write faster and better. As I had to write a lot to talk with my partner, I think my grammatical skill is better" (Table 2) and "I had to either speak or write in English with my partners, and I still talk to my partner from The Netherlands sometimes, therefore, that gives me more confidence since my partner understands clearly what I say and because I practiced a lot my language skills during the ECU course" (Table 2). Of course, confidence does not solely lead to an increase in linguistic abilities, but it does engage better active participation in the target language.

Table 2

Sample of Linguistic Competence.*

Age	Gender	Year	How did the GU program encourage your use of English?
24	Female	Fifth	I had to communicate myself by video calls and E-mails because I wanted to learn more about people who are different from me.
21	Male	Third	We have to communicate with the other person this create a necessity of communication that motivate us to try to do it in the most proper way possible.
21	Female	Fourth	Because they forced us to use English to communicate with our partners during the video conferences and in the chat rooms.
22	Male	Third	I had to use English to communicate with my partners. It was a necessity.
25	Male	Fourth	Because in the collaborative project we need to use a lot of English and I felt really confident.
21	Female	Third	I think it was a good opportunity to talk, even though when I didn't really talk a lot. I felt more comfortable talking by Facebook or e-mail, so I think I developed more writing skills.
22	Female	Third	Since most topics had a lot of discussion I was able to show my point of view regarding the topics.
20	Female	Third	I had to either speak or write in English with my partners, and I still talk to my partner from The Netherlands sometimes, therefore, that gives me more confidence since my partner understands clearly what I say and because I practiced a lot my language skills during the ECU course.
25	Female	Third	Now I can write faster and better. As I had to write a lot to talk with my partner, I think my grammatical skill is better.
26	Female	Fourth	we talk all the time, so inside the classroom we could improve our speaking skill and outside the classroom we could improve our writing skill.
23	Female	Fourth	Because when we spoke to our partners, it was always in English, even though we weren't always in language classes.
20	Female	Third	Because we had to use language (English) all the time inside the classroom (videoconferences) and outside when we talk by Facebook.
21	Female	Third	Because I could talk with my partner outside the classroom via E-mail and chatting.
20	Female	Third	Inside the class is really obvious: through the chats/video-calls and outside because it kept me thinking in English and also because I still chat with a partner, so I used the language via Facebook or email.
22	Female	Fourth	because we had to communicate with our partners in classes and outside to discuss the assigned topics and prepare our projects.

*Students' original comments.

4.3 Authentic material and language

This telecollaboration presented students an opportunity to interact in English with native and non-native speakers without being in physical proximity. The results of the survey show students' awareness of having the opportunity to interact authentically with native speakers or learners from other countries: "Because we can talk with native speaker[s] just in English, and that's a good way to practice it in real situations" (Table 3).

Closely related to the perceived increase in their linguistic skills, many students indicated how engaged they felt when in "real speaking situations", something that teachers strive to achieve but may not be able to replicate in the classroom: "[...] I had to be using English in authentic situations to chat with my peers as if it were in my normal life, interlinked with my daily usage of Spanish" (Table 3). Greater engagement in using the target language was observed from the results which is one of the main benefits from online exchanges (O'Dowd and Lewis, 2016).

No matter how much talk time students are provided in class it is usually in a structured environment. However, during these sessions students were provided greater freedom, while still being supervised by a teacher in the synchronous sessions, leading to a more realistic situation than the classic EFL classroom: "It helped a lot to use it in a real-life situation such as having a conversation about any topic with someone without any major problem" (Table 3).

As mentioned before, students are only in an English based environment for around an hour and a half to three hours per day. However, synchronous and asynchronous tools such as emails and chats increased the length of exposure to authentic situations. Certainly, the comments suggest that the project provided more varied opportunities to produce and practice English, "because i[I] had to communicate in English in class and when i[I] was in my house" (Table 3) and "I felt like this because I had more opportunities to interact with people" (Table 3).

Additionally, for the duration of the telecollaboration students were guided to reflect upon and explore topics generally not encountered in the typical classroom, leading to critical thinking and a deeper involvement with English. As one student declared, researching was a fundamental previous step to the virtual exchanges: "I had to investigate about the topics that we were discussing in the project so that I had to use English in real speaking situation[s]" (Table 3).

Table 3

Sample of authentic language and situations.*

Age	Gender	Year	How did the GU program encourage your use of English?
22	Male	Fifth	As I had to be using English in authentic situations to chat with my peers as if it were in my normal life, interlinked with my daily usage of Spanish.
22	Male	Fourth	i had to investigate about the topics that we were discussing in the project so that i had to use English in real speaking situation.
21	Male	Third	It helped a lot to use it in a real life situation such as having a conversation about any topic with a someone without any major problem.
20	Female	Third	Because I think it was a great opportunity to practice my English in a real context. And I was more satisfied with the partners from The Netherlands because they showed more interest in the program than the ones from USA.
21	Female	Third	Because we can talk with native speaker just in English, and that's a good way to practice it in real situations.
23	Male	Third	After the ECU program I feel like I can think in more daily life topics apart from the ones from Lifebook.

21	Female	Third	Because we talked not only the topics assigned but also of our interest in general.
22	Male	Fourth	It was a different from a normal class, so it gives a more meaningful view.
23	Male	Fifth	because i had to communicate in english in class and when i was in my house.
23	Female	Third	I felt like this because I had more opportunities to interact with people.
21	Female	Third	because it was a very good opportunity to improve our pronunciation and our writing skill.
26	Female	Fourth	Because with the program I had the possibility to improve some of my communication skills in English.
25	Female	Third	Because this project gave me the opportunity to improve my English and also I can talk with people of other countries.
21	Female	Third	Because I've never had an opportunity like this before and even though I didn't feel really comfortable speaking, I think it was good for my development as an English teacher.

*Students' original comments.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of the current study was to explore students' opinions about a telecollaboration project. On the basis of survey results, it can be concluded that project participation led to the following results: First, students reported an increase in cultural awareness. Students interacted and communicated with foreigners from three different countries. During the telecollaborations the majority of students' interest was piqued not only in language but also in their partners' culture. In other words, participation in the project allowed learners to foster language and intercultural development. From this, it was clear that this project aided students in breaking the language barrier, that is, students actually conversed with speakers from other cultures. This lends support to previous findings of the benefits of telecollaboration in the development of intercultural competence.

Second, the project presented opportunities to develop language skills via authentic language interactions. Students were provided with numerous instances to improve the four skills: speaking and listening when talking via videoconference, reading and writing when chatting, writing emails and messaging one another. Moreover, students reported feeling encouraged and compelled to use their English as all communication was held in English. Students who partook in this initiative were provided with an alternative and more realistic way of interacting and communicating in the target language. As students declared, they were more confident and motivated to practice and use English, pointing to an increase in learners' motivation in language acquisition.

It is interesting to note that the drawbacks cited by the students in the survey referred mainly to interpersonal matters rather than anxiety and discomfort when speaking in the target language. In the typical university language class there are students who feel anxious when called upon to use the target language during class. Yet, by providing new and varied approaches to learning, students might gain more confidence and improve in ways they could not before.

A limitation to this study was related to the implementation of the project itself, that is, the length of each connection and the number of meetings with each university. The schedules of each university were uncontrollable variables as not all the meetings with each university lasted the same amount of time. Telecollaboration with one university might last for

six sessions, while with another university there were only four sessions. Possibly influencing students' interests and affecting students' attitudes towards a particular group. An additional uncontrollable factor were the preset topics, as the GU course is run by ECU these topics could not be altered. This led to some students feeling bored or tired of repeating the same information with each partnering university, as expressed by their comments. In addition, further research should be undertaken to investigate if this project had an impact on academic results, as most students did mention improving their English, especially related to speaking and writing.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that implementing these telecollaborative classes would be influential and important to future EFL teachers in Chile in a number of dimensions. The majority of university students in Chile do not have the opportunity to travel abroad, however by incorporating ICTs such as videoconferencing and social media in these classes, students are exposed to new cultures, new identities and different realities. For future EFL teachers these opportunities provide them with a chance to use their English in authentic situations. Also, because communication takes place outside of the classroom, students are motivated to use English apart from the context where it is most often seen, in the classroom.

The Chilean classroom is changing, but by discussing differences, breaking down stereotypes and learning about one's own culture, these students are better able to face the realities and dynamics of their own multicultural classrooms. These experiences can be used as reference points when discussing hot topics inside their own classrooms. While this telecollaboration project was a viable tool for English Pedagogy students, considerable work would need to be done to analyze the viability of implementing it on a larger scale and in other socioeconomic contexts.

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