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# Intercultural competence in synchronous communication between native and non-native speakers of Spanish

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses to what extent synchronous communication via Skype by Argentine university students of History and Danish university students of Spanish contributed to fostering intercultural competence in the two groups of participants. Intercultural gains are considered both as part of the planned tasks to be solved by the participants (intentional learning) and in the spontaneous communication that arose in the course of the Skype conversations (incidental learning). The overall objective of this telecollaboration project has been the promotion of intercultural competence, with particular focus on the learning and teaching of Argentine regional history. Several tools, synchronous and asynchronous, were used for this purpose. The focus of the present paper will be the analysis of instances of intercultural awareness observed in Skype conversations, and of the affordances and obstacles that this modality of communication seems to pose for the native and non-native participants.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, computer mediated communication, synchronous communication, telecollaboration, native/non-native communication

## 1 Introduction

Globalisation has led to increased human mobility and multicultural societies. In educational contexts, it is therefore paramount to give students opportunities to develop intercultural skills in order to cope with cultural diversity. Personal encounters on the Internet through telecollaboration projects that link students in different locations around the world can contribute to this aim. This article focuses on gains in intercultural competence obtained in the course of a pedagogical intervention based on telecollaboration that took place between the Institute

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of Higher Education No. 28 “Olga Cossettini”, located in Rosario, Argentina, and Aarhus University in Denmark. The present intervention was designed to foster a collaborative exchange between third year students of History (pre-service history teachers) and first year students of Spanish, respectively. Interventional research is defined as requiring “the implementation of an explicit treatment in the classroom by which learning takes place explicitly in different ways” by Félix-Brasdefer (2008: 49–50), following Rose and Kasper (2001).

This article will concentrate specifically on the analysis of intercultural gains observed in the synchronous modality of choice: communication via Skype. For a more detailed analysis of the whole project, see Fernández and Pozzo (2015).

The intervention had a general academic goal, the teaching and learning of Argentine regional history, as well as different specific goals for each group of participants.<sup>1</sup> For the Danish participants, the intervention was a mandatory element in their subject Latin American History, whose curriculum included the conquest of Argentine territory by Spanish colonial powers and the establishment of a colonial society, as well as more recent aspects of Argentine history, such as the military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983. For the Argentine participants, the telecollaboration module was part of an elective course on regional history of the province of Santa Fe, where the participating Argentine educational institution is located.

Danish students were expected to profit from the experience in a number of ways: by engaging in conversation in Spanish with native speakers, with possible gains in language practice and intercultural awareness; by reading teaching materials on Argentine regional history designed specifically for them by Argentine History students who have a very close personal connection with the historical events in question (these materials were integrated as part of the syllabus of the subject History I - Latin American History); by acting as critical readers and giving feedback to the Argentine History students about the teaching materials they had designed; and by interviewing young Argentinians about recent events in Argentine society (including an interview with a male history student whose parents disappeared during the last military dictatorship). The advantage offered by this pedagogical intervention was getting access to personal testimonies of people involved in the events under scrutiny, offering an

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<sup>1</sup> The intervention is part of a wider research project, “Construcción de espacios interculturales en la formación docente: Competencia comunicativa intercultural, cultura regional y TIC”, funded by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Productive Innovation of the province of Santa Fe, Argentina. The present paper has also received financial support from the Linguistic Research Program at Aarhus University.

alternative view to the mainstream presentation of events in commercial history manuals.

On the Argentine side, the intended gains were also numerous: the promotion of intercultural awareness by communicating with Danish students of Spanish as a foreign language; designing teaching materials about Argentine regional history for a very specific target group; explaining /clarifying orally (in Skype conversations) some of the topics depicted in the teaching materials at the request of the Danish students, and receiving feedback from their target-group readers on the quality and adequacy of their texts; talking about their life stories related to recent events of Argentine history, thus becoming first-hand witnesses and bearers of unique and powerful testimonies.

We believe that this intervention project presents a novel design in the pairing of two – at first sight – quite dissimilar groups of students, who are expected to profit quite differently from the experience. This opens new possibilities in the implementation of telecollaboration, which normally is based on the idea of reciprocity or symmetry between participating groups. Therefore, in order for this experience to serve as inspiration for other practitioners or researchers, we offer a brief presentation of the complete intervention design and its results and challenges (Section 4 of this article) before we present our main topic: tracing signs of intercultural awareness in Skype conversations (Section 5). But before engaging in the description and analysis of the empirical study, brief theoretical introductions will be made to the concept of telecollaboration, including synchronous modalities of communication (Section 2), and to the notion of intercultural competence as a goal in both foreign language learning and teaching and in teacher training in general (Section 3).

## 2 Telecollaboration as a tool for intercultural contact

Telecollaboration, also known as “online intercultural exchange”, has been defined by O’Dowd as:

the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations with the aim to develop their FL [foreign language] skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work. (O’Dowd 2015: 194)

Both synchronous and asynchronous modalities of online communication can be applied in telecollaborative projects. Among synchronous tools, text, voice

and video communication systems like Skype and different chat software are favourite choices. Asynchronous communication modalities include e-mail, blogs and online discussion forums, while social media such as Facebook and Google allow both modalities.

There is a great deal of literature that discusses the positive effects of applying telecollaboration designs in the foreign language classroom. Some focus areas have been the creation of opportunities to communicate directly with native speakers (Belz and Kinginger 2005; Belz and Vyatkina 2008), the development of language skills (Belz 2003; Belz and Thorne 2006), media literacy (Guth and Helm 2010), intercultural communicative competence (O'Dowd 2006), awareness of cultural differences (Belz and Kinginger 2003), pragmatic competence (Belz 2006; Morollón Martí and Fernández 2016) and the opportunity to practise different speech acts (Belz 2006; O'Dowd 2006). There have also been arguments in favour of integrating telecollaboration in teacher training (O'Dowd 2007; Dooly and Sadler 2013).

Telecollaboration is used in foreign language classrooms with the purpose of raising awareness of cultural differences through direct communication with native speakers of the target languaculture (Guth and Helm 2010; O'Dowd and Ware 2009). In other cases, the telecollaboration exchange is the source of learner generated data (Belz and Vyatkina 2005; 2008; Morollón Martí and Fernández 2016), which subsequently become the object of classroom instruction or reflection on language or culture. In the present study, synchronous communication via Skype goes beyond a simple online conversation, as it is combined with the production and exchange of written materials (history essays and interview scripts for each group, respectively) that support and shape the Skype conversation.

### 3 Intercultural communicative competence

In the last decades, there has been a clear evolution in how foreign and second language learning and teaching are conceived (Pozzo and Fernández 2008). A shift can be traced from the previous focus on grammatical structures as organizing principle, through an interest in notional and functional content (i. e. functions of the language such as introducing oneself, asking for help, issuing an invitation), which acted as stepping stone to the more recent communicative approach, with its focus on *communicative competence* (Larsen-Freeman 2000; Richards and Rodgers 2001). Here, learners are from the very beginning considered “language users” and the goal is to allow them to use the language in authentic communication situations.

Communicative competence (Hymes 1966; Canale and Swain 1980) requires much more than the ability to produce correct language. No doubt, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation rules still need to be acquired, but they do not suffice. They must be complemented with pragmatic competence, which allows the language user to communicate adequately in a given context; with discourse competence, or the ability to go beyond sentence level to create cohesive and coherent text – both oral and written, dialogic and monologic; and finally, with strategic competence, or the ability to compensate for a lack of language skills by making use of resources such as body language, translations or word coinage, assistance from others, etc. (Griffiths 2013).

This view of communicative competence as comprising the abovementioned subcompetences embraces many important aspects of language, but the approach has still been criticized for having a merely instrumental goal and for paying little attention to the cultural features of each particular language (Porto 2013). If language teaching is to contribute to creating “intercultural speakers” (House 2008), with a deep insight into other cultures and an open and receptive attitude to “others”, communicative competence alone is not enough – an additional competence dimension is needed. In order to fill this gap, Michael Byram proposed the concept of *intercultural communicative competence* in 1997, which later became the key to a wholly new turn in language teaching (Kramsch 2011; Risager 2012; Dervin 2016). In particular, the Council of Europe (2001) adopted this intercultural approach to language learning in the cornerstone document *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), where knowledge, skills and attitudes are described as an integral part of intercultural competence. This responds to the Council of Europe’s expressed wish to defend European language diversity as a valuable resource that can contribute to “mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcom[ing] prejudice and discrimination” (Council of Europe 2001: 2).

Intercultural competence, as described above, surpasses the notion of “multiculturalism”, which implies knowing *about* other cultures, but not necessarily engaging with them (Cerezal 1999). According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), raising intercultural awareness means favouring dialogue, positive curiosity and real exchange – one can say that the speaker is not the same person after an intercultural encounter or experience. Byram’s well-established model (1997: 34), comprising knowledge, attitudes, skills and political education, shows how comprehensive intercultural communicative competence is, as it affects aspects of cognition, behaviour and emotion.

The importance of intercultural communicative competence has also been valued beyond the limits of the foreign language classroom. Even if the foreign language classroom is by definition an intercultural space, it can be argued that

all classroom situations pose an intercultural encounter in today's globalized world. Therefore, we consider that intercultural competence must be a focus not only in the foreign language classroom and in language teacher training, but also in teacher training in general. This is why our project links university Spanish students with History students, as both groups will face the challenges posed by interculturality in their respective studies and future careers.

The intercultural ideals of the CEFR have of course resonated around the European continent, and thereby in Denmark, but they have also gained ground in countries around the world, including Argentina. This has provided the instructors of each side of this project with a shared understanding of the concept of intercultural competence and an equal desire to foster its development.

## 4 The project

In this section, the whole intervention design will be briefly presented in order to provide a context for the discussion of results regarding intercultural awareness in Section 5.

### 4.1 Course structure

As mentioned above, the project deals with the learning and teaching of Argentine history, with focus on learning on the Danish side and teaching on the Argentine side. Several modalities of collaboration were implemented, both synchronous and asynchronous: production of teaching materials (Argentine side) to be read and reviewed by the other group (Danish side), e-mail communication to establish the first contact and introduce oneself to the telecollaborative partner(s) and Skype conversations where different tasks were to be solved. For research purposes, the results of these synchronous and asynchronous exchanges were collected and, in the case of retrieved audio materials (see Section 4.3), they were fully transcribed. In addition, a demographic questionnaire, an evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix), reflective essays and final evaluating interviews were administered and collected. All participants signed forms of consent for data collection.

In order to fulfil the needs of both groups, the course was divided into two parts, both in content and working modality. In the first part, the texts created by the Argentine participants (assisted by their teacher) were the centre of attention and, in the second part, the focus lay on interviews and the notion

of “oral history” as a resource in the teaching of history (Bermúdez Brínez and Rodríguez Arrieta 2009; Egido León 2009; Phipps 2013).

This dual structure allowed both participant groups to perform different roles, alternating the role of expert. In the creation of teaching materials, the Argentine students provide historical knowledge, but as critical readers, the Danish students are empowered as providers of feedback whose voices are valued. In the interview sessions, the Danish students decide the agenda through their interview script and the Argentinians once again provide their knowledge – this time, their own testimony, which, in turn, allows them to reflect about their own history and thus gain a better understanding of it. In this way, a form of symmetry is obtained and both groups receive benefits, albeit different ones.

## 4.2 Participants

The Danish group consisted of 34 first semester students (25 female and 9 male) with a Spanish level no higher than CEFR level B1. These students were divided into seven groups of four or five students, and the Skype communication involved one Danish group and one Argentine student (sometimes two students). Allowing the Danish students to work in groups was a scaffolding strategy aimed at addressing the ethical concern of pairing students with different linguistic abilities, which was potentially stressful for Danish participants. Working in groups contributed to remedying these students’ linguistic difficulties and to alleviating the nervousness of having to communicate in a foreign language with native speakers.

The Argentine side consisted of 11 students (only one of them male), at different stages of their studies. One important ethical concern in the project was to avoid causing emotional distress in the Argentine participants by making them relive tragic episodes of recent Argentine history, in some cases related to their own family stories. Particularly concerning was the participation of the male student (identified in the material as AHD), who is the son of political dissidents who were “disappeared”.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this student proved to be the

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<sup>2</sup> Argentina was ruled by a military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. In this period, numerous people were victims of forced disappearance (these victims are known as *desaparecidos*). They were abducted or illegally detained, kept in clandestine detention centers, questioned, tortured, and sometimes killed. In 1984, official investigations documented 8,961 disappearances and other human right violations; in 2003, the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons claimed that the number of disappeared was 13,000; the actual number, though, is believed to amount up to 30,000, as many cases were never reported.

most engaged and enthusiastic participant. He only took part in the interview sessions, but he himself offered to be interviewed by all Danish groups. This student is a committed human-rights activist and takes pride in sharing his story. His participation (as well as the other students') in the intervention and in the data collection for research purposes was absolutely voluntary. His own evaluation of the experience was highly positive. In his own terms:

- *Personally, it was a wonderful experience, which made me search, think and, what we mostly want, teach history. ...I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express myself with absolute freedom.* (AHD, evaluation questionnaire)<sup>3</sup>

Similar responses were obtained from the other Argentine participants and there have been no negative comments about emotional strain in the final evaluations on any side of the project.

### 4.3 Procedure

All students who agreed to participate in the project received instructions about how to use Skype and how to record their conversations. They were asked to record and send their recordings to their respective teachers. Unfortunately, due to technical problems and forgetfulness, not all conversations were retrieved. The conversations took place at the university, in bars or private homes, as best suited the respective participants. All communication was through Spanish. All participants formally consented to data collection and were guaranteed anonymity.

### 4.4 Some general results

This intervention experienced many of the difficulties reported in the literature on telecollaboration, including:

- Technical problems such as poor Internet connection
- Problems in agreeing on a date and time (particularly because of time differences between Denmark and Argentina) and punctuality in Skype meetings
- Insufficient instructions regarding the tasks to be performed
- Disparity in the groups, in particular, low levels of language proficiency on the Danish side

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<sup>3</sup> All quotations, both comments made by the students in the evaluation questionnaires and extracts from Skype conversations, have been translated from Spanish or Danish by the authors.



Although the abovementioned pitfalls are real and were clearly identified in the evaluation data and in our own observations, it must also be said that, in general terms, the experiment received positive evaluations in the final student evaluation questionnaires and interviews – and from their teachers.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we believe that it is well worth modifying and improving the intervention for future implementation.

The main change that should be implemented is to reserve this telecollaboration module for the subject History III (third semester of BA studies) rather than History I, on the Danish side. A Danish group comments to this effect:

- *This is our first semester and it is VERY difficult to understand a native speaker of Spanish, particularly when we are not used to the Argentine accent. We would have profited more from the course if it had taken place in one of the coming semesters.* (group 2, Denmark, evaluation questionnaire)

Another aspect that can be improved is the quality of the instructions given to participants with regard to synchronous communication. In a few cases, the Skype transcriptions show participants' confusion and frustration as to what they are supposed to talk about. Detailed instructions in writing are therefore a must in a future implementation.

The synchronous communication tool chosen, Skype, presented a few challenges due to delays and freezing, of both sound and image. There are several passages in the recorded conversations where these difficulties overshadow the topic of conversation, for example:

- (1) *D2<sup>5</sup>: Do you have eight kids?*  
*A: ... Is she gone?*  
*D2: Oh, what is going on? What?*  
*D1: Oh, oh.*  
*D2: What...? Ah, it doesn't work.*  
*A: Can you hear me?*  
*D1: Yes, but the connection is failing.*  
*A: It is like slow.*  
*D1: Yes, it is like it is breaking up. (G1, C2)*

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<sup>4</sup> The authors were organizers of the course and responsible for the development of the intervention, but two course instructors, from the Danish and Argentinian side, respectively, were also involved in the daily work with the students.

<sup>5</sup> In the examples from Skype conversations, the initial A refers to the Argentine participant(s) and D, to the Danish. All examples are identified by group number followed by conversation number (for instance, "G1, C1"). Pauses are represented by ellipsis points and punctuation is merely for legibility.

Nevertheless, the advantages of engaging in online face-to-face synchronous communication outweighed the obstacles, and Skype (or other similar audio and video systems) will probably still be a substantial element in future implementations. In spite of serious linguistic difficulties, technical problems and the personally challenging experience of having to communicate face-to-face with a stranger, the overall evaluation of the enterprise has been positive and the key seems to be the human encounter and the friendly tie created between telecollaborative partners:

- *We felt good; we thought they were very polite and enthusiastic about talking with us. They showed interest for getting to know Argentina and that was also an incentive. Knowing that what we do is interesting to them and valued.* (Group 5, Argentina, evaluation questionnaire)
- *Our Argentine partners were very open, interested and patient. They were good listeners and good at explaining the texts we had read before the Skype conversation. They have contacted us in Facebook and we hope to keep in contact. In short, a good experience.* (Group 2, Denmark, evaluation questionnaire)

These and similar reactions from the participants can be connected to philosophical theories about the importance of meeting the other as a flesh and blood person to promote ethical awareness (Bysted 2013). Lévinas (1996) considers this face-to-face meeting with the other essential, as it expands our horizon, gives meaning to our life and presents us with an ethical responsibility. Likewise, Løgstrup (2010) sees the actual meeting with the other as an instance that fractures our preconceived picture of the other and thereby contributes to breaking down stereotypes. In the case of our project, the meeting with the other is virtual rather than flesh and blood or even face-to-face, but the affordances of the synchronous medium allow an experience of contact and closeness. In the following section, we intend to track to what extent the direct online contact between these individuals from two different cultures has left visible signs of an interculturally enriching encounter, besides positive evaluations on their side and a sense of satisfaction expressed after the meetings.

## 5 Intercultural awareness in Skype conversations

The analysis presented in this section is based on the transcriptions of all recorded Skype conversations (see table 1).

As explained before, one of the overall objectives of the intervention was to foster intercultural competence in both groups of participants by providing opportunities for communication among fellow students from two distant

**Table 1:** Overview of transcribed conversations.

	Conversation 1	Conversation 2	Conversation 3
<b>Group 1</b>		2800 words	
<b>Group 2</b>	4109 words		
<b>Group 3</b>	2448 words		
<b>Group 4</b>	2194 words	1184 words	
<b>Group 5</b>			
<b>Group 6</b>	387 words		2324 words
<b>Group 7</b>	1726 words	4324 words	4364 words

countries. It is probable that very few of the participating students would have come into contact with people from the other country were it not for this project. One of the Argentine participants states:

- *I liked getting to know these guys; it was my first encounter and experience via skype and with foreigners.* (Group 3, Argentina, evaluation questionnaire).

To establish whether this intercultural communication contributed to visible instances of intercultural awareness-raising is the aim of the analysis that follows, where we intend to map episodes related to aspects of intercultural competence to the Skype communication. For this purpose, we classify intercultural-orientated episodes in four categories, following the classification proposed by Liaw (2006) on the basis of Byram (2000).

We are interested both in episodes that relate directly to the tasks assigned to the students – what we will call “intentional learning” – and in episodes that might have arisen spontaneously in the conversations – classified here as “incidental learning” (Hulstijn 2003). We leave aside exchanges in Danish among Danish participants during the Skype conversations and focus exclusively on episodes in Spanish that involve participants on both sides. We adopt a qualitative perspective in our analysis and present the findings according to the four categories of intercultural competence presented in Table 2.

## 5.1 Interest in knowing other people’s way of life and introducing one’s own culture to others

This is the best represented category in our corpus. In particular, conversation 1, where the task was “getting to know each other”, offers a series of episodes related to asking and telling about cultural features. In this sense, it is interesting to find out how the participants interpret “getting to know the other”, which

**Table 2:** Categories for classification of intercultural competence entries (Liaw 2006: 58).

Category	Description
A. Interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– I am interested in other people's experience of daily life, particularly those things not usually presented to outsiders through the media.</li> <li>– I am also interested in the daily experience of a variety of social groups within a society and not only the dominant culture.</li> </ul>
B. Ability to change perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– I have realized that I can understand other cultures by seeing things from a different point of view and by looking at my culture from their perspective.</li> </ul>
C. Knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– I know some important facts about living in the other cultures and about the country, state and people.</li> <li>– I know how to engage in conversation with people of the other culture and maintain a conversation.</li> </ul>
D. Knowledge about the intercultural communication process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– I know how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the view point of another culture.</li> <li>– I know how to discover new information and new aspects of the other culture for myself.</li> </ul>

can be traced both in the questions they ask and in the information about themselves that they provide.

In all cases, after exchanging names and asking questions about the immediate context (*Is it cold over there? What time is it?*), it is always the Argentine participants, the native speakers of Spanish, who are in charge of getting the conversation started, sometimes in a very direct way:

(2) A: *Ehm... Do you guys know anything about Argentina?* (G4, C1)

(3) A: *Well, I have no idea about Denmark.*

D: *No?*

A: *So anything you can tell is super new to me, new* (G6, C1)

In other cases, the Argentinians soften their "leadership" by letting the Danes choose what to start with:

- (4) *A1: What do you know about Argentina? Or what would you like to know about Argentina?*  
*D2: Eh!... Yes, you guys... the university where you are and what is the name.*  
 (G2, C1)

The interest in getting to know the other culture becomes evident in some of the Argentine participants' search for information as preparation work for the talks:

- (5) *A1: Rosario is the second biggest [city] in Argentina.*  
*D4: Ah, nice.*  
*A1: It has a population more or less like the capital of Denmark* (G2, C1)
- (6) *A: Yesterday I was looking for information about your country because I didn't know...*  
*D: Then you know a lot, don't you?*  
*A: I already knew what I learnt in history, its position during First World War, the invasion by the Nazi Germans... I knew some, some things because of History, but not other things like Denmark's economy, politics or culture.*  
 (G7, C1)

On the other hand, our participants are sometimes challenged when asked for information about their own countries or language, which in fact opens up learning opportunities for both sides, as participants need to rethink issues concerning themselves and complement each other's knowledge:

- (7) *D1: Here in Denmark, in our country, there are like... almost six million of us, I think.*  
*D2: Yes, six million, in all.*  
*A3: The province of Santa Fe has three million.*  
*A2: But in the whole country... how many of us are there?*  
*A3: Forty million.* (G2, C1)
- (8) *A: What origin does Danish have? Is it of Saxon origin?*  
*D: What origin?*  
*A: Saxon or is it of Latin origin?*  
*D: No, I don't think so...* (G6, C1)

Within the category discussed here, getting to know other people's ways of life also implies inquiring about personal habits. There are several examples of this,

some of which move from the personal to the general, applying to a whole socio-economic group, and moving from there to a comparison with the other culture:

(9) *D: Now we are at a bakery where I work; well, the Wi-Fi is good here...*

*A: That means that you also work!*

*D: I work at a bakery right by the university.*

*A: It is very usual in Denmark that students are independent, that they work while they study, right?*

*D: Yes, for instance you study six... a week and maybe three times a week you work I don't know... in some little job...*

*A: I also worked while I studied (G7, C1)*

Also in the conversations that had a more academic task focus, the interest in getting to know the other and their culture appears in episodes that fall outside the task at hand (what we term “incidental” intercultural exchanges). In the next example, the presence of a baby on the Argentine side (duly praised by the Danish students who see the baby on the screen) generates an incidental conversation about having babies while studying:

(10) *A: And you guys... over there you don't normally study and have kids and such, do you?*

*D1: No. That...*

*D2: Not here.*

*D1: No. It is different.*

*D2: Yes.*

*D1: Here the kids are after... the studies and... and yes.*

*A: But here it is the same for most, but not me... I am the exception. (G1, C2)*

Other incidental allusions to personal habits are less transcendental and can touch on stereotypes:

(11) *A: I drink mate [Argentine national drink] all day long.*

*D2: Like coffee.*

*D1: Yes.*

*D2: In Denmark... always coffee (G1, C2)*

But we also find deeper inquiries about the way people feel about themselves:

(12) *D4: Is it important for people in Argentina that almost all are immigrants from... from Europe? Is it important to say “I am from eh... Germany”, “I am*

*from Ireland”, “I am from Sweden” eh...? Like it is normal in USA, there is consciousness of what country they come from, but is it the same in Argentina or... are they all Argentinians?*

*A: Hhm... I would like to know whether you are talking about hhm... immigration... in recent years or the immigration we had during the whole century.*

*D4: Hhm... the whole century eh... from... eighteenth century, I think.*

*A: Perfect. Hhm... at that moment, yes. It was preserved... one had the nationality eh... the origin into account. At first, the first waves, what is called “immigration waves” eh... 1880, a bit earlier too, eh... until 1910, it was very important, the Italian community, the Spanish community, and then there were the... the... natives hhm... we are not talking about native peoples, but the so-called criollos, who were eh... the... children of Spaniards and of the native peoples or the children of Spaniards born in America. (G7, C2).*

In many cases, the provision of information – personal or general – by one party triggers a comparison from the other party in a ping-pong sequence consisting of “information + counter-information”. These sequences display the participants’ enthusiasm in presenting their country, but they sometimes appear unreflective, in the sense that the new information is not further inquired into, but it is promptly replaced by information about their own country:

(13) *D2: Denmark is much smaller and therefore... the climate does not vary so much. That is, it is almost the same everywhere. For example, between December and February almost all the country is covered in snow.*

*A2: Really?*

*D2: Mhm.*

*A2: And here because the territory is so vast and there are different landscapes that makes it... makes the climate different in the different provinces.*

*(G2, C1)*

## 5.2 Ability to change perspective

Our data provide several instances of students reconsidering previously held assumptions about their interlocutors in the course of a conversation and of students adopting the other’s perspective in order to adjust their discourse to their interlocutors’ knowledge level.

In order to establish some common ground, participants often resort to cultural icons that they expect the other party to know: the flag, famous people, geographical landmarks, etc. This is a mental operation that requires distancing

oneself from one's culture and taking up the other's perspective. This operation can be more or less successful (sometimes due to linguistic difficulties by the non-native group):

- (14) *A1: But do you know anything? Do you know the flag?*  
*D3: Yes*  
*D2: Yes... ehhh*  
*D1: We know Messi...*  
*D4: The national football team and Messi, of course.*  
*A1: Of course, Messi is from here, from Rosario.*  
*A2: He is also from Rosario.*  
*D1: We didn't know.*  
*A1: Do you know the Andes mountain range? Have you ever heard of it?*  
*D1: Who?*  
*D3: What?*  
*D2: The what?*  
*A1: The Aconcagua [Argentina's highest mountain]?*  
*A2: Do you know Maradona?*  
*D3: Yes, him too. (G2, C1)*

Establishing common ground can bring participants to anticipate what others (and perhaps the interlocutors) think of their national group and to modulate these perceptions:

- (15) *D2: Normally, people say that Danish people are a bit... a bit closed. But when you start to talk to us we are very open people (G2, C1)*
- (16) *AHD: I would like you to come here once because there are beautiful cities, we are very friendly, we like talking a lot. If you come to Argentina one day you will see that it is not so bad after all as you maybe think... (G6, C3)*

In the same way, the act of distancing oneself from one's own culture can imply adopting a critical position, sometimes serious in nature, sometimes playfully scornful:

- (17) *AHD: Argentine history is fascinating, like Latin American history. We, in Latin America it is an unequal world, where there are many inequalities and also racism but mostly of an economic kind. Here the evil ones are the poor. (G6, C3)*



- (18) *D4: Here everything is flat. We don't have mountains, because the highest one is called...*  
*D1: Yes, Himmelbjerg.*  
*D4: ... it is called Sky Mountain.*  
*D3: But it is not a mountain.*  
 (...)  
*D4: Then everybody comes to Denmark... to see this Sky Mountain.*  
*D: (laughter)*  
*D4: And you come... well like... where is it? Where is the mountain?*  
*D2: Hahaha Yes. (G2, C1)*

One clear aspect of synchronous communication that we observe as advantageous is the fact that it allows overcoming inaccurate conceptions that impact the participants' interpretation of reality. In the following example, the conception by Argentinians that Danish students should be a monocultural, homogeneous block is modified by the presence of a Venezuelan student in the group:

- (19) *D1: I am from Venezuela.*  
*A: Ah, that's why! When I searched for you in Skype, I couldn't find you because I found "Venezuela", and then I said: no, it cannot be true that she is from Venezuela (G1, C2)*

In some cases, emerging contrasts between the groups are met with surprise. Realizing that reality can be organized in very different ways is a first step towards a change in perspective:

- (20) *A: What time do you finish school?*  
*D1: Eh, well. It is different. Some days we start at ten, at eight... Today we started at ten until now, three. And... other days we have school from eight to two.*  
*D2: Yes... And on Fridays we do not come to class.*  
*A: We, I attend classes from Monday to Friday from eight to one.*  
*D2: Eight to one. OK. Always?... Is it not different each day? No? Yes. (G1, C2)*

### 5.3 Knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication

This category is about knowing how to engage in conversation with people from another culture. In our material, there is a noticeable development in the participants. In the first conversations, we find examples of inexperience:

- (21) *A2: We study to be history teachers, at the “Olga Cossettini” Institute, which is located almost in the south of Rosario.*  
*D1: And where is Rosario in Argentina? In the north or in...?*  
*A2: It is in Santa Fe... let’s see the map... Now we are going to show you a map.* (G2, C1)

Here, A2 displays a certain lack of intercultural perspective when she offers too detailed information about the location of the school within the city, when the Danish counterparts still have not been presented with more basic information, such as where in Argentina they are. This is related to the idea of “universality” (basicness) as a classifier for degrees of intercultural information as proposed by the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* (2006). The information that A2 provides falls short of “universality” and D2’s question about the location of Rosario within the country signals this need for more basic information.

The use of a map, on the other hand, is a powerful resource chosen by some Argentine participants, as it offers visual support and allows commenting on the enormous distance that separates both countries, which can be seen as a comment on geographical as well as cultural distance:

- (22) *A1: And you guys are here.*  
*D3: (laughter) yes.*  
*A1: Look how far away we are: here we are and you guys are up there* (G2, C1)

After the episode above, the map is used some more to place the city of Rosario in the right location. It takes several questions and answers for the Danes to get a clear idea, as the Argentine participants do not always provide the amount of information needed – sometimes offering unnecessary detail and sometimes taking for granted their interlocutors’ knowledge. In other cases, though, clarity of exposition and a sensibility towards the other’s need is present even from the first exchange, showing noticeable individual differences among participants:

- (23) *A: Eh... as I told you before... I live in Rosario. Rosario is a city. It is the most important city in Santa Fe province. Santa Fe is a province that was constituted within the Argentine territory* (G4, C1)

By the end of the project, pedagogical examples like the one above are more abundant, and it is clear that there is a greater awareness of the importance of adjusting the language:

- (24) *A: ...Here there were many other ideologies that were considered subversive, for instance, well, the ones who adhered to Peronism, particularly to revolutionary Peronism. Do you know what Peronism was? Peronism is a movement. If you don't understand I can explain it with other words. (G6, C3)*

The explanation of unknown concepts like in (24) is not the only scaffolding mechanism at work. There are also numerous examples of consideration in the use of appropriate language resources and modification of difficult or imprecise phrases in order to obtain increased intelligibility:

- (25) *AHD: to benefit workers to the detriment of...**against** the business sector (G7, C3),*
- (26) *D2: I am 20 years old too.*  
*A1: Ah! of course. You guys are little ones... **young** (G2, C1)*

As can be seen, synchronous communication with non-natives provides the Argentine history students, who are not used to focusing on metalinguistic reflection in their studies, with a welcome opportunity to monitor their own expression, a skill that most likely will prove useful in their future teaching profession. In this sense, the project offers potential for enhancing communicative competence in this group too, even though they are “merely” using their native language.

## 5.4 Knowledge about the intercultural communication process

Finally, we find a number of instances that reflect knowledge about the intercultural communication process (the fourth dimension proposed in the theoretical model).

The Venezuelan student in the Danish group – a native speaker of Spanish and considered almost “native” to South American culture – takes up the role of intermediary, as proposed by Byram (1997) and the CEFR (2001):

- (27) *D1: The project as such is for Danes, but although I am Venezuelan, I am in the group and well... if they don't understand, I must help them. (G1, C2).*

We observe that our participants have a tendency to value native speakers as a reliable source of information. In this sense, for instance, Danish participants ask their Argentine partners to confirm the facts presented by their teacher:

- (28) *D4: There aren't many Indians, indigenous people in Argentina, right? Our eh... teacher has said today that... that there aren't many of those in... in... in Argentina, but in the other countries in South America there are... there are many eh... Indians. (G7, C2)*

Having visited the place that one is learning about is seen as a crucial factor that increases credibility:

- (29) *A: It is interesting that one of you has been here. Well, you have a different contact when someone was in the place, knows somebody in the place, in order to study the region. It is different to study without knowing anything. (G7, C2)*

In general, Argentine participants become much more aware of their interlocutors' needs and limitations throughout the project. From signs of impatience and lack of pedagogical skills in the first sessions, we see an increased sensibility in the last session (although it must be conceded that AHD, who only participated in conversation 3, is the source of most examples of this sort, and his exemplary behaviour is probably due to personal skills):

- (30) *AHD: What do you guys think? Did you like the history [we talked about]? Have you understood anything?  
D: Now it is clearer to me...  
AHD: Well, this is my function, trying to help you understand Argentine and Latin American history and well, very thankful that you have paid attention and that you have been able to have a conversation with someone from Argentina. Well, guys, see you then, thank you very much for everything (G7, C3)*

AHD has a particularly good understanding of what is needed to support the intercultural encounter and, therefore, he positions himself in a constant comparative perspective, which creates a strong pedagogical effect. He has also made an effort to learn a few Danish words to use in the conversations as an ice-breaker:

- (31) *AHD: [Hi, goddag!] Well specifically what you said is correct. During the Second World War Germany invaded Denmark the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1940 and that generated resistance in the Danish population, the Danish resistance movement. OK? Well the same happened in Argentina from 1955, when the government was invaded by the military dictatorship in line with USA's interests. (G6, C3)*

Throughout the project, Danish students display more modest levels of participation than their counterparts due to language challenges. Nevertheless, when they are given the opportunity of preparing a script in advance, they too are capable of taking charge of the intercultural communication process and contribute with insightful questions:

- (32) *D: What does this period of dictatorship mean in the Argentine mentality today, to Argentinians? Are Argentinians particularly aware of democracy?*  
(G7, C3)

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we have analysed to what extent a number of sessions of synchronous communication via Skype between native and non-native speakers of Spanish contributed to promoting intercultural awareness in both groups of participants. We have shown that all four categories of intercultural competence proposed by Liaw (2006) were represented in our corpus, with a preponderance of category A, “Interest in knowing other people’s way of life and introducing one’s own culture to others”. We have traced a development in the participants’ abilities to cope with intercultural communication (categories C and D) from the first session to the last, and we have pointed out instances of change of perspective (category B), directly related to the synchronous modality of communication, as it placed the students face-to-face with “the other” and forced them to review previously held assumptions. We have observed that, in order to establish common ground, our participants showed skills in anticipating what their interlocutors thought of their national group and in trying to change inaccurate conceptions. A positive effect of the project may be seen in the fact that, as communication evolved, participants became more and more aware of how to communicate in order to increase intelligibility for both sides, though with individual differences related to personal skills.

Our results show that synchronous communication posed a challenge to both native and non-native speakers. In the latter case, performance was enhanced in the sessions where a script was prepared in advance (interview sessions), so that language difficulties could be mitigated with thorough preparation. This is an important fact that we intend to take into account and further exploit in future implementations of telecollaboration between native and non-native speakers. For the native speakers, the challenge consisted in adapting their speech to their interlocutors’ knowledge and ability, as regards both language and content. This group’s initial difficulty in expressing their

ideas clearly may be due to the scarce opportunities that higher education students have to express themselves orally in class, as this educational level focuses a great deal on reading texts and listening to teachers' lectures. Synchronous oral communication on the Internet can therefore contribute to developing university students' oral proficiency, whether it is in their native language or a foreign language.

Besides promoting oral skills, the project proved fruitful in advancing participants' content knowledge on both sides. History students had the opportunity of exploring and explaining their own historical and social background, and this personal testimony was highly appreciated by the non-native group, who were presented with an alternative view to that of conventional history textbooks. We have observed that our Danish participants had a tendency to consider their Argentine interlocutors as a highly reliable source of information regarding Argentine history and the materials written by them as more authentic than textbooks. On both sides of the project, participants developed a deeper emotional relationship to the topics discussed than they would get in their normal classroom experiences: one group because they were given the chance of explaining facts that they themselves and their families experienced at close range; the other because they were confronted with powerful personal testimonies and life stories. The impersonal stance of textbooks was replaced in this project by authentic "lived history".

We believe, therefore, that personal encounters on the Internet can have an important educating effect as a supplement to traditional classroom activities, and this effect can be enhanced when the encounter takes place across cultural and geographical borders. Due to growing mobility, most societies today are intrinsically multicultural. As we have pointed out earlier, all classroom situations pose an intercultural challenge to teachers of any subject: religious, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in the classroom are everyday facts that teachers need to address; indeed, even the age gap between teacher and student is a form of intercultural gap. Foreign language teachers may have more opportunities of being exposed to intercultural encounters than teachers of other subjects, like history in the case presented here, but intercultural competence should feature in every teacher-training curriculum. Our project, which pairs teachers of different subjects, intends to show an example of the infinite possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration in this respect.

Telecollaboration offers a rich educational tool for promoting intercultural awareness, as it contributes to overcoming geographical distance and lack of resources for students' mobility experiences. In order to exploit this tool in all its potential, though, it needs to be combined with an appropriate theoretical construct, such as *intercultural communicative competence*, and with carefully

designed tasks and practical preparation. A number of aspects, ranging from academic content to logistical questions, must be carefully addressed. Our results show incidental learning gains caused by spontaneous contact with online interlocutors, which is a welcome effect of the meeting with “the other”, but we believe that careful planning of intentional learning outcomes is of the essence. Interventional research and a qualitative research perspective are needed in order to shed light on what works best. In this project, we have learned that some of our planned sessions and tasks worked better than others, and revised versions need to be tested in future implementations. A second iteration, already being planned, will involve an improved design that takes into account some of the lessons learnt in this first iteration. The findings presented in this article are based on a small number of students and sessions, so follow-up studies of these learners’ long-term intercultural gains, alongside new interventions with new student groups, will allow us to improve this type of interdisciplinary telecollaboration and its potential to generate intercultural awareness.

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## Appendix. Evaluation questionnaire (version presented to Danish students, translated into English)

Aarhus University

Department of Aesthetics and Communication

History I - 2014

Final evaluation of the telecollaboration project between Danish and Argentine students

During this semester, you have participated in a telecollaboration project with Argentine History students. Your work included the following elements:

- 1) You read texts that the Argentine students wrote for you
- 2) You communicated with the Argentine students through Skype and you discussed the texts (and talked about your respective contexts)
- 3) You interviewed a son of disappeared political dissidents about his life experience with the Argentine military dictatorship

## Evaluation:

### a) Content aspects:

Write a few lines on each of the three elements mentioned above and about your experience with each of them. You can take the following questions into account in your reflection:

- Can you name positive aspects of each element?
- Can you name negative aspects?
- Which of these elements was the more/less useful (or beneficial) and why?
- What have you learned working with each of these elements?

### b) Linguistic reflection:

– Was it difficult to communicate with your Argentine interlocutors? Why/why not?

– Have you learned something concrete about the language in your conversations with the Argentine students? For instance, a new grammatical construction or a new expression that your interlocutors used? Do you have any concrete examples?

### c) Practical aspects:

– Write a few lines on the more practical aspects of telecollaboration: for instance, did Skype work as it should? Was it easy to keep meeting agreements with your Argentine partners? Were all members of the group active and did they all contribute to the work?

### d) Emotional aspects:

– Explain how you experienced this telecollaboration from an emotional point of view: Was it easy to talk (keep a conversation) with your Argentine interlocutors? Was there anything that you found shocking or difficult? How were your Argentine partners in your opinion? (open, interested, closed, (im) patient, etc.) Was it easy to communicate through a medium such as Skype?

## Bionotes

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