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## ELF and Intercultural Telecollaboration: A Case Study

ABSTRACT:

This chapter discusses an intercultural telecollaboration project led by the authors in the 2012/2013 school year. A group of ten Italian high-school students of English from Rome, and a group of ten American intermediate learners of Italian from the University of Arizona volunteered to be connected online asynchronously by means of a wiki to discuss a wide range of topics about their cultural backgrounds and lifestyles. The main purpose of our research was to enhance the participants' intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998) via the creation of a Web-mediated, multilingual and multicultural communicative setting in which the students' second languages, English and Italian respectively, would be used as effective mediational tools. From this point of view, this project has shown that the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) by non-native speakers (NNSs) of English within a networked-based context is not a hindrance to communication and mutual understanding. On the contrary, it proves to be an appropriate affordance that L2-users develop through social cooperative practices in order to carry out pragmatic communicative goals. This study is based on integrating Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Sociocultural Theory (SCT). Our goal is to show language practitioners how to create a web-mediated community of practice (CoP), the members of which seek to improve their intercultural competence while using their respective L2s as an affordance to carry out several communicative tasks online. Our CoP, for example, interacted through a website and a wiki that were purposely designed for the needs of the project. As regards the pedagogical implications of our project, the qualitative results indicate that Web 2.0 technology could play an important role in teacher education, as it promotes a valid alternative to face-to-face instruction. It reduces the gap between the teacher and the student, as the former becomes familiar and learns to interact with forms of communication that are second-nature in younger generations. This research confirms that integrating telecollaboration into the foreign language syllabus is a promising option. It helps the learner gain a new impression about the languaculture systems they are exposed to and, in the case of non-native speakers of English, it favours the emergence of ELF as an authentic communicative tool in multilingual and multicultural web-mediated settings.

*Introduction*

This paper discusses a pilot intercultural telecollaboration project[1] led by the authors in the 2012/2013 school year. A group of ten Italian high-school students of English from Rome, and a group of ten American inter-mediate learners of Italian from the University of Arizona[2] volunteered to be connected online asynchronously by means of a wiki to discuss a wide range of topics about their cultural backgrounds and lifestyles. The language level of the two groups was comparable and the age difference was minimal.

The main purpose of our research was to enhance the participants' intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998) via the creation of an authentic, albeit Web-mediated, multilingual and multicultural communicative context in which the students' second languages, English and Italian respectively, would be used as effective mediational tools. Moreover, we assumed a pragmatic entailment between the improvement of the learners' intercultural competence and the development of their language awareness and communicative competence. Hence, the focus of our project was not primarily laid on second language acquisition (SLA) and the «learners' cognitive orientation […] towards language form» (Mauranen, 2012: 7), but rather on the activation of real-life second language use (SLU), whereby the participants' intrinsic motivation to communicate was conducive to cooperating within a Vygotskian zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; van Lier, 2004; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006)[3].

Another important goal of our study was to show L2 practitioners how ELF-based communication can be integrated into ELT through net-worked-based language teaching (NBLT) (Warschauer and Kern, 2000). The distinctive feature of this particular research consists in the Italian participants' use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), that is a «vehicular language used by speakers who do not share a first language» (Mauranen, 2012: 8). Following Mauranen (8-9), this definition of ELF applies also to communicative contexts where some of the interlocutors are native speak-ers (NSs) of English, as in the case of this telecollaboration. Traditionally, in a telecollaborative setting two foreign languages (FLs) are involved, so that each speaker plays two roles alternatively: the native speaker (NS) who has the status of language expert in his/her L1, and the non-native speaker (NNS) who is learning an L2. However, our contention is that if one of the two languages involved in telecollaboration is English, the use of which is situated beyond the canonical FL environment of the English

classroom, it should be identified as ELF, because the main aim of the speakers' engagement in communication is their mutual intelligibility and the achievement of pragmatic goals, rather than language accuracy, even when NSs of English are present. Therefore, the rationale underpinning our study is that once telecollaboration and Internet-mediated communication are integrated into English language teaching (ELT), English as a foreign language (EFL) – i.e. the English of the subject in a schooling context – and ELF – i.e. today's primary contact language for global communication – tend to converge and become complementary in the L2-user's performance (Grazzi, 2013).

The pilot study discussed in this paper was conceived to provide a platform for L2-users of English and of Italian to communicate through Web 2.0 technology. The following sections provide an overview of the theoretical framework that inspired this research, particularly as regards the potential of NBLT, as well as a description of the implementation of the project. Finally, we will discuss the most important outcomes of this research.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Foreign language telecollaborative projects have the potential to provide learners with an alternative to knowledge found in traditional educational resources. However, their potential is not limited to the exercise of language per se, but includes the promotion of a deeper understanding of the culture of the language in question. As Antoniadou (2011: 285) asserts, culture in the 21st Century eludes national boundaries and calls for «multiliterate 'world citizens' who are able to work collaboratively in multicultural/multilingual contexts, co-construct knowledge, and think critically». Indeed, in the Modern Languages Association Report (2007) intercultural competence is a necessary issue that higher education needs to address in order to remain relevant in the imminent future. Even in the study of SLA, researchers and institutions are increasingly recognizing that communicative competence in itself cannot realistically be its exclusive objective. Thorne (2006: 5) observes that «according to the *Council of Europe* (2001)[4] communicative competence alone is no longer adequate as the sole goal of FL learning. Rather, the "objective of foreign language teaching is now…'intercultural competence'" (Sercu 2004: 115)»[5]. Nonetheless, this is not to say that intercultural-oriented tasks neglect the linguistic component of language learning. Rather, telecollaborative intercultural projects allow learners to direct their attention on cultural

differences through the means of language (O'Dowd and Waire, 2009). By way of unmediated interaction with members of different cultures, participants can gain valuable insights about foreign cultural backgrounds. According to Kern, Ware, and Warschauer (2004: 243), the emphasis that has been placed in recent years on intercultural education via distance collaboration presents a «second wave» of L2 pedagogy. Thorne (2006: 4) stresses three major shifts in this new trend: 1) the use of intercultural competence and pragmatics as a framework for L2 learning; 2) a move from a local, classroom-based context to a wider and global one; 3) a focus on the conceptualization of communication and of culture in L2 pedagogy and research. Moreover, one of the purposes of telecollaboration, as defined by Belz (2005: 23), is «to foster dialogue between members of diverse cultures, who otherwise might not have the opportunity to come into contact, in an effort to increase intercultural awareness as well as linguistic proficiency». Instead of the dry and impersonal information usually found in traditional classroom settings, in a telecollaboration learners have the opportunity to be exposed to subjective and personalized viewpoints from members of a different sociocultural background, thus becoming «aware of how aspects of the target culture are perceived within the culture itself, and what are the significant events and people in the target culture's 'national memory'» (O'Dowd, 2007: 146-147). In a telecollaborative pedagogical environment, intercultural learning and the promotion of intercultural communicative skills usually involve tasks in which learners are asked to examine or compare cultural artifacts, or to use their faculty of cultural interaction to recognize and discuss the different cultural positions between themselves and their partners. Through these environments, intercultural-oriented tasks allow learners to direct their attention on cultural differences through the means of language (O'Dowd and Waire, 2009). Byram (1997: 34) identifies intercultural competence (IC) as the «readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours» and a «willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging». As O'Dowd (2007: 149) explains, the skills for a successful intercultural telecollaboration may not be innate to many students. In order for participants to benefit thoroughly from such a project, it may be helpful for them to obtain explicit direction and coaching in various characteristics of intercultural telecollaboration. Instead of merely attempting to find a common ground and sustain discourse within those safe boundaries, «students need to be trained to see themselves as ethnographers or cultural investigators whose

task is to find out more about the foreign perspective and the beliefs and values which underlie it».

Today, Web 2.0 affordances are generally accepted by language teachers and researchers as powerful platforms through which pedagogical material and learning environments can be created to foster FL learning. In particular, an emergent pursuit that has attracted the interest of SLA researchers that make use of this technology is what is commonly identified as telecollaboration or Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (ICFLE) (Antoniadou, 2011; Belz, 2005; O'Dowd and Waire, 2009; Thorne, 2006). In language learning contexts, telecollaboration may be described as an «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» (Guth and Helm, 2010: 14). As indicated by Bloch (2007), discussing topics that require critical thinking from students enable them to contribute to the creation of knowledge, whereby they can attain greater confidence in their authorship instead of relegating them to a role of passive consumers. The objective of telecollaborative projects is to use Internet-mediated communication to promote discussion, debate, social interface and collaborative exploration among geographically separated participants, and thus to use the language they are studying within an real context and for meaningful purposes. For example, research indicates that the use of blogs may promote the development of intercultural competence as well. In a project conducted by Elola and Oskoz (2008), the authors found that, through blogging, students were successful in achieving intercultural competence, that is the ability to communicate with members of other cultures while being perceptive of diversities and correspondences without stressing otherness and stereotypes. The article argues that this was achieved by the communicative tools that are available with the blog as a medium (i.e. text entries, multimedia upload and commenting), which in turn allowed for the students to reflect and share their own knowledge and values. A similar pedagogical outcome may be achieved also with the use of wikis. These are websites where users' texts can be uploaded and edited by members of a discourse community. In a pedagogical context, wikis are found to be more motivating to the students than traditional writing assignments due to their collaborative quality (Warschauer and Grimes, 2007).

According to O'Dowd (2007), since the pioneering virtual learning environments carried out in the mid-1980s, the importance of telecollaborative exchange among language learners has steadily grown and is

currently deemed as «one of the main pillars of online language learning» (O'Dowd, 2007: 2). Therefore, one of the purposes of our pilot study was to show the pedagogical potential of telecollaboration and of new teaching methodologies that go beyond the traditional teacher-oriented and text-book-bound approach. Telecollaboration, we believe, allows students to use the L2 in a meaningful and authentic way, while expanding their intercultural and communicative competencies (New London Group, 1996; Byram *et al.*, 2002; Modern Language Association Report, 2007). In the following section we will discuss Web 2.0 technology and its implications for L2 instruction as well as networked-based language teaching (NBTLT).

### 1.1 Web 2.0 and its pedagogical implications

The extraordinary progress of technology in the past decade, its wide-spread accessibility, cost-effectiveness, pervasive practice and user-friendliness, has made instantaneous communication and collaboration for business or leisure among geographically remote individuals a daily routine. Web 2.0 is the second generation of the World Wide Web. As opposed to its antecedent, Web 1.0, it is a technology that allows for the creation of content that is generated and maintained by users. The key feature of Web 2.0 is that it changes the orientation of Internet communication: while Web 1.0 could be considered as the «readable web» (Kárpáti, 2009: 2), where the emphasis is on the reception of content by consumers, Web 2.0 is the «writable web», a space where the importance lies on the creation and exchange of content. Zimmer (Schuck *et al.*, 2010: 235) summarises Web 2.0 as a «blurring of the boundaries between Web users and producers, consumption and participation, authority and amateurism, play and work, data and the network, reality and virtuality». The development of this technology has generated new literacies and new authorship practices that are shared by millions of users worldwide – fanfiction and collaborative writing (Grazzi, 2013) are a case in point – , and the impact of this digital turn has far-reaching implications in all aspects of modern society, including education. As Warschauer (2005) points out, it is impossible to understand the kinds of motivation and positions that young students have towards working with technology if we do not firstly understand the significance of new technologies in modern economy and society. The potential for participative networking and for the production of mixed-media inherent in Web 2.0 makes this technology an ideal support for L2 education, one that is able to transform students into «active learners, team builders, collaborators, and discoverers» (Thorne, 2008: 420).

As maintained by Wenger (1996: 214), «learning involves an interaction between experience and competence». The Internet promotes the development of communities of practice that afford access to competence and offers the opportunity for personal engagement with which the learner can integrate that competence in a participatory mode. «When these conditions are in place,» argues Wenger, «communities of practice are a privileged locus for the acquisition of knowledge». As the New London Group (1996: 60-61) pointed out: «[l]iteracy pedagogy has traditionally meant teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms of the national language. Literacy pedagogy, in other words, has been a carefully restricted project — restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language». The Internet has drastically revolutionized the literacy landscape into a constellation of sub-cultures, languages and expressive modes. For the new generation of students, the evolving literacies issued from digital spaces are extremely significant to their everyday lives as language users. For Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001) in particular, i.e., those individuals who were born when the Internet was already established, social, academic and professional interactions are increasingly mediated by digital communicative instruments such as social networks, blogs, instant messaging, online games, chat rooms and voice/text messaging via cellular phones. It is necessary for contemporary L2 educators and designers of pedagogical materials to be well informed about the ethos of this emerging culture and be aware of the potential of this technology, to identify the most valuable platforms and its possible setbacks (Thorne and Reinhardt, 2008).

The inherent networking capabilities of the Internet are considered fit for a wide-ranging investigation of other languages and cultures, for they allow learners to engage directly without the measured artificiality of textbooks and impersonal mediation found in traditional classroom-based instruction (Belz, 2005). Internet-mediated communication, be it synchronous (e.g. chat-rooms) or asynchronous (e.g. wikis, blogs, social networking websites) is being employed by foreign language practitioners to build collaborative learning environments in which students transcend the book-bound approach in favour of cross-cultural awareness and literacy and thus they can be exposed to their target language in relation with other human beings (Liaw and Bunn-Le Master, 2010). Many FL teachers are implementing Web 2.0 technology for L2 learning, and understand how this platform can offer the tools to constructing knowledge via collaborative learning environments and provide access to language in context (Stevenson and Liu, 2010). Instead of the more traditionally lopsided

and teacher-controlled classroom discourse, the addition of Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) in the foreign language classroom offers the prospect for students to use authentic language in real and meaningful interaction, which fosters a more student-centered environment. This in turn allows for greater student autonomy, participation and interaction as well as for different types of discourse that go beyond those generated in the traditional classroom (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2011). Teachers, program developers and institutions are now expected to pay attention to the learners' sociocultural backgrounds and adopt materials and pedagogical methods accordingly, «because ignoring the students' norms and expectations — that is, what students bring to the classroom — is denying the learners' experiences» (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005: 99).

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), researchers and teachers increasingly recognize the necessity to elicit instances of language use that are illustrative of the learners' performance while they are not focusing on accuracy (Ellis, 2003). By revolving language instruction around tasks, learners are implicated in an educative process in which they employ their L2 for meaning-making: «this negotiative language use process will spur and promote the learners' language acquisition» (Lai and Li, 2011: 1). Indeed, as pointed out by Reinhardt (2008), it has been decades since Wagner-Gough and Hatch (1975) called for a suitable model for interaction among language learners that did not isolate language from meaning. They solicited the investigation of language in context, containing all the «variables (for both the learner and the native speaker) that give life, colour and meaning to the learning process» (Wagner-Gough and Hatch, 1975: 298, in Reinhardt, 2008: 238). In this view, the attention of language teaching should be on meaning rather than simply on form, with an emphasis laid on communication for real-life situations.

The intercultural telecollaboration project that is presented in this chapter was intended to exploit the great potential of networked-based language teaching (NBLT), which also incorporates the five key features of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): 1) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the L2; 2) the introduction of authentic texts into the learning environment; 3) attention not only on the language but also on the learning process itself; 4) bringing the learner's own personal experience to the classroom as a component of the learning process; 5) the attempt to connect classroom language learning with language outside the classroom (Nunan, 1991, in Nguyen, 2013: 42).

The section below situates our telecollaboration within Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). According

to SCT-based Communicative Language Teaching, language is acquired through social interaction, mediated though social and cultural tools, and fostered by the assistance of more competent peers. Our project intended to link together language students in two separate countries through computer-mediated communication in order to activate their ZPD via peer feedback to improve both their L2 and their intercultural competence.

### 1.2 Sociocultural Theory and Communicative Language Teaching

Within a language pedagogy context, Sociocultural Theory (SCT)[6] marks a turn from individual acquisition to artifact-mediated participative collaboration to nurture the learning process. Through the lens of SCT, language is seen not simply as a means for communication but also as the expression of human thinking process and culture. According to Firth and Wagner (2007: 768), second language acquisition (SLA) researchers should identify and explain how language use and acquisition are consequences of interaction and context: «Language is not only a cognitive phenomenon, the product of the individual's brain; it is also fundamentally a social phenomenon, acquired and used interactively, in a variety of contexts for myriad practical purposes». As noted by Newman and Holzman, in Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 56), «Vygotsky's approach begins with the assumption that humans are always and everywhere social entities, always deploying their agencies in order to make sense of their environment, of what they are doing, and of what is being done to them». SCT-based Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) pedagogy thus assumes that: 1) language is best learned via social interaction and negotiation of meaning; 2) learning is typically mediated by social and cultural tools; 3) collaborative learning with peers activates a ZPD, resulting in the improvement of linguistic performance; 4) collaborative learning plays a fundamental role in CTL language classroom settings. In CLT, teacher-centered pedagogy is replaced by group-based and pair-based learning, where social interaction becomes a means of knowledge-formation and the student plays an active role while the teacher acts as a facilitator (Nguyen, 2013).

Our telecollaborative project was meant to provide a platform for linguistic and intercultural development of young students in Italy and in the USA. A series of themes that touched on various aspects of Italian and American culture – i.e., *education*, *Facebook and privacy*, *abortion*, etc. – were devised and posted online in a dedicated website. Participants were to choose one of those themes, mostly all of which included a scaffolding paragraph with external links to the topic in both languages, and write

their thoughts on a wiki to their partner. The latter was to read the post and provide a response that was expected to include a personal reaction as well as peer feedback on the partner's language to activate the ZPD. In the following pages we will take a detailed look at how the project was implemented and how the interactions were carried out.

## 2. The implementation of the intercultural telecollaboration project

The project was launched in October of 2012 and ended in December of the same year, for a total of nine weeks of telecollaboration. It was not a didactic module within an institutional FL educational setting, therefore participants were not formally obliged to fulfil their assignments, nor was their work corrected and evaluated by their teachers.

To facilitate the development of the project, two ad hoc Web 2.0 websites were set up by the researchers. The first, created through the <www.webs.com> (last access 10.02.2016) platform, was intended as a descriptive space through which participants gathered information about the telecollaboration. This website displayed the goals of the project, pictures of the participants and, more importantly, clear procedures and guidelines about the students' assignments. Because of time-zone constraints (there is an 8 to 9-hour difference between the two locations), the exchanges were to be carried out through asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC), i.e. participants were not required to be simultaneously connected. The second website was a wiki developed through <www.wikispaces.com> (last access 10.02.2016). It was the medium used for the participants' interaction. These two platforms were chosen among a variety of Web 2.0 sites as they were free of charge, they offered the possibility to be password-protected, and were simple to develop and relatively easy to operate.

To keep the *communicative stress* factor to a minimum, i.e. to reduce the performance tension that may arise when speakers are involved in L2 verbal interaction,  the thematic content of the tasks of this telecollaboration focused purposefully on the participants' familiar native cultural backgrounds and individuality (Ellis, 2003). The two groups of Italian and American students were randomly paired into ten dyads (teams of two) and were asked to choose among the various themes featured in the <webs.com> (last access 10.02.2016) website (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 – List of themes

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | First of All, Talk About Yourself | 9. | Genetically Modified Food |
| 2. | Abortion | 10. | Music |
| 3. | A picture, a culture | 11. | Peer-to-Peer Downloading |
| 4. | Death Penalty | 12. | Soccer |
| 5. | Education | 13. | Stereotypes |
| 6. | Facebook and Privacy | 14. | Surveillance |
| 7. | Football | 15. | Swearing |
| 8. | Films | | |

Each theme included a representative image, followed by a short intro-duction to the topic and a selection of links to related articles and videos, both in Italian and in English. The only topic that all participants had to talk about at the onset was theme Number 1, *First of All, Talk About Yourself*, as it served as an introduction. Each week, one student within a dyad picked one of the topics listed above to write about in their L2, following no particular order. At the same time, the partner chose a topic which could have been the same or a different one, depending on his/her preference. Therefore, team members were not required to develop the same subject simultaneously.

The tasks designed for this telecollaboration project were to be developed by the participants in two parallel phases:

- Phase A: in each team, students were asked to produce a text in their L2, the subject of which could be chosen among the list of fifteen themes provided on the project website (see Table 1 above). Next, they had to upload their texts onto the page of the wiki that had been previously assigned to each team. This would start the participants' asynchronous conversation on the topic/s they had chosen. More importantly, working on a wiki allowed students to enrich their texts with further uploads, like .mp3 audio-files, pictures, videos, and links to relevant Web pages. Moreover, each team's page hosted a forum, so that all the members of the discourse community involved in this telecollaboration could follow what was being discussed by each team and participate to their conversation, if they wanted. In any case, notwithstanding the forum was open to all participants, only team members were allowed to change their texts, add new ones, and delete or upload audiovisuals. Interestingly, though, participants were not particu-larly keen to join open discussions, nor did they use the forum to

exchange metalinguistic comments. Peer reviewing was essentially carried out in pairs, by each team. Against all expectations, as project coordinators, we realized that although our students were social networkers who usually interacted with their friends online (for instance through Facebook), they did not fully exploit the potential of the forum hosted on the wiki. Perhaps, we concluded, the main reason was that they were very busy and had little time to spend on blogging for this school project. Therefore, they limited their participation to team work.

- Phase B: in each team, students were asked to provide their partners with concise peer-to-peer corrective feedback to improve the overall intelligibility of their L2 texts. In order to support the students who conceivably had no prior experience in peer feedback, a PowerPoint presentation that included specific advice about the appropriate modus operandi and etiquette was distributed via email and posted in the website. Phase B, as will be explained in more detail in the following section, was a very important component of this telecollaboration, as it allowed students to reflect on the use of the L2 and on the communicative process while it was being carried out. Peer-to-peer corrective feedback enhanced the students' language awareness and helped them improve their language performance. Participants could even reformulate their texts progressively and, thanks to an application called *History*, could compare all the previous drafts of the texts they had written.

The ad hoc corpus that was compiled at the end of the project contains a total amount of 28,136 words. The following grid (see Table 2 below) shows the word count as regards: a) the texts written in ELF by the Italian students of English; b) the texts written in Italian by the American students of English; c) the metalinguistic feedback about the use of Italian provided by the Italian participants; d) the metalinguistic feedback about the use of English provided by the American participants.

*Table 2 – Word count*

| Word count |
| --- |
| a. ELF: 12,380 words |
| b. Italian: 11,101 words |
| c. Feedback about the use of Italian: 2,130 words |
| d. Feedback about the use of English: 2,525 words |

The number of themes discussed by each team, as well as the number of messages they exchanged, and the amount of metalinguistic feedback they provided varied considerably, as can be seen in the following grid, where a more detailed word count is presented (see Table 3 below). Usually, each team exchanged from two to four messages per theme, but in some cases a few teams wrote even more messages per theme. Only in six cases out of forty-three (namely, Team 1, Theme 10; Team 4, Themes 4, 10 and 11; Team 6, Theme 6; Team 8, Theme 2) participants wrote a text that was not followed by a reply from their partners. Finally, almost all teams used to enrich their messages with audiovisuals and provided hyperlinks to relevant web pages.

*Table 3 – Detailed word count*

| Team | Theme | ELF | Feedb. It. | Italian | Feedb. Eng. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 413 | | 282 | |
| | 6 | 241 | 24 | 286 | |
| | 10 | 182 | | 175 | |
| | 13 | 340 | | | |
| 2 | 1 | 339 | 100 | 219 | |
| | 2 | 297 | | 280 | |
| | 3 | 333 | | 350 | |
| | 5 | 594 | 96 | 532 | 85 |
| | 6 | 318 | | 267 | 89 |
| | 7 | 227 | | 366 | |
| | 9 | 436 | 43 | 239 | 17 |
| | 10 | 509 | 129 | 225 | |
| | 11 | 110 | 105 | 200 | 31 |
| | 13 | 403 | 75 | 408 | |
| 3 | 1 | 225 | | 276 | |
| 4 | 1 | 176 | 55 | 253 | |
| | 4 | 197 | | | |
| | 9 | 201 | 36 | 306 | |
| | 10 | 356 | | | |
| | 11 | 272 | | | |
| 5 | 1 | 198 | | 147 | 116 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3 | 127 | | 86 | |
| 6 | 1 | 293 | 127 | 621 | 99 |
| | 6 | | | 128 | |
| | 8 | 287 | | 149 | 284 |
| 7 | 1 | 300 | 125 | 330 | 221 |
| | 11 | 152 | 96 | 243 | |
| 8 | 1 | 273 | 108 | 486 | 252 |
| | 2 | | | 356 | |
| | 10 | 197 | | 271 | 195 |
| | 13 | 202 | 121 | 349 | 132 |
| 9 | 1 | 669 | 105 | 398 | 134 |
| | 2 | 353 | | 301 | 139 |
| | 4 | 302 | | | |
| | 5 | 511 | | 359 | |
| | 6 | 609 | | 297 | |
| | 10 | 579 | 245 | 260 | 145 |
| 10 | 1 | 432 | | 296 | 187 |
| | 3 | 57 | 154 | 645 | |
| | 10 | 197 | 126 | 135 | 117 |
| | 11 | 110 | 105 | 200 | 31 |
| | 12 | 161 | | 122 | 58 |
| | 13 | 202 | 155 | 258 | 193 |

Aside from the first theme, which was to talk about oneself and which was required for all, participants could choose the themes they were more interested in discussing with their partners. The subject that the students were more interested in discussing was, perhaps not surprisingly, *Soccer/ Football*. In both cultures, these two sports play an important role. Other popular themes were *A Picture, A culture* (where learners were supposed to share pictures of typical aspects of their cultural backgrounds and comment them); *Education*; *Facebook and Privacy*; *Swearing*. Not much attention was devoted instead to themes such as *Abortion*, *Surveillance*, *Peer-to-Peer Downloading* and *Death Penalty*. Owing to the fact that the researchers and organizers of this project are obviously not members of the same generation as were the participants, probably a more in-depth understanding of the kind

of themes young students are more concerned with could have increased overall participation and engagement. Indeed, one student suggested cutting altogether the more 'serious' themes and leaving it to more jovial matters. Most of the contributions of the students were in depth when one of the two pairs was particularly involved with a theme. They frequently asked personal questions and provided links to websites and videos that represented their thoughts.

The following section highlights the main features of peer-to-peer feedback and how participants carried it out.

*3. Peer-to-peer feedback*

Research indicates that corrective feedback among peers often results in less anxiety perceived by the learner than if it were to be provided by an authority figure such as the teacher. The noticing of language forms may take place within ongoing interactional assistance provided during the flow of conversation as well as in feedback in electronic tandem (e-tandem) partnerships (Ware and O'Dowd, 2008). In the case of our telecollaboration, we recommended the participants to be selective and deliver corrective feedback only when their partners' texts contained lexicogrammar 'deviant' forms that hindered meaning and intelligibility. To this purpose, we observed that students implemented interpersonal, strategic accommodation skills (Jenkins, 2000) and tended to focus more on content rather than form. Here is an example of peer-to-peer review (from Team 2, Theme n. 1, *First of All, Talk About Yourself*), where an Italian student is not only providing her American partner with lexicogrammar correcting feedback, but is also negotiating the meaning of a non-standard Italian expression to suggest a more appropriate wording:

> Talking about the pair-review I don't know exactly how to do that, so I will try :) you are very good in writing in italian!!!!!
> In italian we don't use the article before the word "sister", so we say: mia sorella minore, and we also say: è il suo ultimo anno di liceo. Then, when you say that you want to be an "editore di film" you mean that you want to "create" moovies? So in italian is: regista. Also when you say: "so sopra venti stili di danza", is better to say: conosco più di venti stili di danza.

Here is one more example of peer-to-peer feedback based on accommodation and negotiation of meaning, intended to facilitate mutual

understanding (from Team 10, Theme n. 13, *Swearing*). An American student is suggesting a possible interpretation and a more appropriate wording of a few opaque expressions used by his Italian partner:

> What do you mean by "I disagree with believer people who blaspheme toward God of other religions"? Do you mean people who talk badly about other religions? I dislike when people do that too! Funny little thing I learned: bestemmiare is to blaspheme, but we don't use "blaspheme" in America when we are referring to swear words. We use "swearing" or "speaking bad words", so my professor told me the proper usage is, "dico parolacce"!

In some cases, though, some students overcorrected their partners' texts, for the sake of lexicogrammar accuracy, according to NS-norms, rather than fluency. The following example shows a typical feature of ELF, that is the use of *advice* as a countable noun, which was corrected by the American student, even though this deviation from the norm did not affect the overall intelligibility of the Italian student's utterance (Team 9, Theme 1, *First of All, Talk About Yourself*):

> Suggestions for you:
> In english the word Advice is both plural and singular so it is correct to write "Advice" not advices.

As regards the Italian students' use of ELF and the corrective feedback they received from their American partners, the general tendency was to perceive it as a communicative affordance or, as Kohn (2011: 80) suggests, a pragmatic «orientation» for successful use of English. Here is an example taken from the ad hoc corpus (Team 8, Theme 1, *First of All, Talk About Yourself*):

> I just wanted to give you a quick peer review. So you did a really awesome job again! I wish my Italian was as good as your English, I have to look up so many words in the dictionary :( The few errors I found were when you talk about your dad forcing your brother to love soccer, you say "he have done it with my brother" but it would sound better if you said "he did it with my brother". Another thing I noticed was that you switched around some of your prepositions. For example, when you say "I'm very supporting with my team" it is better to say "I'm very supporting of my team". Also, you said "in these occasions" but it is better to say "on these occasions". Prepositions are very difficult though.

We could say that the kind of e-partnering that was activated within this ZPD was not meant to disregard the Italians' use of ELF and impose prescriptive NS norms. On the contrary, it favoured cooperative negotiation of forms and meanings between interlocutors who belonged to different languacultural backgrounds and at the same time helped the Italian students learn more about the L2. Thorne (2008) proposes that peer-to-peer feedback may indeed afford access to information purportedly missing in dictionaries and grammar books, thus intensifying an amplifying the pedagogical success of an L2 project.

The same could be said about the peer feedback the Italian students delivered to the American partners who spoke Italian as their L2. In any case, an important distinction should be made between the nature of English as a lingua franca and the nature of Italian as a foreign language, for this entails important implications as regards the concept of 'ownership of the language' and the languacultural identity of L2-users. This, however, is an area of research that goes beyond the scope of the present study.

The peer-review phase in this project gave students the opportunity to share ideas, provide corrective and topic-oriented feedback, as well as negotiate meaning. They employed spontaneous socio-affective comments to encourage their partners and their appraisal prevented them from feeling uncomfortable, as shown in the following example (Team 9, Theme 1, *First of All, Talk About Yourself*):

> When you ask "How do you look like?" It is better to say "What do you look like?" We use the word "how" more often like "Come sta?/ How are you?" I am very impressed with your english! [...] You made very small mistakes, nothing bad at all! I look forward to talking with you the next few weeks. It will be fun! Bye for now!

With Belz (2005), we may conclude that within the dialogic pedagogical framework of telecollaborative settings the learner is not a mere passive receiver of norms, but an active interpreter of his or her own authentic L2 interactions.

In the sections that follows, we will discuss the results of this intercultural telecollaborative project and draw our conclusions.

## 4. Discussion

We believe that, at this juncture in present-day society, the key question is not 'whether' the latest technologies should be used in education,

rather 'how' they can be used (Prensky, 2001). Perhaps, the case in point in the controversy involving the gap between *Digital Natives* – those individuals who were born after the Internet was already in place – and *Digital Immigrants* – those who were born before the advent of the Internet – (Prensky, 2001) is not that teachers should mould education to the supposed new learning styles of modern students. Instead, we claim it is the responsibility of modern teachers to at least bear in mind this hypothesis and get acquainted with what can be achieved with modern technology, exploiting it at its fullest to realize well-designed teaching objectives (Thorne and Reinhardt, 2008).

Additionally, this study shows that through telecollaboration more attention is given to the concept of «intercultural dimension» (Byram *et al.*, 2002). The 'intercultural dimension' in language teaching seeks to prepare learners to become «intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity» (5). In order to do so, learners need to achieve intercultural as well as linguistic competencies; they need to be prepared to interact with people of different cultures and accept them as individuals having different outlooks, ideals and behaviours; and they need to appreciate that such kind of intercultural interaction is in itself an enriching event (Byram *et al.*, 2002). This approach tries to promote a distancing attitude towards stereotyping, which is much welcome in modern society. From this point of view, this project has shown that the use of ELF by NNS of English in a multicultural and multilingual networked-based context is not a hindrance to communication and mutual understanding. On the contrary, it proves to be an appropriate affordance that L2-users develop through social cooperative practices in order to carry out pragmatic communicative goals. Moreover, the participation of American NSs of English in this telecollaboration did not seem to have a gatekeeping function. Rather, it provided the Italian participants with useful peer-to-peer language feedback that enhanced their communicative competence without preventing them from expressing their own languacultural identity through the use of ELF.

The two cultures involved in this project, the Italian and the American one, have a long history of mutual interaction. Thanks to the Italian immigration in the USA that characterized the beginning of the past century, many traits of the Italian culture are ingrained in the American one, especially in the realm of cuisine, art, and opera, but also in less flattering spheres, such as the 'mafioso' or the 'organ grinder and monkey' image (Maranzana, in press). Yet, Italy is obviously a lot more than this,

and oftentimes, to the US citizen, the Italian-American culture blends in with the Italian one, as if they were the same thing. Conversely, a lot of stereotyping revolves around Americans in the eyes of Italians, from the perennial cowboys to the hamburger-eaters.

The students who joined this project showed that they were aware of the groundlessness of cultural stereotypes, and proved to be receptive to the idea of learning about their partners' culture through their authentic descriptions. Let us consider this example (Team 7, Theme 11, *Stereotypes*):

> American student:
> Ci sono molti stereotipi degli italiani negli Stati Uniti, specialmente l'esagerazione dell'accento italiano. Gli americani pensano che gli italiani mangino gli spaghetti e la pizza ogni giorno e solo bevono vino.
> Molti americani pensano che tutti gli italiani siano nella "mafia". Non mi piacciono gli stereotipi perché sono una rappresentazione negativa della cultura.
> [There are many stereotypes about the Italians in the United States, especially the exaggeration of the Italian accent. Americans think that Italians eat spaghetti and pizza every day and only drink wine.
> Many Americans think that all Italians belong to the "mafia". I do not like stereotypes because they give a negative representation of culture.]
>
> Italian student:
> I really hate stereotypes because i know that they are just an exageration of some behaviors or problems of a country and i can't tolerate that someone from another country describes me only as an eater of pizza and pasta or as member of mafia. I also think that what have a big importance in the diffusion of stereotypes are the mass media, infact for example we can see that in some movies or cartons people of other country are described only through stereotypes. In the end i think that stereotypes can exist but they should not be taken as something true but only as something funny.

Much can be done to promote real understanding of the Italian and American cultures through projects centered on developing intercultural communication, as this pilot study has tried to demonstrate.

## 5. Conclusions

This research indicates that Web 2.0 technology could play an important role in teacher education, as it promotes a valid alternative to face-to-face instruction. As Johnson (2006: 244) observes, it «create[s] more

equitable social roles as teachers engage in inquiry about their own learning and teaching, foster[s] greater collaboration among teacher learners, and decrease[s] the sense of isolation L2 teachers in disparate locations often experience». Furthermore, it reduces the gap between the teacher and the student, as the former becomes familiar and learns to interact with forms of communication that are second-nature in younger generations. Intercultural communication (ICC), which Dogancay and Aktuna (2005: 100) define «the process occurring when the producers and receivers of a message belong to different cultures», should for example be taken into consideration not only when the teacher is from a different country than the students' – e.g. an Italian teacher of Italian as a FL in the USA – but also when teacher and students are from the same cultural background but belong, as it is often the case, to different generations.

The peer review phase in this project provided students with opportunities to share ideas, offer corrective and topic-oriented feedback as well as negotiate meaning. The transcripts of this study reveal that 50% of the participants placed the use of correct lexicogrammar as the most important aspect for feedback. They employed spontaneous socio-affective comments to encourage their partners and prevent them to feel uncomfortable by their appraisal. In line with the findings of Thorne (2003, 2008), students' comments from the ad hoc corpus showed their enthusiasm in being able to communicate in their FL and learn the language and its culture from a peer. Within a dialogic pedagogical framework, the learner is thus not a mere passive receiver of norms, but an active interpreter of his or her own authentic FL interactions (Belz, 2005). Most of the students found this pedagogical project original and interesting and 40% were thankful that they were given the opportunity to relate with peers from another culture.

Pedagogically speaking, the research confirms that integrating telecollaboration into language learning is possible and promising. This project helped the student gain a new impression about the culture they were exposed to. Almost all participants realized that there is actually not much difference between the lifestyles of the young in both countries, while those who had discussed the topic of *Education* found a lot of difference between the Italian and the American school system. 80% of students found the themes for discussion quite engaging, although some of the Italian students[7] recognized that, despite the fact that their American partners were slightly older, they tended to be less interested in the more intense and thought-provoking themes. It needs to be understood, though, that the impressions they formed about the foreign culture

was forcibly the outcome of interaction with one single partner. A better understanding of the culture would unquestionably be achieved if every single participant could engage in conversation with multiple partners.

Overall, we are satisfied with the outcomes of this study and we believe that it benefitted the students as they were able to go beyond the traditional classroom setting and expand into the broader world beyond it. Some reported to their teachers (namely, Maranzana and Manni) establishing a friendly relationship that went past the boundaries of this project – indeed one of the pairs of participants kept in touch via email for a year and arranged to finally meet in person in Rome.

In sum, a long preparation needs to be carried out in order to maximize its pedagogical potential, with a look at which platforms are better to be used in line with the teaching objectives. Although the majority of the students declared that they had no major critiques on this telecollaboration, most of them had some reservations regarding the wiki platform (wikispaces.com) which they initially found somewhat complex to grasp. It is advisable, therefore, that the technology used in telecollaboration is as user-friendly as possible, to allow even less skilful social networkers to carry out their tasks.

Importantly, this kind of project was not part of the institutionalized curriculum of the language department in which the students of the University of Arizona study Italian as a FL. Therefore, it was sometimes challenging for Maranzana, their teacher and project organiser, to motivate them to participate actively as the outcomes of the telecollaboration were not translated into any academic credits. On the contrary, the participation of the Italian students to the intercultural telecollaboration project was very important for the overall evaluation of their school-leaving exam, that year. This contributed to stimulate and keep the participants' motivation alive.

In conclusion, we believe that projects of this kind, should indeed be integrated in the FL syllabus in order to provide language students with the possibility to use their L2s for meaningful interaction and broaden the scope of their intercultural and communicative competencies.

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[1] This project was a recipient of the European Language Label Award for Innovative Projects in Language Teaching and Learning 2012-2013.
[2] The group of Italian high-school students attended the final year at the *Liceo Classico Statale Ennio Quirino Visconti* of Rome. They were coordinated by their teacher of

English, Rosella Manni. The group of American intermediate level-students of Italian of the University of Arizona were coordinated by their teacher, Stefano Maranzana.
[3] Within a ZPD, learners provide reciprocal language scaffolding and peer reviewing in order to carry out their joint communicative endeavour successfully. Their focus is not laid on language accuracy per se, but on the intelligibility of their discourse.
[4] Council of Europe 2001, *Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework of Reference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[5] Sercu, L. 2004, Intercultural Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Education: Integrating Theory and Practice. In John, O. St., van Esch, K. and Schalkwijk, E. (eds.), *New Insights into Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 115-130.
[6] Lantolf (2004: 30-31, quoted in Lantolf and Thorne, 2006: 1) explains what the essence of Vygotsky's (1978) SCT is: «despite the label "sociocultural" the theory is not a theory of the social or of the cultural aspects of human existence. […] it is, rather, […] a theory of mind […] that recognizes the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking».
[7] Source: private communications sent to the project coordinators.

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