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Intercultural Experience in Online Collaboration: A Case of Polish and Romanian Teacher-trainees

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Abstract

This study examines intercultural learning during an email collaboration project carried out as part of an EFL didactics course attended by Polish and Romanian teacher-trainees. Email entries and the results of a final questionnaire were used as sources of data that offered insight into the intercultural dimension of the participants' interactions. Analysis of the data focused on the intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills developed by the participants in the course of the project, as well as their evaluation of the project's value. The findings showed that the students enriched their cultural knowledge, including their awareness of the nature of interactions in English as a lingua franca, and attempted to relate to and interpret information conveyed by their partners; moreover, their attitudes displayed a curiosity and openness toward their partners and their online collaboration. They also gained experience in overcoming intercultural communication problems. The didactic implications indicate a need to involve teacher trainees in intercultural interactions with the aim of broadening their intercultural perspectives, which is a necessary step in becoming an effective teacher.

Keywords: intercultural learning, online collaboration, teacher training, English as a foreign language

Introduction

In today's largely globalized world, helping learners develop the skills and abilities needed for effective intercultural communication is a vital aim of foreign language instruction. As stated by the Council of Europe (2001, p. 43), a foreign language learner is expected to develop "interculturality" by combining their own language and cultural competence with knowledge about the "ways of acting and communicating" in other languages they learn. In light of this, in the contemporary foreign language classroom, a "cultural orientation" in teaching has been replaced by an "intercultural orientation," which goes beyond merely transmitting cultural facts about the country whose language is being taught, and embraces elements of communicative intercultural competence, including knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Baker, 2011; Byram, 1997; Scarino, 2010). Therefore, opportunities for intercultural learning, which helps students acquire greater

cultural awareness and sensitivity, are crucial for effective intercultural communication (Bennett, 2009), and thus need to be created through a variety of in- and out-of-class tasks. Cross-cultural online collaboration appears to be a promising solution for promoting such learning.

The incorporation of intercultural learning into syllabi has created new challenges for foreign language teachers, who now need to be able to act as intercultural mediators for their learners (Atay, Kurt, Camlibel, Ersin, & Kaslioglu, 2009; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002); however, as studies have indicated, they do not always feel adequately prepared for this role (Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Olaya & Rodríguez, 2013; Young & Sachdev, 2011). It is, therefore, pertinent that teacher training courses include an intercultural component, through which trainees will preferably have a chance to get hands-on experience concerning what cross-cultural communication is, what benefits it offers to its participants, and what difficulties it entails (Sercu, 2005b; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, Mercer, Hepple, & Carrington, 2013). Incorporating this kind of intercultural learning into teacher education can be accomplished in many ways, including stays abroad and participation in online collaboration projects (Keranen & Bayyurt, 2006; Levy, 2007; Lord & Lomicka, 2004).

In this article, the findings of an action-research study in which teacher-trainees from Poland and Romania exchanged emails in an intercultural project will be presented and discussed. First, however, the literature on the topic of intercultural learning in contemporary EFL didactics and in teacher training programs will be discussed.

Literature review

Technology in promoting the intercultural component in foreign language education

In the era of globalization, being able to communicate effectively with people from other cultures has become a vital prerequisite for maintaining good interpersonal contacts in professional and leisure settings. As a result, the position and aims of the intercultural component in foreign language learning have been redefined and have acquired new significance (Castro & Sercu, 2005; Garrido and Álvarez, 2006; Baker, 2012; Byrnes, 2010; Scarino, 2010; Sercu, 2010; Spooner-Lane et al., 2013). While intercultural education once focused mainly on gaining knowledge about the L2 culture, today it embraces a much wider array of skills and abilities aimed at preparing a learner to participate in multicultural settings; thus, a change has taken place in the scope of intercultural education, which can be summed up in L2 education as a shift from a cultural to an intercultural orientation (Scarino, 2010). This change has reflected a shift in the understanding of the main aim of foreign language learning, which has moved from acquiring communicative competence to acquiring intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; O'Dowd, 2011).

Defining the areas of an intercultural speaker's competence, Byram (1997) lists an individual's attitudes, knowledge, skills, and values as its crucial components. In terms of attitude, an intercultural mediator displays curiosity and openness toward others, and a readiness to consider and respect the point of view of a person with a different set of beliefs and opinions. This means a willingness to "relativize" one's own beliefs and

convictions. Other scholars (House, 2007; Sercu, 2005a) stress the role of a desire to interact with people from other cultures and positive attitudes toward intercultural engagement as crucial to pursuing the development of intercultural competence. According to Sercu (2005a; 2010), an intercultural competent person is characterized by a willingness to communicate with people from other cultures and to see the world from their perspective, as well as to see oneself through another person's eyes. Moreover, such a person is empathetic, interested in other cultures, tolerant and non-judgmental about cultural differences. The area of knowledge encompasses both culture-specific knowledge, and, more importantly, knowledge about the social and identity-related processes involved in intercultural interactions. As far as skills are concerned, Byram (1997: 52) highlights the skill of interpreting culture-based events and relating them to one's own culture, the skill of acquiring knowledge about a new culture, and the "ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction." As concluded by Corbett (2003: 2), within an intercultural approach to foreign language education, learners develop an ability "to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding." Finally, within the area of values, intercultural speakers are able to critically evaluate beliefs and behavior in their own culture as well as in other cultures (Byram, 1997: 53).

Perry and Southwell (2011) present a similar description of the notion of intercultural understanding; in their definition, it encompasses knowledge about one's own and other cultures, positive attitudes (respect, empathy and curiosity) toward other cultures, and an appreciation of differences among cultures. The conception of intercultural competence thus involves both behavioral aspects and communication skills, and it largely denotes "the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures" (Perry & Southwell 2011: 455).

One significant way of opening L2 learners up to intercultural experience is through computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, which have made communication and mediation among individuals from different cultures considerably easier (Blake, 2008; O'Dowd, 2007a; van Compernelle & Williams, 2009; Youngs, Ducate, & Arnold, 2011). According to Belz (2007), through telecollaboration, participants engage in building interpersonal relationships with peers from other cultures, while at the same time exploring linguistic and cultural issues. The value of such settings is that learners "are engaged in the ethnographic processes of observing, participating, describing, analysing and interpreting the language behaviours of their keypals in relevant and authentic situations" (p. 138). Through cross-cultural email exchange, learners enter direct, personalized interactions with people from other cultures and have a chance to challenge the stereotypes and preconceptions they have about other cultures, as a cross-cultural learning environment allows them to expand their views on multiculturalism, cultivate feelings of empathy for different cultures, and to develop skills needed to operate in multicultural settings in the future. Such projects thus address the need for global citizenship in the contemporary world (Furstenberg, 2010; Hertel, 2003; Jackson, 2011; Wang, 2011).

Studies generally appear to corroborate the positive influences of such collaborations on learners' intercultural awareness and understanding (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; O'Dowd,

2007b; Schuetze, 2008; Zeiss & Isabelli-García, 2005). However, as has been noted by some researchers (Ware & Kramersch, 2005; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Levy, 2007; Blake, 2008; Schenker, 2012), intercultural CMC may also bring about tensions and communicative breakdowns resulting from insufficient cultural understanding. This points to the fact that online participation in a multicultural community might pose a great challenge to L2 learners and their teachers.

The intercultural component in foreign language teacher training

Defining foreign language learners as intercultural speakers has also resulted in a change in expectations toward the roles performed by foreign language teachers (Atay, 2005; Atay et al., 2009), who are now supposed to promote the development of intercultural competence in learners and act as intercultural mediators. Byram et al. (2002, p. 13) aptly state that “[t]he role of the language teacher is therefore to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop a knowledge of a particular culture or country.” This calls for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills by teachers, so that they will be both willing to promote intercultural understanding in learners and be able to do it.

Garrido and Álvarez (2006) make the important point that although teaching for intercultural understanding has been prescribed by most official documents regulating foreign language teaching (such as the Council of Europe’s *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 2001), many teachers find it extremely challenging to fulfill this goal in practice. One of the reasons behind this situation is the difficulty teachers have formulating specific cultural objectives due to the lack of consistent methodology for intercultural teaching. The complexity of the notion of culture in its contemporary understanding is another source of difficulty for implementing intercultural teaching in practice. Finally, the necessity for teachers to assume a multitude of new, often interrelated roles and responsibilities, and to cater to a variety of learners’ individual factors, including cultural ones, has added to the challenges involved in teachers becoming cultural mediators. In view of such problems, Sercu (2005b) calls for more complex, multidimensional teacher education that would encompass experiential learning. She concludes that teachers “need to revisit their common-sense notions of what it means to teach and learn a foreign language in the light of their encounter with a new philosophy, a philosophy that truly recognizes the intercultural nature of all encounters between speakers originating from different cultural backgrounds” (pp. 180-181).

Sercu (2005b) reports the findings of an international study which investigated perceptions and attitudes about intercultural competence teaching and actual teaching practices among a large sample of teachers from seven countries. The results showed that despite differences among the educational contexts, a rather consistent profile of a teacher emerged from the study. One important finding was that the teachers formulated their objectives mainly in linguistic, not cultural, terms, but were at the same time willing to “interculturalize foreign language education” (p. 163). The main obstacles in achieving this aim were a lack of time and resources and insufficient preparation. Most of the teachers conceptualized intercultural education in terms of transmitting cultural knowledge from teacher to learners, which resulted in their choosing teacher-centered activities. Moreover, they felt more competent at evaluating their learners’ linguistic

development than at assessing intercultural learning. As indicated by these findings, there is a clear mismatch between teachers' readiness to foster intercultural learning in their classrooms and their selection of didactic practices. Much in the same vein, in measuring the intercultural sensitivity levels in a group of Turkish pre-service teachers of English, Cubukcu (2013) observed generally high levels of openness and sensitivity toward other cultures and a willingness to promote intercultural learning in their prospective teaching practice; meanwhile, Turkish teachers in Atay et al.'s (2009) study voiced the need to develop intercultural competence in learners. At the same time, however, they admitted to rarely integrating cultural elements into their own lessons.

A similar disparity between teachers' beliefs about the relevance of the intercultural component and reported practices was observed in a more recent study, conducted by Young and Sachdev (2011) on ESL/EFL teachers from the UK, USA and France, with apparent similarities being found across these three countries. Reasons for participants expressing unwillingness to teach about culture included: "lack of learner interest, a lack of curricular support, a lack of suitable textbook material, a lack of ICC testing, and concern about engaging with controversy" (p. 95). Similarly, a study reported by Olaya and Rodríguez (2013) conducted on Colombian EFL pre-service teachers also revealed the participants' largely unsatisfactory preparation to serve as intercultural mediators despite their generally positive attitudes toward culture teaching. The findings revealed that elements of "surface" rather than "deep" culture are more frequently incorporated in teaching, and that trainees often lack knowledge on how to deal with the latter. Moreover, they demonstrated a need to "become more critical about issues of otherness, power relationships, ideologies, and identity," and "to create stronger personal attitudes to become intercultural as regards tolerance, curiosity, readiness, and openness" (pp. 61-62). Walters, Garii, and Walters (2009) discuss the unsatisfactory levels of U.S. teachers' preparation for teaching in the culturally diverse environments of today's schools, strongly arguing for the incorporation of international exchanges and intercultural learning programs into pre-service teacher training.

Therefore, it seems pertinent for teacher education programs "to provide opportunities for domestic and international pre-service teachers to collaborate and engage in meaningful intercultural experiences that will enhance their cultural knowledge and skills, so that they can communicate and teach successfully in a global context" (Spooner-Lane et al., 2013, p. 2), and, what also needs to be stressed, giving pre-service teachers hands-on experience in using pedagogical technologies in didactic practice is another benefit of such projects (Lord & Lomicka, 2004). In order to address this need, CMC-based approaches have been implemented in teacher training courses, bringing generally positive outcomes (Guichon & Hauck, 2011).

In Levy's (2007) report on the Australia-Brazil-Collaboration project, in which teachers of various languages from Australia exchanged emails with teachers of English from Brazil, and in a study by Keranen and Bayyurt (2006) in which Mexican in-service and Turkish pre-service EFL teachers interacted online through a discussion board, participants discussed a variety of cultural topics of their own choosing, which deepened their individual intercultural understanding (although sometimes only superficially, as Keranen and Bayyurt (2006) concluded). Fuchs (2005, 2007) describes online

collaboration between teacher-trainees from Germany and the USA, which, despite reflecting some communication problems, had numerous advantages, the most important being the opportunity to face the challenges of intercultural interaction and to view this learning experience from the perspective of future teachers. Hence, as the author concludes, there is a need “for teacher educators to foster group interdependence and critical self-reflection in relation to (intercultural) learning” (Fuchs, 2007). Lee (2009) described a project based on social networking tools, the aim of which was to enhance intercultural communication and awareness in pre-service and in-service teachers of Spanish (in the USA) and of English (in Spain). The findings revealed the participants’ positive attitudes toward online cultural exchange, enhanced levels of their intercultural understanding, and increased communication skills due to personal engagement. Gaining experience with the use of digital technology for didactic aims was an additional benefit. In a study by Liaw and Johnson (2001), two groups of pre-service teachers in Taiwan exchanged emails with peers from two American universities. As the researchers noted, the strengths of the project included the personal, authentic way in which the participants acquired and shared cultural information; an increase in respect for the other culture, and the challenging of certain stereotypes, allowing the Chinese participants to discover a more realistic image of Americans and their culture.

The present study focused on providing an intercultural learning opportunity to Polish and Romanian pre-service teachers of English through an online collaboration project. Largely following Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural competence, the study focused on knowledge, attitudes, and skills as aspects of intercultural learning. Evidence of these links will be traced in the data obtained in the study.

Research questions

The present study was an action-research investigation, whose primary aim was to enhance the participants’ intercultural learning through an intercultural online exchange. Action research is undertaken by practitioners in order to find solutions to problems encountered within their practice, and it typically includes the following steps: identification of a problem, seeking knowledge, planning an action, implementing and observing the action, reflecting on the observation and, finally, revising the plan (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Burns, 2009; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Wallace, 1998). In this study, the students, prospective teachers of English, had limited opportunities for intercultural contact with other speakers of English, and, as was revealed in class discussions and activities, were largely unaware of the need of foreign language teachers to act as intercultural mediators and of the ways in which a teacher can prepare to fulfill this role. Informal conversations between the Polish and Romanian teacher trainers confirmed that the situation was similar in both groups. Therefore, an intervention in the form of engaging them in an intercultural online collaboration project was implemented as part of their training program. More specifically, within this vein of investigation, the study set out to explore the following research questions:

- What evidence of intercultural learning, in the domain of intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills, will emerge in the exchanges?
- How will participants evaluate the effectiveness of the interactions in terms of their intercultural learning?

Method

Participants

It seems important to highlight that the study was conducted in an EFL setting and none of the participants was a native speaker of English, which is a relatively unusual situation in CMC studies (one exception being Keranen and Bayyurt's (2006) study). The fact that English was a common lingua franca for the participants was an important consideration in selecting the research sample. Moreover, it was assumed that there would be no major differences in the "prestige values" of the participants' cultures and languages, which could be, according to O'Dowd and Ritter (2006, p. 634), a potential source of problems in intercultural exchanges.

In total, 40 teacher-trainees participated, 20 from a Polish university and 20 from a Romanian university. There were 35 females and 5 males among the participants. Thirty-eight of them were in the 21-22 age range, and two Romanian students, who at the time of the study were also in-service teachers of Romanian, were 25 years of age. All of the participants were training to become teachers of English and were in the final, third year of their BA-programs; however, while all of the Polish students were majoring in English, in the Romanian group, some of the students were majoring in English, and others were minoring in the language. Those who were minoring in English were majoring in Romanian or in another foreign language. Consequently, those in the Polish group were more homogeneous in terms of their level of proficiency in English (they were approximately at the C1 level, denoting a "proficient user" according to the Common Reference Levels (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24), while among the Romanian students, the level was lower, ranging between B1 ("independent user") and C1 ("proficient user") within the group, according to the same scale.

Procedure

Preparations for the online collaboration project began at the beginning of the 2012/2013 academic year. First, a detailed schedule with topics for interactions and time frames was drawn up by the trainers (EFL didactics teachers at the universities). The topics were related to material discussed in didactics classes, but due to syllabus differences between the Polish and Romanian groups, the topics had to be rather general, given that their aim was to stimulate interaction between the participants and encourage them to reflect on their own practice rather than merely enriching their knowledge base. The aims of the project along with tasks and schedule were then presented and explained to the students during didactics classes. The students were randomly divided into cross-cultural pairs, and given the task of exchanging emails on the assigned topics, followed by a collaborative preparation by each pair of a presentation summing up what they had learned from these interactions. The tools and format to be used in the presentation were not specified and were left up to the students' preferences. Moreover, a conversation on Skype during the project was a recommended option, though not an obligatory element. The email correspondence lasted for 11 weeks, from the beginning of November 2012 to mid-January 2013. The emails and presentations were forwarded to the trainers.

Data collection and analysis

The data collected for investigation included a total of 292 email entries and the results of a final questionnaire, which was filled in by 35 participants, including 20 Polish and 15 Romanian students. The questionnaire yielded both quantitative and qualitative data, as it included both closed-ended Likert-type questions, for which responses were marked on a 5-point scale, and open-ended prompts for comments and opinions. The questionnaire is enclosed in the Appendix. Means and standard deviation values were calculated for the Likert-type questions, and email entries and open-ended comments from the post-project questionnaires were analyzed according to recurrent themes in order to yield insights into the intercultural value of the project. The analysis of the qualitative data involved detecting the most recurring themes within the three broad domains of intercultural learning according to Byram's (1997) model: the domain of intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The findings of the study will be presented under such headings in the following section. The names of the participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Results

The knowledge dimension of online exchanges

According to Byram et al. (2002, p. 12), the "knowledge" component of intercultural competence involves knowledge "of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction." Although the knowledge of cultural facts, phenomena or artifacts is not necessarily at the core of intercultural learning (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), it seems to be an important element of the present study, as exchanging cultural information appeared to be a way of establishing rapport between the keypals, serving as a bridge between discussion of the obligatory teaching-related issues imposed by the project design, and freer, more personal exchanges.

In email exchanges, the following cultural topics emerged: geographical information, language, system of education, the position of English teachers, holidays, and popular culture. These topics created multiple opportunities for the participants to exchange information about their countries, thanks to which they broadened their cultural knowledge, but were also able to conduct cross-cultural comparisons and relate to the cultural and social aspects of living in the other country. This can be seen in the following excerpts from the students' emails:

It's really surprising to me that you have to teach in the countryside first. It's definitely something that I didn't know about. Why is it so? (Ewa 2012/11/25)

Sometimes, in order to earn more, teachers work in public schools and in afternoons they give private lessons or (...) work in language schools. So the situation seems to be more or less similar in our countries. (Aldona 2012/11/23)

The cultural knowledge dimension appeared to be valued by the participants, which was reflected in their evaluation of the project in the final questionnaire. Increased interest in the other culture as well as gaining cultural knowledge were frequently highlighted as positive outcomes of the project:

It was a great opportunity to get to know Romanian culture from a first-hand perspective;

I found out some things about Polish cuisine (...) and about Cracow, one of the most visited places in Poland. In return, I provided some information about Romania's famous monasteries, about the vampire Count Dracula, and about the little things we offer in the beginning of spring, which are here called "Mărțișoare."

In some emails, sharing information about one's own culture was at the same time an occasion to reflect on it, and to add comments revealing a distanced approach to the described situation. For example, when explaining Polish Christmas traditions, a student commented on the religious dimension of these celebrations:

After Christmas Eve supper, Polish people go to church for a midnight mass. Not everybody of course, because for many people now Christmas is more connected with ornaments, gifts and so on. Polish people are not so religious now, the situation is changing. Poland is still considered a Catholic country, but I have doubts if it is still true. (Iza 2012/12/17)

In a similar way, another student reflected on the current trend of young Poles leaving for the UK and other countries in Western Europe:

When I graduate (after the M.A.) I would like to go to Great Britain and work there. Many Polish people nowadays go to other countries, because earnings are much higher. I'm not sure if it's very good for Poland if so many young and educated people leave, but it's their choice. (Magda 2012/11/21)

Such comments show that sharing information about their own cultural and social settings stimulated a reflective, distanced attitude toward it. This is an indication of a willingness to understand one's own culture, often emerging in intercultural communication, and a sign of a developing intercultural sensitivity.

The emails were also a good source of knowledge about the nature of intercultural interactions in an English as a lingua franca (ELF) online setting. The way the students expressed meanings and organized their emails seemed to reveal certain differences. For example, the emails written by the Romanian students tended to be shorter, but more emotional, as they contained exclamation marks, ellipses, and emotive salutations and ways of finishing the messages. These are examples of emails illustrating these points:

As for my personality... I can say that... I love people, life... I enjoy learning new things!!! I cannot wait to hear other things about you... I'll let you decide what you want to share with me ©ENJOY LIFE!!! (Cristina 2012/11/15)

Besides that, I work part-time in a kindergarten teaching English and German... it is so much fun to hear them screaming and laughing and sneaking all the time... :) See you next time! Good Night! XOXO :)) (Ana 2012/11/15)

While the Polish students' style of writing was rather "neutral," most Romanian students' style was emotionally laden, as illustrated in this example:

I was really frightened, all my blood was trying to come out from my skin – that much I blushed- and I started to tremble really hard. After a few moments she said "Go back

to your place you got a 10!" I can't forget this it was way awesome. Ah, I was about to forget she came to school on a motorcycle – EVEN MORE AWESOME! (Diana 2012/12/06)

Thank you for letting me know about the deadline... I don't really know what we're going to do with that Power Point presentation... :(Aaaaaaand I hope I wasn't that terrible as co-worker :D (Alexandra 2012/12/21)

Although the style of writing emails can be linked with an individual's personal characteristics, the Polish students perceived it as a cross-cultural difference and commented upon it in the final questionnaires. In this way, the experience resulted in developing knowledge about differences in the processes of interaction in a context in which the common language was English, a foreign language for all participants.

The intercultural "attitudes" dimension of the online exchanges

Most of the students stuck to the assigned topics and concentrated on completing the required tasks; however, some kind of bonding was visible in some exchanges, and many comments revealed both a general willingness to participate in such an intercultural experience and a positive attitude toward the other person and the other culture involved in the exchange. "Curiosity and openness" are crucial elements of intercultural attitudes (Byram et al., 2002, p. 12), and some of these can be traced in the email entries.

Very often, positive feelings between the keypals seemed to stimulate greater interest in the other culture and a willingness to open up. Several quotations from the emails show such positive attitudes, as evident in the following examples:

Before the project started, I knew almost nothing about Romania. Now I am becoming more and more interested in the history and culture of your country. I think I'll have to read more about it. (Joanna 2012/12/01)

On the basis of what you have told me about yourself and your culture, it seems to me that Romanian people are open and friendly. I'd like to meet more of them. (Ewa 2012/12/22)

Exchanging emails with you made me willing to visit Romania one day! (Karolina 2013/1/15)

The following examples also point to an emerging openness and curiosity about the other culture as a result of the personal experience of engaging in the intercultural interaction:

Last night I took part in an advertisement marathon at a cinema, where I saw ads from different parts of the world. There were some Romanian ones, too! Each time I saw a Romanian one, I thought about you :) (Anna 2012/12/15)

Previously, the words 'Poland,' 'Polish' meant nothing to me, but now, when I hear them, I think of you, and I have positive associations. (Maria 2012/12/3)

The positive and friendly attitudes toward the partners were confirmed by the fact that some of the students invited their keypals to their Facebook profiles and interacted through this medium apart from exchanging emails, even during the project, and promised to keep in touch on Facebook afterwards.

On the other hand, it needs to be noted that some students were inclined to formulate generalized negative opinions about the whole population on the basis of their experience:

Romanian students don't treat their studies very seriously – like they didn't consider this project as important as we did.

This example shows that perpetuating judgmental or stereotypical attitudes can take place as a result of frustration or negative experiences in the course of intercultural interaction. Similar cases have been reported in other studies as well (Chun, 2015; O'Dowd, 2003). In Belz's (2001) study, a lower L2 proficiency in one group resulted in a perception of a lack of engagement and friendliness and led to negative attitudes. A similar situation probably occurred here.

The intercultural skills dimension of the exchange

Byram et al. (2002, p. 13) list the “skills of interpreting and relating” and “skills of discovery and interaction” within the “skills” dimension of intercultural competence. Some students expressed a willingness to interpret the other person's point of view and relate it to their own situation. This indicates their developing skills of interpretation and comparison, also listed as important elements of intercultural learning in Byram's (1997) model. For example, one Polish student responded to her Romanian partner's explanation of the standards of living in her country in the following way:

You wrote that the financial situation of teachers is sometimes very hard. I understand what you mean, because it's similar in Poland. I think in most post-communist countries a lot of people have to have two jobs to live on a good level. (Sylwia 2012/11/29)

In this email, the student skillfully expressed empathy to her partners' comment and related to the socio-economic situation in a personal way. In another example, a Romanian student made a remark on Polish history when responding to her keypal's enumeration of the subject she studies at University:

It's very nice and interesting that you study Polish history. I think especially the 20th century has been a difficult century for everybody. Poland has been a troubled country, having many enemies. What other subjects related to Poland do you study in the other years? (Gina 2012/11/22)

In this way, she displayed well-developed interactive skills, displaying some knowledge of the topic, as well as empathy and interest in what the other person has written about.

On the other hand, it also needs to be noted that some of the problems that emerged in the course of the project led the students to find solutions to them, which in turn stimulated the use of skills necessary in conducting intercultural online interactions. For example, as has been mentioned, there were cross-cultural differences in the conventions of writing the emails. The emotional character of the emails written by the Romanian students was often interpreted by the Polish students as a sign of enthusiasm and deep engagement in the interactions. However, as the project continued, problems with the flow of the interaction started to occur due to frequent delays in responding to emails and sticking to the project's time frame. This caused a clash with previous perceptions and led

to disappointment. Some students tried to prompt their delayed partners diplomatically in their emails, urging them, often jokingly, to write back; more direct expressions of dissatisfaction with a lack of response also took place, as seen in this example:

I thought the exchange of our mails was fun for you and for me and now I see that you don't really care (Agata 2012/12/20).

Comments about insufficient engagement were also often made in the final questionnaire:

She wasn't genuinely interested in getting to know me. When I shared my opinions about something and asked how she felt about it, she wouldn't reply.

I was so excited at the beginning, but my enthusiasm waned as the project continued. My Romanian partner's attitude was so discouraging.

These comments show that the interactions were a hard lesson for some students about the challenges involved in online intercultural interactions. On the other hand, they had a chance to build their knowledge about interaction processes and reflect upon what is needed in order to maintain successful intercultural communication; in this way, their initial knowledge about what to expect from intercultural online interactions was challenged and restructured. Some reflections about the challenges involved in intercultural communication and the need to assume the right attitude toward it were expressed by the Polish students in the final questionnaire:

I learned that one needs to be very flexible, patient and open-minded in such projects because we didn't know each other and didn't know what to expect.

I've realized that sometimes my partner struggled to express herself in English, and maybe that is why she didn't always reply on time, I don't know. It was sometimes hard for me as well. But I'm glad that we were both tolerant and we managed to do everything on time.

In the latter quotation, the Polish student tries to explain the reasons for her keypal's problems, instead of just judging her behavior. The willingness to understand the other person seems to be an important step in developing intercultural awareness, and often a key to success. According to Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 11), the ability to notice misunderstandings, but also readiness to resolve them, is an important part of intercultural learning.

Students' evaluation of the project

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the students' answers to the Likert-type questions in the final questionnaire. The students marked their answers on a 5-point scale, where 1 meant "not at all," 2 – "no," 3 – "hard to say," 4 – "yes," and 5 – "very much indeed."

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the participants' responses to questions evaluating the cultural value of the project

Question	Polish group (N=20)		Romanian group (N=15)		Total (N=35)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Before the project started, did you have positive feelings about it?	3.60	.883	3.07	1.335	3.37	1.114
Did you find interacting with your project partner interesting?	3.5	.688	4.27	.458	3.83	.707
Did you notice or have a chance to investigate any cultural differences on the basis of your interactions?	3.0	.649	3.13	1.060	3.06	.838
Did the project develop your intercultural awareness?	3.65	.933	4.13	.640	3.86	.845
Generally, are you glad that you took part in this project?	3.75	.550	4.67	.488	4.14	.692
If you had a chance, would you like to take part in a similar cross-cultural project again?	3.65	.745	4.40	.507	3.97	.707

As can be seen from Table 2, the students were not very eager to participate in the project before it started, as the mean total value for this question oscillates around the “hard to say” answer. The mean for the Romanian group is slightly lower, and the most frequent descriptive comment for this question concerned doubts about their level of English being sufficient for cross-cultural communication. However, the students generally found interacting with their partners interesting (with the Romanian group’s mean value and homogeneity of answers considerably higher than the Polish group’s). The respondents were not sure whether the project helped them notice any cultural differences, and the descriptive comments point to a wide range of understandings of the term “cultural differences” in this context. For most students, the term was associated with comparing facts about their countries, though, in fact, there was little interaction of this kind. On the other hand, they evaluated more positively the role of the project in developing their cultural awareness, and expressed their satisfaction with having taken part in the project. Moreover, they declared a willingness to participate in a similar cross-cultural project in the future if given a chance. It is worth highlighting that the Romanian group provided consistently higher mean values for the answers, which indicates a more positive evaluation of the value of the project.

The open-ended comments also shed a light on the students’ evaluation of the cultural value of participating in the project. Writing about the strengths of the project, almost all of the students mentioned having an opportunity to make contact with a peer from another country as the main reason they found it attractive. They stressed the fact that

their keypals were in a similar academic situation (training to be EFL teachers), and that they were foreigners, which gave the interactions a new dimension. One student wrote:

The project provided us with an opportunity to broaden our horizons and gain knowledge about the reality of life of English philology students in another country.

Moreover, they stressed that intercultural interactions broadened their minds and provided a stimulus for reflective thinking. A Polish student noted:

It helped me look at many things from a different perspective.

Some students valued the novelty of an intercultural activity in the didactics course, and said they would definitely try to use such procedures in their own teaching. For others, the unique chance to broaden their intercultural knowledge and practice intercultural communication skills was the main benefit of the project. This is seen in the following quotation:

I have a feeling that I learned much more than in a normal course on teaching. Even though it was a bit time-consuming, it stimulated my thinking about new things and I had a chance to "speak" to my Polish colleague in English. It was a very special experience which I will never forget.

Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that the intercultural online collaboration project constituted a valuable intercultural experience for the participants. As prospective teachers, they had an opportunity to take part in an intercultural online exchange, thanks to which they developed their intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills. This seems to be important in foreign language teacher education because, as stated by Byram et al. (2002, p. 10), "the 'best' teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness,' and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives." Having first-hand experience with intercultural interaction is a step which prepares future teachers to perform this role.

One of the benefits of this experience was, as indicated by the email entries, that the students broadened their intercultural knowledge by exchanging cultural information, and, at the same time, developing a certain distance toward their own culture. This also created an opportunity for them to reflect upon certain cultural phenomena, which was evident in numerous email entries. When responding to what their interlocutors wrote, they often interpreted some information as well as made connections with the cultural and social issues mentioned in the interactions. These are crucial elements of intercultural learning, closely connected with reflection; as suggested by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), reflective communication and action, both at the affective and cognitive levels, are at the core of developing intercultural competence.

Intercultural knowledge involves not only knowledge about customs and artifacts, but also awareness of communicative conventions within a given setting (Meierkord 2007). Therefore, another important benefit of the study was that the participants, who were speakers of different L1s using a common L2, had a chance to function in an English as a

lingua franca (ELF) communicative setting, and discover some conventions within it. Pragmatic conventions in ELF interactions are currently a vital area of study. It appears, as noted by Kecskes (2007), that ELF speakers transfer their pragmatic competence (their preferred ways of expressing meanings and organizing thoughts) from the L1 to the L2, which makes ELF a “specific language mode,” with its specific pragmatic conventions. This phenomenon was observed and experienced by the participants in the email exchanges. Raising awareness of the linguistic and pragmatic nature of ELF communication and collaboration seems to be relevant for prospective language teachers, who will prepare their learners to participate in intercultural communications using ELF as a means of conveying meanings. Within the dimension of intercultural language instruction, “there is a need for language teaching to take into account norms related to bilinguality and interculturality rather than focusing exclusively on the native speaker as the target language norm” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 30).

Apart from broadening their knowledge, the participants developed positive attitudes toward the experience and demonstrated them throughout the study. The interpersonal, social dimension of participating in collaborative tasks contributed to shaping their attitudes and thus needs to be highlighted as an important benefit of participating in the project. Many of the students managed to develop a bond with their keypals, evident, for example, in exchanging photographs and communicating through Facebook and other social media, even beyond the required design of the project. This interaction led to the creation of interpersonal relationships, although to varying extents. This seems important, as a personal cross-cultural experience may serve as a stimulus to open up to the culture of the new acquaintance (as was implied in some of the email entries and comments in the final questionnaire), as well as to be more open to intercultural contact in a more general sense. It has been stressed by researchers (e.g., Byram, 1997) that attitudes based on openness and curiosity are a vital precondition for developing intercultural skills.

Within the domain of intercultural skills, another important benefit of the project for the participants was that its interactive, collaborative character led them to broaden their intercultural sensitivity in relating to others, and they learned how to communicate with strangers from another culture effectively enough to be able to complete the assigned tasks. In order to do this, the participants had to recognize the demands of an online intercultural exchange in a foreign language and conduct the interactions with efficiency and at the same time observe the required conventions. This was a demanding task, through which prospective teachers gained some of the skills necessary to become good teachers, capable of maintaining social interactions across cultures. Social interaction lies at the core of intercultural learning and teaching; as stated by Byram et al. (2002, p. 15), in learning for intercultural competence, “the focus is on how learners respond to others and others’ views of themselves, and how they interact with people from other cultures.”

The difficulties that the students encountered in the course of the project can be seen as a good lesson and an eye-opening experience; they made the students realize that it is not always easy to collaborate online with strangers, especially ones from a different culture. As some of the students concluded, a positive attitude and good will are generally needed to make effective collaboration possible. The difficulties also highlight the important role

for the trainer of talking to the students about the sources and possible ways of overcoming the problems which inevitably occur in cross-cultural communication. In this way, intercultural experience can stimulate further critical reflections and lead to deeper, more elaborate learning.

Previous research (Olaya & Rodríguez, 2013; Young & Sachdev, 2011) has indicated that teachers often do not feel prepared to embrace the intercultural component in their teaching. The findings of the present action research indicate that engaging teacher trainees in intercultural online interactions, and thus giving them an opportunity for intercultural learning, is an adequate option in preparing them for this challenging task.

Limitations and final conclusions

It needs to be clearly stated that the study had several limitations. Its short duration and number of participants is a limitation which does not allow for a formulation of more general conclusions on the basis of its findings. Another limitation was the rather rigid organization of the study, which perhaps constrained, as was suggested by some of the participants, the spontaneity of the exchanges. Moreover, if the participants had not been obliged to forward the emails to the tutors, they might have been more open in touching upon a greater number of intercultural issues.

However, apart from the limitations, this small-scale action-research project showed the potential of online collaboration for stimulating intercultural learning. Its generally positive evaluation by the participants showed that it was definitely worth the effort. The teacher trainees had a unique chance to experience a novel educational situation, based on acquiring first-hand cultural knowledge and practicing intercultural communication skills, which can help them approach intercultural situations from a deeper and more critical perspective. Despite the difficulties encountered in the interactions, or maybe thanks to them, the teacher trainees will be better prepared and more open to introducing didactic innovations and embracing intercultural collaboration in their own teaching.

About the Author

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Appendix

The final questionnaire

1. Before the project started, did you have positive feelings about it?

not at all no hard to say yes very much indeed

2. Did you find interacting with your project partner interesting?

not at all no hard to say yes very much indeed

3. Did you notice or have a chance to investigate any cultural differences on the basis of your interaction?

not at all no hard to say yes very much indeed

4. Did the project develop your intercultural awareness?

not at all no hard to say yes very much indeed

5. Generally, are you glad that you took part in the project?

not at all no hard to say yes very much indeed

6. If you had a chance, would you like to take part in a similar online collaboration project again?

not at all no hard to say yes very much indeed

7. Generally, what did you like about this project?

8. What did you learn from the experience of taking part in the project?

9. Generally, what didn't you like about the project?

10. In what ways, in your opinion, could this project be improved?

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