10 Intergenerational telecollaboration: what risks for what rewards?

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Abstract

Foreign language telecollaboration pairs learners so that they may improve their language and intercultural skills. A lesser known model, intergenerational telecollaboration, uses senior citizens as native language partners instead of peers. This paper presents the results of an intergenerational videoconferencing project between learners in second-year non-specialist English classes at a French university and senior citizens in Massachusetts. Between September 2014 and June 2016, seven learners were partnered with seniors in order to practice their speaking skills. Based on the data collected over two years, this paper analyses the risks and rewards of intergenerational telecollaboration.

Keywords: intergenerational, seniors, videoconferencing, language learning.

1. Introduction

Telecollaboration links students who are either learning a common foreign language or who are learning the other's language in order to develop linguistic and intercultural competences (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). While most telecollaboration has focused on this peer model (Develotte, Guichon, & Vincent, 2010; Helm,

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2015; O'Dowd, 2015), a lesser-known model, intergenerational telecollaboration, uses seniors as language partners for learners (FCB Brasil, 2014).

Seniors are ideal partners because they have more time to devote to their communities (Holtgrave, Norrick, Teufel, & Gilbert, 2014). Intergenerational projects also allow students to work through any pre-existing attitudes about seniors (Jones, 2011) while providing seniors the opportunity to develop a better understanding of young people and to participate in more meaningful social interactions (Roodin, Brown, & Shedlock, 2013). Cordella et al. (2012) also found that in intergenerational language partnerships, seniors corrected learners and provided feedback.

This paper examines the risks and rewards of an intergenerational videoconferencing project between learners in non-specialist English classes at a French university and seniors in Massachusetts.

2. Methodology

Project *Dynamic Interactions between Senior Citizens and University Students through Skype* (DISCUSS), started in the fall of 2014, pairs second-year non-specialist English learners at a French university with seniors in Massachusetts for one-on-one videoconferencing exchanges via Skype (Skype, n.d.).

Data for this paper was collected between September 2014 and June 2016. During the 2014-2015 academic year, learners from one advanced (C1) English class volunteered to participate, and a total of five students over two semesters worked with a senior. Data from that year consisted of recorded video of the exchanges between learners and seniors, students' end-of-semester reflective essays, and individual end-of-project interviews with all participants.

For the 2015-2016 academic year, learners from two English classes – one upper-intermediate (B2) and one advanced (C1) – were selected based on their answers to two questionnaires: the first focused on their personal background,

their computer skills and their foreign language experience, whereas the second covered learners' opinions about videoconferencing with peers and seniors. Data from that year consisted of learner responses to the two questionnaires, recorded video of the sessions between learners and seniors, and end-of-semester reflective essays written by students.

3. L2 learner attitudes and motivation

Intergenerational telecollaboration involves many risks. One central risk is motivation: do learners even want to work with seniors? To elicit their pre-project opinions, learners were asked about speaking with peers and with seniors. The results presented in Figure 1 show that almost all students agreed that speaking with either a student or a senior would be a positive experience. However, more learners strongly agreed that it would be a positive experience to speak with a student rather than with a senior, indicating a preference of working with peers. Only one learner responded that speaking with a senior would be a negative experience, explaining that he "would be disappointed" and might find it "boring".

Figure 1. Learner pre-project opinions about speaking with American peers and American seniors

It would be a positive experience to speak with …

	B2 (23 students)		C1 level (21 students)	
	American students	American seniors	American students	American seniors
Strongly agree	12	4	14	2
Agree	10	17	7	18
Disagree	0	0	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	1	0	0
No answer	1	1	0	1

Another question related to motivation asked learners to choose between a student and a senior and to justify their choice. The responses appear in Figure 2. Most students would prefer to work with a student, reinforcing the previous conclusion that learners would prefer to work with a peer. The main

justifications provided by students involved being the same age and having things in common.

Figure 2. Learner pre-project preference regarding their choice of videoconferencing partner

If you had the choice between an American student and an American senior citizen, what would you choose?

	B2 (23 students)	*C1 (21 students)*
Student	*13*	*17*
Senior citizen	*3*	*3*
Doesn't matter	*7*	*1*

However, a few students expressed a preference to be partnered with a senior: three B2 students and three C1 students would actually prefer to work with a senior instead of a student, and for seven B2 students and one C1 student, either possibility was acceptable. Some reasons included learning more with a senior than with a peer, the unexpected experience of working with a senior, and being able to ask seniors for life advice. The objective of this questionnaire was merely to determine learners' pre-project attitudes about videoconferencing with peers and with seniors, as the two learners in the 2015-2016 project had already been selected based on their answers to the first questionnaire.

4. Logistical issues in intergenerational videoconferencing

Having addressed the risks pertaining to learner attitudes and motivation, the remaining difficulties that emerged from this project were logistical. One such challenge is not finding seniors to participate. Partnering with a senior center to help recruit seniors has not been as successful as anticipated. The objective during the fall 2015 semester was to have six students working with seniors, but no seniors signed up. The same objective was maintained the following spring, but only two seniors registered, so the project was downsized. One B2 student

who finally exchanged with a senior at the end of the spring semester lamented in his end-of-semester reflective essay that it is “too bad that the exchanges with seniors seem so complicated to set up”.

Understanding language learners can be problematic, and this is an issue in intergenerational videoconferencing, especially if seniors are hard of hearing or are not accustomed to speaking with foreigners. Higher-level students were selected to mitigate this risk, but one senior citizen chose to abandon the project because she found it too challenging to understand her learner. To minimize this risk, participants should be given information sheets which provide suggestions for overcoming language difficulties.

Seniors sometimes encounter technological difficulties, which can be very discouraging. Some seniors had expressed interest but eventually gave up when they encountered technical problems. Hopefully, as videoconferencing becomes more widely used, more seniors will be familiar with the technological tools necessary to participate.

Since exchanges take place outside of class, learners must be able to record their exchanges for research, which is sometimes difficult or even impossible. For example, one student was unable to record her exchanges because her laptop had broken and she could only use her tablet. She still managed to talk with her senior, but no data from her exchanges was collected.

Seniors may also have health issues. One 92-year-old senior was not replying to her learner, and it turned out that she had been in the hospital. Her health improved, but due to the university calendar, her learner was partnered with a different senior.

5. Rewards of intergenerationalvideoconferencing

Despite these risks, intergenerational videoconferencing is very rewarding for both learners and seniors. In end-of-project interviews, all participants

expressed satisfaction with their exchanges. One learner expressed how happy she was to work with a senior because it allowed her to work on "one of the skills [she lacked] the most" with a native speaker. Another learner talked about providing companionship – albeit virtual – to her senior. She also stressed that they always found topics to discuss despite their age difference. Interestingly, the fear of not having anything in common was one of the potential negative aspects expressed by learners in the questionnaire.

One senior taught two learners how to make origami peace cranes by giving them verbal instructions and using the webcam to show them how to fold the paper. The learners helped and corrected each other to accomplish the task. When the learners successfully finished their peace cranes, it was rewarding to see their expressions of joy. The senior was thrilled as well, calling it "a miracle of modern science".

After the end of the data collection for the 2014-2015 project, one learner started videoconferencing with her senior on Sundays in order to complete the *New York Times* crossword puzzle together. The learner explained that her senior would explain vocabulary that she did not understand, and when they were unable to figure out the answer together, the learner used her technology skills to search for the answer on the Internet. The learner added that she was happy to be able to teach her senior slang terms that younger people use. This interaction is specific to an intergenerational exchange, as it seems highly unlikely that an L2 learner would be able to teach slang terms to a native speaker of the same age.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of project DISCUSS has shown that while not all language learners are interested in videoconferencing with seniors, a certain number are curious and see the potential of such a project; some would even prefer to work with a senior. Intergenerational videoconference is inherently risky though, with difficulties ranging from finding willing seniors with the necessary technology skills to language-related issues. Despite encountering difficulties, seniors

and learners alike were delighted with their exchanges and found them to be beneficial, which indicates that the rewards outweigh the risks in intergenerational telecollaboration.

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New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education
Edited by Sake Jager, Malgorzata Kurek, and Breffni O'Rourke

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