

# 4 A reflective e-learning journey from the dawn of CALL to web 2.0 intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Marina Orsini-Jones<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. How did you become interested in using technology in your professional life?

I graduated from the University of Bologna in Modern Foreign Languages and Literature in 1984 and I remember the painstaking job of typing my 40,000 word dissertation on American literature on an old Olivetti type-writer. Umberto Eco had just started publicising an innovation called the ‘Word-processor’, but unfortunately I did not know anything about it and the quality of the final version of my first dissertation (with visible Tippex marks) provides embarrassing evidence of this.

I obtained my first graduate job as Italian language assistant with the British Council and was ‘sent to Coventry’, to the then *Lanchester Polytechnic*, currently *Coventry University*, where the German and Russian teams were experimenting with what would probably be called ‘blended learning’ these days, with little BBC micros –black screen, white letters, state-of-the-art Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) back then– and there was evidence that their experiments were being well received by students. I found this encounter with CALL and the way technology could support both professional development and the learning journey of students very inspiring. It was thus that my interest in technology in education started.

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1. Coventry University, United Kingdom. [m.orsini@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:m.orsini@coventry.ac.uk).

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## **2. How has your use and knowledge of technology in language learning and teaching developed over time?**

The new generation of computers and software packages that became available in the early 1990s enabled me to better incorporate socio-cultural themes into language learning. For example, I co-created with my students *La neve nel bicchiere: a multimedia CD-ROM for students of Italian* to teach Italian language, history and society (Orsini-Jones, Tandy, & Rossi, 1998) which was the first example of student-informed integrated language/content hypermedia for the higher education sector in the UK.

The arrival of the World Wide Web in the late 1990s and the invention of campus-wide virtual learning environments management systems enabled me to better develop my ‘vision’ of student-centred CALL, trialling new approaches to teaching translation (Orsini-Jones, 2002) and language awareness (Orsini-Jones, 2004). It was thanks to these new technologies that I could co-create, in collaboration with a colleague in Health and Social Sciences, a constructivist e-learning model, the *FREE* (Fluid-Role Evolving Environment<sup>1</sup>). The birth of e-portfolios in the 00s enabled me to further explore how to develop language-specific study skills and critical meta-reflective competencies.

## **3. How has contact with colleagues impacted on the way you use technology in language learning and teaching?**

The annual e-learning symposia at Southampton were fundamental for my professional development. These gatherings offered opportunities to reflect on the added value of integrating technology in language learning and teaching, to disseminate my work and to obtain valuable feedback on it from an ‘expert’ community of practice.

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1. <https://books.google.co.uk/books?isbn=1902454138>

#### 4. How do you use technology in your professional practice now?

There are some principles that have always underpinned my position towards technology-enhanced language learning and which have been reinforced by the dialogue had at the e-learning symposia between 2005 and 2015. Firstly, I still use technology to co-construct knowledge with my students and try and choose the best e-learning tools there are for this purpose within the constraints imposed by the ethical requirements of my institution.

Secondly, I believe that there are appropriate technological tools that can be integrated into language learning to enhance multilingual and multimodal critical digital literacies, foster meta-reflection and provide unique opportunities for social-collaboration on tasks. There are also tools that can provide innovative ways of helping students to 'Focus on Form' (e.g. Socrative.com multiple choice exercises on SMART phones).

Thirdly, I currently teach international trainee language teachers and am acutely aware of the fact that no generalisations should be made about levels of digital literacy amongst language tutors and that the e-learning up-skilling of language teachers is uneven and patchy across the globe. This presents me with a dilemma about e-learning in general and the integration/use of technology in particular. I agree with [Kumaravadivelu \(2012\)](#) that each language teacher will need to operate within the parameters of particularity, possibility and practicality linked to their own context (p.12). I have thus become a little reluctant to provide strong recommendations as to the best technological tools to use. While new technologies offer some exciting opportunities, they also present us with new threats, especially in regard to data protection and long-term sustainability.

Finally, both students and staff must learn to manage their social media presence and, in this globalised world, hone their *netiquette* and intercultural skills in each of the languages they communicate with. In my opinion, this is one of the main e-learning challenges for the academic and professional development of the linguists of the future.

## **5. How does your knowledge and experience in social media and web 2.0 technologies impact on your professional and teaching life?**

### **5.1. Current projects in telecollaboration**

I believe that language learning and teaching should reflect current research findings in the field and that both cognitive theories and interactional/sociolinguistic/sociosemantic ones should be taken into account when trying to understand how languages are learnt. Evidence has been emerging that seems to substantiate the claim that linguistic proficiency and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) –pragmatic competence in the target language in particular– can be enhanced by the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), as is well summarised by [O’Dowd \(2013\)](#) reporting on the findings of research on telecollaboration.

I am currently engaging in large-scale action-research-informed telecollaborative projects that are fully integrated into the first year curriculum and form part of the assessment of a ten credit mandatory module at Coventry University. There are many models of telecollaboration (see [O’Dowd, 2013](#)); I have been developing a ‘hybrid’ one, where students have opportunities to be exposed to and to practise interaction both in the target language studied and English used as a lingua franca, while reflecting on tailor-made intercultural tasks. In keeping with my focus on multilingual and multimodal multiliteracies, this model aims to develop cyberpragmatics, defined by [Yus \(2011\)](#) as the skill in understanding others’ intended meanings in computer-mediated communication. Cyberpragmatics includes, for example, gauging the correct level of formality, developing the ability to switch between registers and genres and interpreting intended meanings.

The integration of telecollaboration into the curriculum is also enabling me to address the need to comply with governmental and institutional drives, such as the internationalisation of the curriculum to foster the competence of ‘global graduatedness’ in its neoliberal connotations of ‘global employability’.

At the same time, I am finding that telecollaboration is making it possible to encourage both students and staff to become aware of the social justice connotation of ‘global graduatedness’, as the fostering of the respect for the ‘different other’.

Figure 1. Framework for the goals of telecollaboration 2.0  
(Helm & Guth, 2010<sup>1</sup>, p. 74)

New Online Literacies	ICC	Foreign Language Learning
<b>Operational: The “technical stuff”</b>		
Computer literacy Information literacies New media literacies	<i>Savoir apprendre/faire:</i> Skills of discovery and interaction <i>Savoir comprendre:</i> ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to one’s own	Spoken production Spoken interaction Written production Reading Listening Codeswitching
<b>Operational: Attitude: the “ethos stuff”</b>		
Willingness to explore, learn from, participate in, and collaborate and share in online communities	<i>Savoir-etre:</i> attitude of openness and curiosity	Autonomy Motivation Willingness to communicate
<b>Cultural</b>		
Knowledge of literacy practises and appropriate ways of communicating online Propositional knowledge of topic	<i>Savoirs:</i> knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in own and other cultures; knowledge of the processes of interaction	Linguistic knowledge Sociolinguistic knowledge Pragmatic knowledge
<b>Critical</b>		
Critical Literacy Awareness	Critical Cultural Awareness	Critical Language Awareness

In my experience, telecollaborative projects can be complex, challenging and troublesome (Orsini-Jones et al., in press). But real learning involves being taken out of one’s ‘comfort zone’. Moreover, active and critical participation in telecollaboration facilitated by web 2.0 tools encompasses a variety of competences for a language learner –and a language teacher (see Figure 1 above

1. Reproduced with kind permission from the authors

by Helm & Guth, 2010) that make it worth engaging with. In the keynote presentation I gave at the 2014 LLAS e-learning symposium<sup>1</sup>, I argued that the added value that telecollaboration can bring to the language learning and teaching environment is multifaceted and proposed that online interaction in telecollaboration exchanges in higher education is a digital multimodal genre for specific academic purposes.

### **5.2. The evolution of the ‘Culture Canon’ in language learning**

Engaging with telecollaboration has enabled me to reflect on how the concept of ‘culture’ has evolved from the 80s to date, following the development of the definitions of communicative competence. I will illustrate this with the support of a good summary of the culture research canon provided by Weninger and Kiss (2013) who discuss it through the changed interpretation of the concept of ‘culture’ drawn from textbooks for English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

When I arrived in the UK in 1984, culture was seen “as an object, a set of facts to be learned about the target language culture, which in most cases entailed national culture” (Weninger & Kiss, 2013, p. 697), and mainly referred to Culture with a capital C (e.g. literature, history, art). Language learning tended to adhere to the acculturation model requiring immersion in the foreign culture. In my plenary at the e-learning symposium in January 2014, I jokingly referred to how closely my personal language learning experience reflected this, as I came to live in the UK and married an English man. But it was not just a joke, I had ‘bought’ into the immersion model and even remember ‘forcing’ my students to change their British names to their improbable Italian equivalents (which was not easy with ‘Craig’ and ‘Wayne’, for example).

I then lived through the reconceptualisation that started from the mid-1990s, with communicative language teaching, when the ‘Cultural artefact’ was

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1. See a recording at <https://coursecast.soton.ac.uk/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=96110436-d00d-4d61-9340-9aa3b910b7b>

substituted with “culture with a small c” (Weninger & Kiss, 2013, p. 697), e.g. popular culture. Language and culture were seen as complementary for successful language acquisition and the focus moved to “inter-, cross-, and transcultural issues in language teaching in order to develop intercultural communicative competence” (Weninger & Kiss, 2013, p. 697) (see the ICC section in Helm & Guth, 2010 above).

It can be argued that technological change (the advent of the World Wide Web) drove the major cultural shift (still) occurring from around 2000 to date that has characterised the perception of what ‘intercultural competence’ is nowadays. This new concept of culture in language learning and teaching is associated with postmodern tenets and the development of intercultural critical citizenship on a global scale (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

Although this summary is based on the way the culture canon has influenced the design of EFL textbooks, I am embracing telecollaboration because I agree with Godwin-Jones (2013) that it is rather difficult for language learning textbooks to provide a rich mix of critical intercultural exposure (p. 2). They often propose a vision of culture that is superficial and has a tourist-inspired perspective.

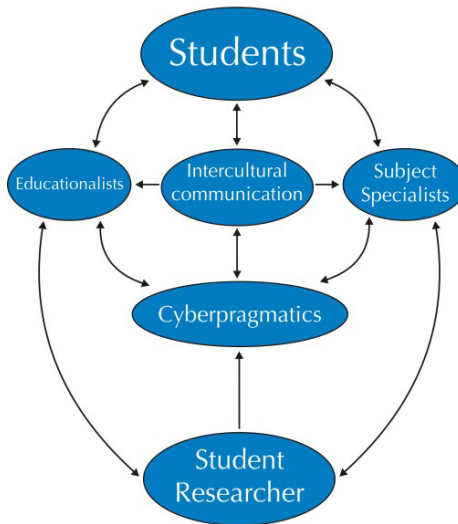
Telecollaboration provides a unique opportunity for contact with other cultures on a global scale. It is telling in a way that telecollaboration is currently being adopted by other subjects and we linguists have led the way in this field of e-learning. Telecollaboration has become OIL (Online Intercultural Learning/ Online International Learning) and gone ‘mainstream’, beyond its initial language-specific theorisation.

However, I have a word of warning that my experience of telecollaboration has taught me. The evolution of the conceptualisation of culture discussed above and the consequent changes to pedagogical tenets adopted (mainly) in the WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant) higher education language learning and teaching world have not necessarily been adopted in the countries we are telecollaborating with. This can lead to pedagogical intercultural critical incidents.

### 5.3. Telecollaboration through the ‘looking glass’ of the expert students’ eyes

In keeping with my previous model of ‘role-reversal’ CALL, a distinctive feature of the telecollaborative projects that we are carrying out at Coventry University consists of the fact that I hire expert undergraduate and postgraduate students as co-researchers. The model (see Figure 2 below) is driven by cycles of action-research and also draws from the transactional educational inquiry theory known as *threshold-concept pedagogy*<sup>1</sup>. The expert students are helping with identifying troublesome telecollaborative concepts and exploring ways to support their peers via the design of *netiquette* activities and digital tasks with staff. It is refreshing for us –staff– to ‘deconstruct’ our pedagogical actions through the expert students’ eyes and feedback.

Figure 2. Role-reversal model of threshold concept pedagogy in languages and linguistics<sup>2</sup>



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1. See definition at <http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>

2. © Orsini-Jones 2011



## 5.4. Telecollaborative tasks

The action-research cycles of the project taught us (the telecollaborative project team) a lesson that forced us into a ‘u-turn’ on task design. In the effort to abandon the role of the ‘sage on stage’ and empower learners, we had embraced a bottom-up approach and left students a considerable amount of choice and freedom in terms of topics to cover and tasks to carry out.




In the rather chaotic pedagogical scenario that ensued, we realised that when the development of multiliteracies at a distance is involved, a very careful scaffolding plan is needed. In the subsequent telecollaboration cycles, we structured both the activities and the online environment with the overseas partners and the expert students and also addressed our partners’ dislike of Moodle’s ‘linearity’ by designing a ‘tiled’ view of the learning environment: compare [Figure 3](#) (MexCo –Mexico/Coventry– initial Moodle interface) with [Figure 4](#) (current Moodle interface –work in progress).

Figure 3. MexCo –Mexico/Coventry– initial Moodle interface


**MexCo Intercultural Exchange**

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**Topic outline**

**Welcome to  
MexCo  
Intercultural  
Exchange**











-  [Notices and information / Avisos e información / Remarques et informations \(Discussion Forum\)](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕
-  [Introduce yourself! / Presentación de ustedes mismos / Présente-toi! \(Discussion Forum\)](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕
-  [Introduce yourself! / Presentación de ustedes mismos / Présente-toi! \(Discussion Forum\)](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕
-  [Example of Task 1: Please view the first Coventry Guide designed by CU students and give them feedback on what you think](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕
-  [Example 2: welcome to Coventry and Coventry University](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕
-  [Example 3: A guide to Coventry and to Britain in three languages](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕
-  [Example 4: Presentation on Stephen King and horror](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕
-  [Share your thoughts on the tasks/Colaborad con vuestras opiniones sobre las tareas/Partage tes idées sur les tâches \(DISCUSSION FORUM\)](#) → ⌂ ✕ ✕ ✕

Figure 4. Current Moodle interface –work in progress



We did, however, always observe intercultural task-design guidelines drawn from relevant literature, such as Liddicoat and Scarino’s (2013, pp. 57-59) who recommend the adoption of an experiential approach that includes the following ‘ingredients’:

- active construction;
- making connections;
- social interaction;
- reflection;
- responsibility.

The tasks we have designed are aimed at helping students to reflect on how all cultures are ‘constructed’ and how we can ‘deconstruct’ multimodal representations of culture to develop critical intercultural awareness. Students carry out the tasks using both web 1.0 (e.g. Moodle and email) and web 2.0 (e.g. Skype, Facebook, Google +, YouTube) platforms. At Coventry University, students must design a collaborative multimedia learning object based on the tasks they have engaged with using the e-portfolio Mahara<sup>1</sup> and present it to their tutors and peers.

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1. <https://mahara.org/>

The e-tasks we designed offered participants the opportunity to develop the following multimodal and multilingual multiliteracies:

- intercultural opportunities: analysis/comparison/debate;
- linguistic opportunities: editing/translating/creating/discussing (both oral and written);
- cyberpragmatic opportunities: intercultural online discourse analysis of the forum exchanges and replies/netiquette exercises;
- multimedia learning object digital design (using the e-portfolio Mahara and YouTube);
- reflective and metareflective individual and group opportunities (commenting on one's experience/minuting progress).

### **5.5. Issues arising in telecollaborative projects**

Between 2011 and 2014, I have been involved in telecollaboration projects with France, Germany, Israel, Mexico, Spain and Turkey. Critical incidents have occurred both amongst students and amongst staff. In my experience, web 2.0 platforms can amplify the resonance of negative critical incidents as they make them more shareable, which can in turn escalate misunderstandings.

With reference to both ourselves and our peers in other countries, what is becoming apparent is that the 'languaging' we are using for the project has different semantic connotations. Even if the words used are the same, we often discover that we do not interpret them with the same meaning, and it is not just a translation issue. The pedagogical interpretation of certain expressions and words, such as 'digital literacies', 'task', 'student-centred' and 'student autonomy' would appear to differ considerably in the UK and in Mexico, for example, at least in our experience.

Another troublesome area is that of the baggage of ‘tacit knowledge’ (Perkins, 2006) that staff and students have. The expectations that some partners have of Britain and British students (and vice-versa) are not normally met in reality for example, and some problematic issues can ensue from this. I feel that we need more research in this sensitive area of ‘pedagogical intercultural issues’ in telecollaboration exchanges to better support tutors in their journey to become global citizens and ‘global pedagogues’.

### 5.6. Summing up

In the light of the findings in the telecollaboration projects I have been involved with, I have learnt, in collaboration with my colleagues and students involved in the MexCo project, to whom I am indebted for many of the reflections reported here, that in telecollaboration it is desirable to:

- carefully scaffold the introduction to online interaction and provide many lines of digital support;
- discuss the multimodal multiliteracy demands of telecollaboration before, during and after the project with all participants involved;
- raise awareness of ‘intercultural cyberpragmatic competence 2.0’ (linking the blocks in Helm and Guth’s (2010) model in Figure 1);
- have a dialogue with expert students to design cyberpragmatic guidelines on ‘rules of telecollaborative discourse engagement’ and tailor-made ‘netiquette’ exercises;
- test the e-learning platforms with partners before the beginning of the project;
- not make any assumptions about the level of digital literacy of the students or staff involved;

- avoid ‘essentialising’ and ‘generalising’, and provide some socio-cultural, geographical and historical information on the partners’ context.

I have finally learnt that intercultural cyberpragmatic competence plays a prominent role in telecollaboration and that it must be taught to students and staff in higher education as it forms an integral part of the multilingual multimodal multiliteracies needed for global citizenship.

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