

# Development of critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness in bilingual telecollaborative projects

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**Abstract.** This reflective practice will examine and report on students' experiences of three different bilingual (English-Spanish) task-based telecollaborative projects. The observations indicate that throughout these different projects the students were able to develop their intercultural awareness and their critical thinking skills via different online tools and learning contexts like a videoconferencing platform and Facebook. This paper employs both a qualitative and quantitative approach and data were collected from various sources, namely, the questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of the projects. As a conclusion, it is argued that the projects helped students to exchange views about cultural aspects and ask and clarify questions that arose during their interactions, which provided them with the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills. Sharing thoughts and views on Facebook and videoconferencing has been a meaningful learning experience and students have been able to discover and reflect on useful information about each other's cultural traits.

**Keywords:** telecollaboration, videoconferencing, intercultural awareness, collaborative learning.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, different technologies for computer-mediated communication and learning offer ever-growing possibilities for language teaching, learning further skills for intercultural awareness, and for developing students' critical thinking

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capacity. New technologies are valuable ways to interact between different cultures and increase cross-cultural understanding among university students, offering new ways for computer-supported collaborative learning. As Halpern (1999) states:

“[t]he changing nature of technology has not only provided us with more and better ways to teach in general but has also increased the need for the skills of critical thinking. The easy availability, with just a few keystrokes, of massive amounts of information has made the ability to evaluate and sort information more important than ever” (p. 72).

Computed-mediated communication tools have been found to have great potential for intercultural learning (Basharina, 2009; Belz, 2007), and traditionally this has been asynchronous. Recently, synchronous communication has also become popular and very motivating for students in intercultural exchanges (Helm, 2015). Videoconferencing is able to provide an authentic out-of-classroom learning experience in collaborative international projects (Eaton, 2010).

Critical thinking processes require active argumentation, initiative, reasoning, envisioning, analysing complex alternatives, and making contingency-related value judgements (Simpson & Courtney, 2002). It was hoped that the students would be able to manage such processes while assessing cultural information, with a view to developing their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, they were expected to enhance their “ability to interact effectively with people with different cultures other than one’s own” (Byram, 2000, p. 297).

In this reflective practice paper, we aim to examine the following questions:

- How were the students able to develop their skills for critical thinking and intercultural awareness in the telecollaborative projects?
- How were the students able to share their knowledge and views via social networking and videoconferencing?

To examine the questions, qualitative and quantitative data were collated from various sources, namely, videos, Facebook posts, questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of the projects, and individual interviews conducted on completion of each project. To gather more data, a survey in the form of a questionnaire was completed by the students at the end of each project. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from one, strongly disagree, to five, strongly agree, was used.

The content of the students' Facebook posts was examined for quality to provide a better understanding of the participants' learning experiences and development of critical thinking through online interaction. The following points were considered: the way students exchanged views, asked questions to prompt discussions, constructed new meanings, and critically assessed each other's responses. We analysed the video discussions by repeated viewings. The most important features of the interactions and the views exchanged were considered so that there was a pertinent relation to the aforementioned questions.

## 2. The projects and tasks

Three different projects involving three different groups of students (19-35) were designed between 2014 and 2016. The first one comprised 19 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Spanish and 17 Finnish students and Facebook was the platform employed. In the second project (2015), the Adobe Connect videoconferencing tool was used for synchronous oral communication. Seventeen Finnish university students and 12 Spanish EFL students were engaged in the videoconference interactions. In the third project (2016), the 12 Finnish university students and nine Spanish EFL students used both videoconferencing (oral activities) and Facebook (written activities) to perform their tasks. The online tasks in the three projects are displayed in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Online tasks

Tasks	Aims
1. Introducing themselves.	Introducing themselves to their foreign partners.
2. Talking about university education.	Thinking about their own culture and environment. Comparing and understanding their university systems.
3. Uploading newspaper articles about current issues and commenting on them.	Comparing attitudes to local issues.
4. Describing traditions, festivals, and gastronomy.	Comparing and contrasting cultural values and life in the different countries.
5. Interviewing each other on an issue (e.g. religion, environment, politics, etc.)	Understanding how members of the different countries experience their own culture.
6. Describing their favourite film, book, poem, place of interest, etc.	Interpreting different cultural traits.

Both the Finns' and Spaniards' levels of English were C1 and C2 – Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). The latter were native

speakers of Spanish, whilst the Finns had a B1/ B2 level of Spanish. Although English was the established lingua franca, in each project Tasks 4, 5, and 6 were performed in Spanish to afford the Finns the opportunity to practise that language.

### 3. Results and discussion

Based on the results of the questionnaires, the students’ evaluation of their learning experience in each project was positive, as shown in [Table 2](#). Although task performance was carried out by different students on different platforms in the three projects, the tools were considered convenient for online engagement. One of the tasks in the projects was to discuss a newspaper article relating to a local issue, the aim being to discover how students could interpret information that is not familiar to them due to their own cultural background. They explained, discussed, and argued their views about the articles and compared their situations with those in their peers’ country. Exploring the Facebook posts and videoconference interactions shows how they reflected on their own cultural traits and those of their counterparts, analysed and clarified responses to be successful in critically assessing each other’s cultural standpoint, thereby leading to the development of critical thinking skills. These online exchanges also encouraged them to ask for more information and hence widen their cultural knowledge, which helped them to enhance their intercultural awareness. Another task which fostered the development of critical thinking skills and intercultural competence was the debating of stereotypes; this enabled them to explore how people from other countries consider them and their respective culture. As one Spanish student reported in an interview, “[t]his task helped me to gain a better understanding of myself and my peers”, which reflected an increase in intercultural knowledge.

Table 2. Students’ appraisal of their learning experience ([Puranen & Vurdien, 2016](#), p. 393)

	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
1. I enjoyed exchanging views with my peers via videoconferencing.	4.04	4	0.64
2. I was curious to learn about my peers’ culture.	4.25	4	0.70
3. I felt motivated to interact with my peers online.	3.68	3.5	0.86

Task performance via videoconferencing and social networking was deemed beneficial in terms of sharing information with each other. Whilst one Finnish

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student said that “[s]haring information with someone from a different culture is very useful because you learn a lot about their country, habits, food, etc...”, a Spanish student commented that “[i]nteracting on videoconferencing has made me more courageous to speak to people from other countries” (Vurdién & Puranen, 2018, p. 272). They were curious to learn about each other’s cultural traits, which motivated them to be fully engaged in their online interactions. In the participants’ view, debating the issue on stereotypes encouraged them to modify the image they had of each other’s country and people and to build on new knowledge, which suggests the task had a productive effect (Vurdién & Puranen, 2018, p. 275). It is, therefore, crucial to design meaningful tasks that will prompt students to share their thoughts with their peers.

#### **4. Final remarks**

This paper has shed some light on how students can experience the development of critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness through task performance with Facebook and videoconferencing as learning tools. Sharing thoughts and views in online interactions has been a significant learning experience, since students have discovered useful information about each other’s cultural traits. The projects have clearly afforded the students an opportunity to communicate, exchange, reflect on, and further discuss and analyse their ideas, thereby developing critical thinking skills in order to enhance intercultural learning.

Task performance is of utmost importance to motivate students to exchange views that will give them a full understanding of cultural traits. Both videoconferencing and Facebook seem to be appropriate tools for assisting students in sharing their thoughts, as well as for constructing knowledge together. Notwithstanding, sufficient time should be allotted for task completion for meaningful learning to take place.

Finally, due to the qualitative and reflective nature of the approach, the results cannot be generalised. It is hoped that further research in this area will benefit the learning process.

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