Capturing potential learning sequences in intercultural interactions through telecollaboration

Oneil Madden[1], Trishana Nelson[2], and Rona Barnett-Passard[3]

Abstract. Telecollaboration allows for students to develop foreign/second language competences linguistically, culturally, and interculturally. The use of platforms, such as WhatsApp and Zoom, is now more frequently exploited in foreign language education to ensure that a wider cross section of students, including Jamaicans, can develop global competences. This paper reports on Phase 4 of ClerKing, a six-week Franco-Jamaican telecollaborative project, which occurred between Applied Foreign Languages (AFL) students of English from University Clermont Auvergne (UCA), France, and students of various disciplines taking French courses in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, Jamaica. Telecollaboration consisted in 45 participants of mixed ages and genders discussing different intercultural topics in groups. Using the exploratory approach, we seek to identify moments of Potential Learning Sequences (PLS). Preliminary findings show that PLS could be made apparent through vocabulary and syntax development, culture-specific knowledge, and negotiation of meaning.

Keywords: potential learning sequence, intercultural communication, ClerKing, WhatsApp, telecollaboration.

1. Introduction

Telecollaboration has become more widespread in the field of language sciences, and more and more universities and countries, including Jamaica, have come on board to explore the benefits that this pedagogical tool could bring to the teaching

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and learning of modern foreign languages and cultures, as well as to the development of intercultural communicative competences. Telecollaboration provides authentic social interactions for students via Computer/Mobile-assisted Language Learning (CALL/MALL) platforms, such as desktop videoconferencing, and WhatsApp, which is increasingly being exploited, as it is considered to be popular, practical, and preferable among students (Madden & Foucher, 2019, 2020).

Generally grounded in interactionist theories of second language acquisition, telecollaboration provides opportunities for negotiation of meaning and form, which in turn fosters language acquisition. Helm and Guth (2010) highlighted that through online collaboration, foreign language learners have a special environment for language development and cultural exchange, which allows them to reduce barriers and make connections between language and culture, while they communicate to negotiate meaning and reach mutual understanding. Helm (2015, p. 198) noted benefits such as increased motivation and linguistic output, gains in language development (accuracy, fluency), intercultural communicative competence, and pragmatic competence, etc.

Despite the numerous telecollaborative projects conducted over the past two decades, there is still a dearth in the literature concerning PLS. Defined by De Pietro, Matthey, and Py (1989), a PLS refers to the process through which the learner captures linguistic data in his/her interaction with a native speaker and makes them the object of internal cognitive activities. However, the notion of native speaker could be extended to include the more competent speaker in certain instances, especially as many online intercultural exchanges now include non-native speakers. Similarly, Madden and Foucher (2020) suggest that PLS could also be demonstrated in the form of negotiation of meaning, reformulation, questioning, etc., as well as in developments in the learner's cultural and intercultural positioning; that is to say, the perspectives drawn during or after interacting with his/her interlocutor. From their study, the authors also cited examples such as new vocabulary and expressions, grammar acquisition, marked differences in cultures and social behaviours, and beliefs as PLS observed in the students' interactions (Madden & Foucher, 2020).

Metacognition is a key process when it comes to PLS. This concept refers to 'thinking about one's thinking' (Flavell, 1979) and the different strategies and skills a learner employs to arrive at meaningful learning outcomes. Metacognition could be in the form of self-correcting and self-assessing, accommodating new knowledge through reflection, and examining how one processes thoughts and feelings.

Using the exploratory approach, we seek to identify and examine different instances of PLS at varying degrees during telecollaboration.

2. Method

Building on the work of Madden and Foucher (2019, 2020), this study reports on Phase 4 of the Franco-Jamaican telecollaborative project, ClerKing (Clermont-Kingston), between AFL students of English from UCA and students of various disciplines taking French courses in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the UWI, Jamaica. The project occurred during a six-week period, February to March 2021, between 45 students (36 females, 9 males) who were divided into nine groups of four and three groups of three (one Clermontois in each group), according to their profiles submitted prior[4] to the start of the project. The main objectives of this project were for students to practise the target language studied and to develop and/or improve their linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competences in the target language, based on their respective language levels. Clermontois students were B2-C2 in English on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, while Jamaican students were A2-B1 in French. Students discussed different intercultural topics (food, music, education system) weekly with the help of a discussion guide[5] via WhatsApp and/or different videoconferencing platforms (Skype, Zoom).

The data collection for this study was similar to the one mentioned in Madden and Foucher (2019, 2020), with the addition of reflective journals. The data for this study are from the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires but primarily the learning and reflective journal entries. Excerpts from WhatsApp interactions are also used for illustration.

3. Preliminary findings and discussions

Concerning the use of the different communication platforms, WhatsApp was used to facilitate more text-based interactions and, therefore, the development of writing skills (see below). In their answers to the post-intervention questionnaire, students noted that WhatsApp is convenient for telecollaborative projects, as it possesses all the features necessary to communicate and it allows them to make plans. It also facilitates bonding and allows participants to connect on a more personal level,

4. Students were grouped according to their language options and levels, as well as common interests
5. Conversation questions

thus making the project seem less formal and scholarly.Similarly, most students noted that videoconferencing made the exchanges authentic, more engaging and convivial, and less academic. This is due to the fact that the conversations occurred in real time, thus making the participants more accustomed to each other and everyone could express him/herself. Additionally, videoconferencing is suitable, especially when cultures are very distinct, as well as when there is a significant time difference, as it helps to foster proximity, lower communication barriers, and authentic, synchronous exchanges.

3.1. Linguistic gains

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the respondents noted that they feel they have gained linguistic knowledge in the form of new vocabulary, slangs, expressions, abbreviations, and, for the Clermontois students, some Jamaican creole words. Students also reported improvement in pronunciation, thanks to the videoconferencing exchanges, as they were corrected by their partner/s. Additionally, some students compared the language studied in the formal classroom to the one used in general daily life, noting that the latter was less formal. Furthermore, the interactions provided opportunities for syntax and sociolinguistic development/reinforcement and for students to be active learners in the construction of their own knowledge (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1. Screenshots of grammar development/reinforcement

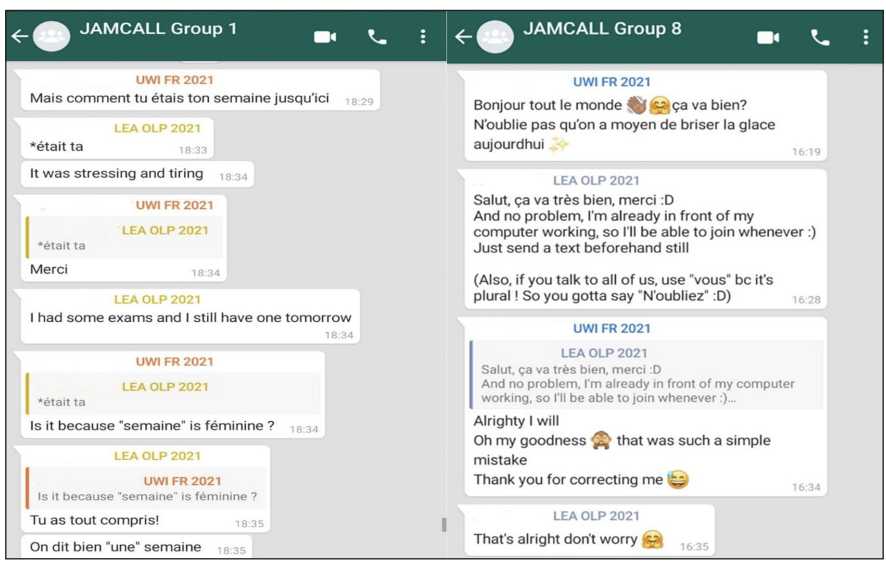
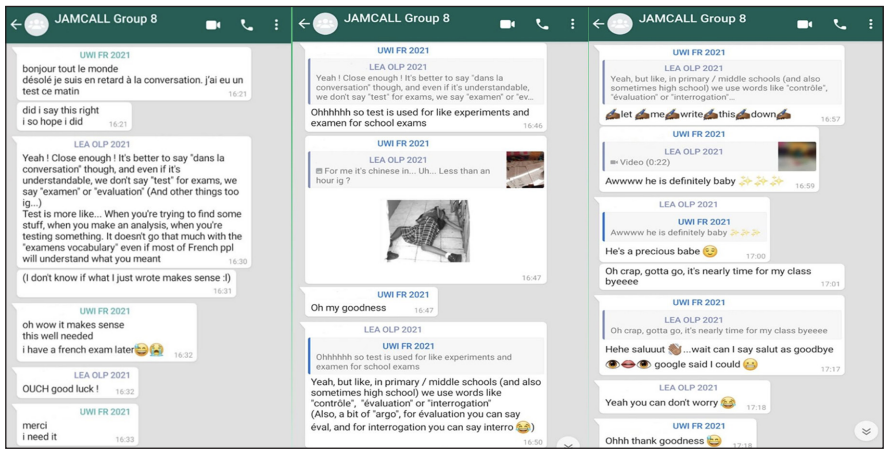


Figure 2. Screenshots of sociolinguistic awareness/development



3.2. Cultural and intercultural gains

All the respondents declared that they have learned cultural information regarding the functioning of each country, with respect to the different topics discussed: cuisine, music, and education system, etc (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Excerpts from students' self-reported cultural and intercultural gains

Cultural and intercultural gains

"I think it was one of the most complicated, if I may say so, because it was the one that I had the most trouble understanding. Indeed, [my partners] were telling me about dishes that I had never heard of before…The nutritional habits of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago are different from those in France. Indeed, the food is spicier and (more) exotic, and it seems that there is no real schedule to eat unlike in France."

"Food was interesting because I learned a bit more how Caribbean people eat their meals. For instance, I learned that they mostly eat savoury food, even at breakfast, and don't eat much sweet food, while we mostly eat sweet food for breakfast. I also discovered that soup was an important and frequent meal, even though I thought that a tropical country wouldn't rely much on stews, a meal being destined for more cold-inclined climate[s] in my mind."

"Furthermore, Jamaican people usually eat savoury breakfast when it's uncommon in France. The main cultural difference is about the place of religion. In France, the decline of believers and the concept of *laïcité* explain this discrepancy."

"The high value Jamaicans attach to religion is something I also noticed during the two calls we made in class. Indeed, many spoke about the fact that they rather not use curse words because it is something bad and that people actually pay attention to (unlike in France)."

"We had a chance during our exchanges to talk about religion and our relationship with it. I have to confess that I was surprised with what I learned. This is an establishment in Jamaica, and I think we can all agree on this point. I don't personally get it, but I had the chance to understand the place and the importance that it had in the life of the people that practice it."

"I learnt about the French culture and how different their culture is from Jamaica's like their culture is very secular. My Jamaican partner and I are Christians however, our French partner [is] not religious. Regardless, we were able to have a discussion on religion without any disputes or objections. [My French partner] was very willing and open to hearing about our opinions on said topics as well as on topics like abortion and homosexuality."

Students noted that both cultures have distinct food practices and eating habits. Additionally, they discovered the place of religion in public schools and individual life. Jamaican students became aware of the concept of *laicité.* Interculturally, the interactions promoted tolerance and open-mindedness, and allowed for stereotypes and preconceived notions to be clarified (see supplementary materials).

4. Conclusions

Our study suggests that WhatsApp and videoconferencing platforms are suitable tools for telecollaborative projects, as they aid in the development of language skills, such as vocabulary and grammar development, as well as pronunciation. Correlation was noticed between students' self-reported linguistic gains and post-intervention questionnaire responses and our assessment of their WhatsApp and Skype interactions. We observed PLS on different levels and forms: (socio) linguistic, cultural, and intercultural, similar to Madden and Foucher (2020). It is sometimes difficult for researchers to determine if and how learning has occurred; however, we have noted that metacognition helps learners to actively engage in the processing and accommodating of new knowledge (Flavell, 1979).

5. Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/5xe7ty884b7ul358o3mmo1l1zcn9cx5p

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