

Religious beliefs: a barrier to cross-cultural communication in the ClerKing telecollaborative project

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Abstract. Globalisation amplifies the need to improve Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICC). However, telecollaborative cross-cultural communication may be affected by different factors such as morals, values, and differences in viewpoints, as observed in numerous European and North American projects. Still, there is a dearth of experiments from the Anglophone Caribbean’s stance. Therefore, this paper seeks to highlight how religious ideologies affect international communication in ClerKing – a Franco-Jamaican telecollaborative project that occurred in different phases over a three-year period with learners of English from Clermont Auvergne University (UCA) and learners of French from Shortwood Teachers’ College (STC) and the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona. Using the exploratory approach, pre- and post-project questionnaires, learning and reflective journals, and different multimodal exchanges were analysed. Preliminary findings suggest that religion was a major theme highlighted in all phases of the project, leading to challenged communication and somewhat negative perception of the target culture.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, religion, telecollaboration, ClerKing, Jamaica.

1. Introduction

The need for people to cultivate and demonstrate ICC and global competence is more demanding in this interconnected world. Globally competent people possess the capacity to “examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand

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and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being” (OECD, 2018, p. 4). Foreign language educators have used telecollaboration to help learners to develop their cross-cultural skills. In fact, several thousand telecollaborative projects have been implemented over the past two decades but mainly in European and North American contexts. There remains a dearth of perspectives from the Caribbean’s standpoint, including Jamaica, which is relatively new to incorporating telecollaboration in educational curricula. Not many Jamaican students participate in study exchange programmes due to financial constraints or lack of opportunities within their degree programmes. Thus, telecollaboration is a cost-effective way to get students to interact with other cultures.

The literature shows that numerous advantages are associated with telecollaboration, such as improvement in cultural awareness and linguistic competence. However, O’Dowd and Ritter (2006) attribute ‘failed’ communication to four domains: individual, classroom, socio-institutional, and interactional. In addition, Madden and Ashby (2021) note that the heterogeneity of cultures and divergence in cultural perspectives, morals, and values can provoke interactional friction. This happens within a ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991), where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.

Helm (2015) found that participants prefer to focus on ‘safe’ topics, but circumventing conflict in exchanges may, however, falsify the reality of intercultural encounters. In fact, exploring sources of disparity over serious issues, including religious beliefs, can be revelatory, a rich cultural point (O’Dowd, 2011). The aim in exposing students to potential conflict is not for everyone to agree in the end, but for students to understand that otherness exists.

Using the exploratory approach, this paper seeks to share insights on the extent to which religious ideologies affected the outcome in the ClerKing telecollaborative project.

2. Method

ClerKing is a Franco-Jamaican project that spanned over three years (2018-2020) between Applied Foreign Language learners of English from UCA, France, and learners of French from STC and the UWI, Jamaica. French students took the course Open Learning Project and were B2-C1 level on the Common European

Framework of Reference for Languages, while Jamaican students took the course Conversation French and had an A1-B2 level. There were four phases, ranging from seven to ten weeks, depending on the semester, and 121 participants of mixed genders, between the ages of 18 and 33 participated. Students were paired/grouped based on their profiles submitted ahead of the project, which included linguistic and cultural background, areas of studies, likes and dislikes, gender, age, and place of birth and residence. They discussed different cultural and intercultural topics weekly via different media (videoconferencing platforms, WhatsApp) to improve linguistic, cultural, and intercultural competences. They also completed specific tasks such as learning journals and reflective journals to document their experiences and gained knowledge. [Table 1](#) provides more details into the breakdown of the project.

Table 1. Breakdown of the ClerKing telecollaborative scenario

Language of exchange	In Phases 1-3, the languages were imposed – French for half an hour and English for the other half to facilitate practice. The UWI participants in Phase 4 had an A1/A2 level in French, so they had the option to choose which language to use.
Topics discussed	Getting to know you, geography, historical moments, culture/customs/stereotypes, politics, regional languages, national celebrations, literature, multiculturalism, taboo subjects. The topics were imposed in Phase 1, while participants had a say in choosing two of the topics in Phases 2-4. They also chose which ‘taboo’ topic they wanted to discuss.
Tasks	Final: Choose one of the topics discussed and create a brochure or a YouTube video to share the content learned from discussions with your partner/s.
Communication platforms	WhatsApp was used for text and voice messages in between, while Skype and Zoom were used for longer video conversations.

The data collection includes pre- and post-project questionnaires (see [supplementary materials](#)), journal entries, and the different exchanges had.

3. Findings and discussion

Preliminary findings show that religion or religious views played a critical role in determining the overall outcome of the ClerKing project. An extrapolation of data across all phases seems to link students’ morals and values to their religious stance, whether they are practising believers or not. This was observed in their discussions on controversial topics such as same-sex unions, abortion, and Valentine’s Day. Forty-five per cent of Jamaican students referenced the Christian

Bible, stating that homosexuality is a sin, and those who practise it will have no part in God's kingdom. On the other end, 60% of Clermontois students in their defence indicated that the problem is not about homosexuality; it is just that some people are close-minded. One Jamaican student described the conversation as 'blasphemous' before exiting the *WhatsApp* group chat. Similarly, on the matter of abortion, the same Jamaican participants cited the Bible to justify their stance for being pro-life, by referring to the commandment that says, 'thou shalt not kill'. Conversely, 30% of their Clermontois counterparts spoke of feminism and the right for a woman to do as she pleases with her body. Regarding Valentine's Day, some Jamaican participants made similar pronouncements that they do not celebrate this event because of the alleged view that Saint Valentine was a homosexual. Most of these exchanges were halted because, on the one hand, 80% of the Clermontois students felt that their Jamaican peers were intolerant and unwilling to view intercultural issues from the other person's perspective. On the other hand, 85% Jamaican participants felt like their religious beliefs were being mocked. Efforts were made to address the concerns in a mutual Zoom call but most participants were opposed to this meeting.

In other instances, personal religious schedules affected many of the exchanges. Amid the time difference (six or seven hours, depending on the semester), all the Jamaican participants in Phases 1 and 2 had to go to daily morning devotional exercises, which were part of their university curriculum. Likewise, 75% of them had mid-week religious services at church on the weekend. At times, they would agree to a meeting time with their Clermontois partners, but they either showed up late, cancelled at the last minute, or were absent due to prioritising religious activities over the telecollaborative project.

Sixty per cent of Clermontois participants found it appalling that religious education is integral in most Jamaican schools, given that they are accustomed to *laïcité*. One participant in Phase 3 summed up this idea by saying,

"I learned that religious teaching was important, even going to say prayers in the morning before the school day begins. Being a French atheist, any religious concept is distant to me, so when I am told that you can be taught religious principles at school, it is always surprising to me".

The findings indicate that religious ideologies contributed to failed communication in telecollaboration, touching the individual, socio-institutional, and interactional dimensions described by O'Dowd and Ritter (2006). Participants operated in their 'contact zones' (Pratt, 1991) on intercultural issues, which led to intercultural

friction (Madden & Ashby, 2021) due to a failure to understand and appreciate others' perspectives and engage in open interactions (OECD, 2018).

4. Conclusions

This study suggests that morals and values, which are influenced by religious ideas, can lead to a lack of openness in cross-cultural communication. While this may lead to challenged communication, it is necessary for curricula to continue to facilitate intercultural exchanges, whether physically or virtually, as the development of global competence requires cultures to interact with each other to cultivate certain skills such as tolerance and curiosity.

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6. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/s86f2k02z1hxd497welqfxbmryft21>

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