

Review of Issues and Potential Solutions of Japan-U.S. Telecollaboration: From the Program Coordinator's Viewpoint

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Introduction

With the notable increase in an awareness of social and contextual perspectives in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), language practitioners as well as researchers have striven to find a way to promote social interaction with the target language community. According to Kurata (2011), social interaction with same-age peers enhances learners' sensitivity to the target language culture; increases self-confidence and willingness to use the L2; personalizes language to suit learners' needs and environment; develops learner autonomy and intercultural competence (ICC); and raises awareness of plurality of language varieties.

Telecollaboration is one way to realize such a learning environment. According to Belz (2003), telecollaboration is defined as an institutionalized, electronically mediated, intercultural communication under the guidance of a language teacher (p.2). The two-fold goal of telecollaboration is the development of language and ICC through collaboration with geographically distant partners. In addition, about a decade of research has shown that this type of online collaboration affords additional benefits such as the development of digital literacy and learner autonomy (O'Dowd, 2007).

On the other hand, telecollaboration is a field of research that has faced a number of challenges and moved from looking at "conflict as accidental finding of research" to regarding "conflict as object of research" (Schneider & van der Emde, 2006). For instance, O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) and Ware and Kramsch (2005) reported on intercultural misunderstanding as a result of telecollaboration. It was also found that telecollaboration is hindered by institutional constraints such as misalignment of academic calendars and scheduling conflicts (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003). In addition, several previous studies have found a dichotomy between participants' desire to be corrected and the lack of corrective feedback in actual interaction (Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; Lee, 2011; O'Rourke, 2005; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008).

Accordingly, language practitioners who decide to incorporate telecollaboration into their curriculum should be well informed of: (1) what options are available to customize and maximize the effectiveness of telecollaborative experience (i.e., planning stage), (2) what kind of "missed communication" (Ware, 2005) learners may encounter during interaction (i.e., interaction stage), and (3) what assessment options are available to measure the effectiveness of telecollaboration (i.e., assessment and reflection stage). Along this line of research, the current study first provides a list of 10 questions/issues that were raised when the author implemented a telecollaboration project for the first time. Then, the study will make practical suggestions to tackle five of the 10 questions/

issues by referring to the previous research findings.

Project Set-up

This study is based on the reflection of the author/instructor who was asked to initiate a Skype-based telecollaboration project between a university in Japan and a university in the east coast of the United States (U.S.). The author (Ed.M. in TESOL) had several years of teaching experience and had experience setting up a pen pal project via email; however, she had never coordinated a telecollaboration project using video chat.

The participants in this project were six Japanese learners in the U.S. (JFL) who are native/near-native speakers of English and six English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Japan whose first language (L1) is Japanese. The six JFL learners were enrolled in an intensive Japanese language course. On average, these learners were rated intermediate-low on the Oral Proficiency Interview by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL OPI) when they completed the semester-long intensive Japanese course.

The EFL students in Japan, on the other hand, were not enrolled in an English course at the time of data collection due to the difference in the academic calendars. They were volunteer language exchange partners who took a two-unit telecollaboration course in the previous semester and who expressed their desire to continue with the project.

Due to the time difference, which made it difficult to conduct a class-to-class Skype session, each participant met his/her partners online (see *eTandem* below for this type of telecollaboration) outside the classroom on designated weekends. There were five bi-weekly Skype sessions in a semester. For each hour-long session, the participants spent half the time in Japanese and the other half in English. Regular sessions started with a warm-up and then moved onto a task-based conversation. This study used a wide range of tasks that are different in types (e.g., problem solving and decision making) and themes (e.g., annual events, trips, and homestays).

At the very beginning of the project, the participants from both Japan and the U.S. watched an hour-long webinar that the author/instructor created to learn about six ways of providing oral corrective feedback (recasts, metalinguistic explanations, explicit correction, repetitions, clarification requests, and confirmation checks) based on Lyster and Ranta (1997). Although error correction was not a requirement, the participants were strongly encouraged to provide corrective feedback and were constantly reminded to do so throughout the semester.

Data Collection and Analysis

The instructor/author kept track of issues and questions in a reflective journal. The journal entries were coded using MAXQDA11. Initial coding of the data involved coding for broad themes that emerged. The second phase of the analysis was to find and refine further subthemes by reading and re-reading the text until coherent subcategories were identified. The top 10 categories were chosen for further analysis.

Identified Issues

The following section presents 10 identified themes/issues and provide some quotes from the journal entries (which are indicated by the quotation marks). Note that the 10 themes/issues apply to various forms of Japan-U.S. telecollaboration unless otherwise indicated.

1. Logistical Issues. There are two major logistical issues that are particularly problematic for Japan-U.S. collaboration. First, the misalignment in the academic calendar created a mismatch of expectations and motivation/incentive between the two schools. While most Japanese universities' fall semester is from October to January and spring semester is from April to July/August, most American universities' fall semester is from September to December and spring semester is from January to May. The current project took place from February to May, when the partner school in Japan was on a break. This created a situation where the EFL learners in Japan were volunteer exchange partners who simply wanted to practice English for no credit, while the JFL learners in the U.S. were graded on their performance. Managing different expectations and motivation of participants turned out to be "extremely challenging, if not impossible" in this type of autonomous learning context. The second logistical issue was the time difference between Japan and the U.S. (13 or 14 hour-difference in EST depending on the daylight saving time). This issue led to the situation where the participants inevitably had to conduct exchange sessions on the weekends, as conducting a session during a class time was logistically difficult.

2. Models of telecollaboration. The author initiated the project without knowing that there were various models of telecollaboration. With further investigation into telecollaboration, she "realized that there were different models of telecollaboration" for different purposes and contexts. The details of the models will be provided in the next section.

3. Goal settings. As a coordinator, the author was "in charge of planning the exchange from scratch." Goal setting turned out to be challenging because she was overwhelmed by the complexity of possible goals. After some brainstorming, the author identified at least six goals of telecollaboration: (1) improving language skills, (2) improving communication skills, (3) making international friends, (4) learning about each other's culture, (5) gaining confidence in a foreign language, and (6) for pre-service and in-service teachers to improve teaching skills (although this goal was not relevant to the current project). In the end, it was decided that the exchange focuses on (1), (2), and (4).

4. Themes of interaction. Even after the goals of interaction were decided, it was not clear "what themes should be incorporated." Therefore, needs analysis about participants' cultural interests was conducted online. The survey first asked whether the participants wanted to talk about *big C culture* (e.g., literature, art, and holidays) or *little c culture* (informal and often hidden patterns of human interactions and viewpoints such as customs, institutions and everyday life) (Alatis, 1995). The survey then asked the participants to choose three themes that they wanted to talk about within each type of culture.

5. Tasks. When the project started, the instructor was not sure whether it is better to "let participants talk or provide tasks that would guide their interaction." If the latter is the case, the

question was what kind of tasks should be provided. “Should participants be allowed to choose a task? Should there be more language-focused activities? If so, what types of tasks (e.g., open-ended questions, decision-making tasks, jigsaw tasks) help reach the goals?”

6. Technology tools. My assignment as a coordinator was to use Skype for establishing a partnership between the two institutions. Skype is a multimodal mode of communication which allows participants to use text chat, audio chat, and video chat simultaneously. In addition, it has additional features like screen-sharing and group chat. In the end, it was decided that video chat would be used as the main mode of communication. However, the author “had to deal with technical problems” because video chat tends to pose more technical issues (e.g., communication disruption due to slow Internet connection) compared with asynchronous modes of communication (e.g., email and bulletin board).

7. Partner selection. The selection of a partner school plays a fundamental role for the successful implementation of telecollaboration projects. A partner school can be selected through convenient sampling or by asking exchange schools for participation. If the latter is the case, telecollaboration facilitates students’ physical mobility before their study abroad. Whether it is through convenient sampling or through study abroad partnership, “once a partner school is decided, a collaborating teacher plays a crucial role.” The next step is to match students into pairs/groups. If collaboration takes place between two individual students (see *eTandem* below) as in this project, the coordinator needs to decide the criteria on which the students are matched (e.g., by the level of proficiency, academic majors, hobbies, gender) and whether participants should switch partners or keep the same partners throughout the project.

8. Language use during interaction. Language choice becomes an issue in telecollaboration. One method is to switch languages and learner/tutor roles after a certain period of time/task. For this, participants need to keep track of time and language use to make the exchange equally beneficial. Another method is to let participants freely use a language of their choice, but this may create a situation where only one language is spoken over the other, depending on participants’ proficiency level and willingness to communicate.

9. Teacher’s involvement. It was not clear what is the role of a coordinator after the project was initiated. For instance, in order to promote focus on form (FonF), it is possible to train participants to provide corrective feedback as in this project. It is also “a good idea to provide a list of vocabulary that participants may use to talk about a certain topic.” It is also “important to facilitate reflection” after each session and provide focused instruction (e.g., data-driven FonF activities by discussing interaction episodes) in order to develop language and ICC.

10. Assessment. Assessment is one of the under-researched areas in telecollaboration. For one, this is because unpredictability and dynamicity of interaction makes it difficult to standardize assessment measures. For another, the reciprocal nature of telecollaboration makes it challenging to evaluate each individual. For instance, participants’ contribution and quality of interaction largely depend on the commitment of participants’ partners, thus making it impossible to separate one individual from another. Although I knew it is not the best way to assess students

this way, I decided to evaluate students based on the frequency of participated sessions and completed assignments because “I did not know what other assessment options were available for telecollaboration.”

Potential Solutions

This section will introduce previous research findings that are related to five of the 10 questions above: models of telecollaboration, tasks, language use during interaction, technology tools, and assessment. It is the author’s hope that previous research findings will provide potential solutions for practitioners who are new to this type of online collaboration projects.

Models of telecollaboration. Telecollaboration can take many different forms depending on available resources, amount of teacher and student commitment, and goals of such exchange. This section introduces two major models of telecollaboration: *eTandem*, and *Cultura*. First, *eTandem* is “a reciprocal support and instruction between two learners” which takes place online (O’Rourke, 2007, p. 43). In this arrangement, participants are native/near-native speakers of each other’s target languages. In most cases, the participants spend half the time using one language and the other half using the other language. Face-to-face mode of such arrangement has existed for generations, but the recent advancement of technology has spurred its usefulness. *eTandem* has often been investigated in the theoretical framework of learner autonomy. Accordingly, *eTandem* focuses on collaboration at the individual level rather than as a classroom activity.

In contrast, *Cultura* (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001) is one of the most widely utilized models of telecollaboration that emphasizes the role of classroom instruction for developing ICC (Byram, 1997). *Cultura* consists of four steps to bring together two groups of students for cultural comparison:

- 1) Students at both schools complete online questionnaires that have been designed to reveal basic cultural differences (e.g., word association of “U.S.A.,” “police,” “heroes,” etc.).
- 2) Each group of students analyzes the questionnaire responses under a teacher’s guidance to find similarities and differences.
- 3) Students at both schools use online forums to exchange opinions about the responses.
- 4) Students analyze forum discussions in the classroom.

García and Crapotta (2007) argue that, *Cultura* is “more demanding than other models of telecollaboration” although “it is a flexible framework open to adaptations that suit particular academic contexts” (p. 79). They also caution that *Cultura*’s success or failure largely depends on “effective faculty collaboration, well planned scheduling, and invested classroom interaction” (p. 79).

Tasks. O’Dowd and Ware (2009) would be one of the most comprehensible papers that addressed the issue of tasks in telecollaboration. Their paper, which problematized “a lack of examination of the opinions with which telecollaborative instructors are confronted when designing tasks for their learners” (p. 174), identified 12 general types of tasks. The 12 tasks were then categorized into three main types: (1) *information exchange tasks*, (2) *comparison and*

analysis tasks (e.g., *Cultura*), and (3) *collaborative tasks*. Information exchange tasks involve learners sharing information about their personal biographies, local schools, and home cultures. This type of tasks can function as a get-to-know-each-other activity as well as for more in-depth ethnographical study. However, information exchange tasks are somewhat monologic and may involve little negotiation of meaning. Comparison and analysis tasks involve critical analysis of cultural products such as books, films, and newspaper articles. Tasks of this type can be either culture-focused (e.g., by examining cultural differences based on questionnaire responses) and/or language-focused (e.g., by comparing translations in both languages). Finally, based on the constructionist theory, collaborative tasks involve collaborative creation of a product (e.g., an essay and presentation) together with one's partner.

Not only can tasks focus on intercultural opinion exchange, can they focus on form. For instance, Blake (2000) investigated the effect of tasks (i.e., jigsaw, information gap, and decision making) on negotiation of meaning in the Spanish text-chat environment. He found that jigsaw tasks led to more negotiations than information gap tasks, but incidental negotiations were mostly lexical, rarely focusing on syntactic items. Akiyama (2014) investigated how target vocabulary of different lexical categories affected learners' focus on form practices. She found that lexical types affected both the frequency and quality of language-related episodes and the use of multimodal features of Skype.

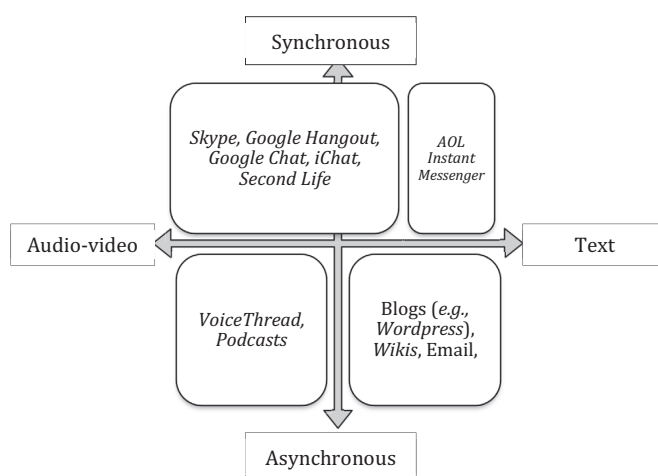
All of these tasks above have different foci and disadvantages. Therefore, coordinators are advised to choose the most appropriate task type that meets the goal of a project and customize them accordingly. For instance, O'Dowd and Ware (2009) argue that *task sequencing* should be considered in order to incorporate all the foci of each task type. For instance, it is possible to focus on both language and culture by employing various types of tasks in a sequence. As such, one session can consist of (1) introduction (e.g., information exchange about pop music), (2) comparison (e.g., comparison of lyrics), and (3) negotiation (e.g., collaborative presentation of pop singers based on a two-way information gap activity about celebrities). Examples of each task type are provided in their paper in detail (p. 176-177), and the author recommends that future coordinators read this paper.

Language use. Just like task selection ultimately depends on the goals of telecollaboration, the proficiency level of participants, and theoretical orientation of practitioners (e.g., psycholinguistics, intercultural approaches to foreign language education, or learner autonomy), it is also practitioners' belief that determines how participants shift languages. Although it is often taken for granted that exclusive use of L2 is better than occasional mixing of L1 and L2, research evidence to support such a position is scarce. In fact, the position for code-switching has been supported by an increasing number of research findings today. For instance, Bruen and Kelly (2014) found that judicious use of L1 in L2 instruction reduced learner anxiety and cognitive overload. An experimental study by Macaro, Nakatani, Hayashi, and Khabbazzbashi (2014) compared three groups of EFL study-abroad students: two taught by a monolingual speaker of English and a monolingual assistant and one group taught by a monolingual speaker of English and a bilingual

assistant of Japanese and English. The study found that the bilingual group made bigger gains in fluency and overall speaking scores after three weeks of intervention, although the three groups were not significantly different. In sum, it is still highly controversial whether exclusive use of L2 is better than occasional use of L1. Accordingly, further empirical evidence, especially in the context of telecollaboration, is necessary to examine the efficacy of L1 use during telecollaborative interaction.

Technology tools. Figure 1 shows some major computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools that are often used in telecollaboration. In Figure 1, CMC tools are grouped into four major categories by the channel of communication (i.e., written vs. audio) and immediacy (i.e., synchronous vs. asynchronous).

Figure 1. Sample CMC tools that are used in telecollaboration



First, studies that investigated differences in the channel of CMC (i.e., audio/video vs. written) are scarce. The study by van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014) is one of the only studies that compared text-based and video-based synchronous CMC. The study revealed that negotiation of meaning episodes demonstrated distinct patterns depending on the channel of communication and that communication through video calling triggered more potential loss of face issues than communication through the text chat.

In contrast, there are a number of studies that have examined the effect of immediacy in the CMC environment. The study by Abrams (2003), for example, compared the performance of 96 L2 German students in three instructional conditions: synchronous CMC (i.e., text chat), asynchronous CMC (i.e., bulletin board), and a control group. The study found that the amount of speech and lexical density was higher in synchronous CMC than asynchronous CMC, although the difference was not significant for lexical density. On the other hand, the difference in immediacy did not lead to a statistical difference in lexical richness and syntactic complexity. In the context

of telecollaboration, Schwienhorst (2003) described a tandem learning network in which learners provided and received language assistance using email and synchronous chat. He found that students in the email tandem networks were more likely to complete required tasks than were students in synchronous networks.

In sum, these studies above and others have found that (1) using different types of CMC tools results in distinct patterns of interaction and different degree of engagement, (2) students in synchronous discussion produce a greater volume of communication than students in asynchronous discussion, yet (3) asynchronous discussion is equal to or better than synchronous discussion in terms of students' completion of course requirements (Abrams, 2003; Pérez, 2003; Schwienhorst, 2003).

Accordingly, there is no absolute answer for what is the best tool for telecollaboration. Therefore, telecollaboration coordinators are advised to choose the most appropriate CMC tool in consideration of (1) time difference (e.g., whether asynchronous is more plausible), (2) participants' proficiency level (e.g., asynchronous CMC allows sufficient planning time), (3) language domain of focus (e.g., audio CMC for improving speaking), and (4) the Internet environment (i.e., video CMC tool requires stable Internet connection). It is also advisable to combine different CMC tools, so it can increase student satisfaction and the likelihood of completing course requirements (Ligorio, 2001; Ohlund, Yu, Jannssch-Pennell, & Digangi, 2000). Table 1 summarizes characteristics of different types of CMC based on Abrams (2003) and van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014).

Table 1. Characteristics of different types of CMC

	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Immediacy (From Abrams, 2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly immediate responses • Use of outside resources cumbersome • Social immediacy of interlocutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended planning, encoding, decoding time • Use of outside resources not limited • Interactants not “immediately” present
	Audio	Written
Mode of communication (From van der Zwaard and Bannink, 2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity of speaking and listening • (Un)intentional emotions • “Tyranny of succession” (i.e., once uttered, it cannot be modified) (Leech & Short, 2007) • No transcripts saved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity of typing and reading • Intentional emotions expressed through emoticons • Slow turn-taking/response • Messages/interaction history saved

Assessment: Goals of an educational activity should be reflected in the way the students are assessed. Yet, as Levy and Stockwell (2006) reported, many educators, who integrate online activities, continue to evaluate students using traditional methods, as they may not know how to assess otherwise and/or they may face institutional constraints. In particular, assessment is an area that requires a rapid growth in telecollaboration. This is because (1) it is hard to measure ICC, one of the two-fold goal of telecollaboration, (2) the dynamic, unpredictable social interaction makes it difficult to measure language learning outcomes using a traditional standardized test, and (3) it is impossible to separate one individual and assess him/her during co-construction of conversation.

A group of European researchers have used the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) to measure ICC. One way to assess such a construct is the use of rubrics. Using rubrics, telecollaboration coordinators can fairly objectively assess students' performance based on descriptions of a certain standard. Another assessment method is the use of self-assessment such as LinguaFolio (<https://linguafolio.uoregon.edu>) and WebCEF (<http://www.webcef.eu>). For instance, Jager, Meima and Oggel (2013) used WebCEF to measure Skype-based telecollaborators' performance. They found that using the self-assessment tool raised participants' awareness as a language user. Finally, O'Dowd (2010) promoted the use of portfolio as the "most comprehensive manner of getting learners to demonstrate what they have learned from their intercultural contact and to reflect on their experiences" (p. 353). Accordingly, telecollaboration requires alternative assessment tools that are more encompassing than the traditional assessment tools and that not only measure language development but also help notice cultural differences and develop learner autonomy.

Conclusion

With the increased recognition of the flipped classroom and the criticism of a one-size-fits-all approach, more educators, as well as SLA researchers, have started to see the great potential of telecollaboration. For its further development, coordinators need to become aware of what obstacles they may encounter and what resources are available. In order to inform practitioners of such, this study examined the author's reflective journal data and identified 10 potential issues that a coordinator may encounter when launching a new telecollaboration project. Then, the study provided possible solutions to five of the issues taking various theoretical perspectives into consideration. It is my hope that more language programs will realize the great potential of telecollaboration as a venue for social interaction and take measures to equip L2 learners with resources to be a linguistic and cultural bridge in this multilingual world.

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