ReCALL **16** (1): 5–19. © 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0958344004000217 Printed in the United Kingdom

Guides on the side? Tasks and challenges for teachers in telecollaborative projects

ROBERT O'DOWD
Universidad de León, Fac. de Filosofía y Letras, Dpto de Filología Moderna, 24071 León, Spain
(*email: dfmrod@unileon.es*)

KATRIN EBERBACH
Department of Germanic Studies, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
(*email: eberback@tcd.ie*)

Abstract

This paper reports on research carried out on an intercultural telecollaborative exchange between language learners in Germany and Ireland and focuses particularly on what was required of the teachers in the development of the project. The review of the literature looks at the role of telecollaboration within the field of network-based language learning and also offers an overview of the different types of interaction which have been identified on on-line message boards. Following that, the different tasks of the teachers in the German-Irish exchange are explored. These include developing learners' understanding of intercultural learning, improving learners' ability to make effective contributions to the on-line interaction, increasing their awareness of the difference between on-line monologues and dialogues and finally, establishing a good working relationship with the partner teacher. Based on these findings, recommendations are outlined on how to prepare teachers for telecollaborative projects.

1 Introduction

A significant number of the papers presented at EUROCALL 2003 dealt with some aspect of on-line exchanges between foreign language learners in different cultures. The popularity of these papers, and the many requests for on-line partnerships which mailing lists such as IECC (www.iecc.org) and TESL-CA (http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/~tesl-l/) distribute on a weekly basis, would appear to suggest that the activity of on-line intercultural exchanges, better known today as telecollaboration (Belz, 2003), is an important and relevant component of network-based language teaching. However, with a few exceptions (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Kern, 2000; Müller-Hartmann, 2000a), the literature in the area appears to have generally failed to explore the many complex tasks and challenges which teachers are confronted with in order to maximise the educational outcomes of these projects.

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This paper reports on a university-level German-Irish message board exchange and questions the common assumptions that, firstly, teachers take on the passive role of a *guide on the side* (Tella, 1996; Warschauer, 1997) in telecollaborative projects and, secondly, that learners will automatically benefit from their on-line contact with the foreign culture and develop their intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) by simply being immersed in the activity. It will be argued that on-line intercultural interaction does not come naturally to learners and that it is necessary for teachers to deal with various complex tasks which include making learners aware of what intercultural learning involves, training learners how to interact effectively on-line, integrating exchanges seamlessly into contact classes and establishing a successful working relationship with their teaching partner in the other classroom.

The following sections provide a brief overview of the role of telecollaboration in foreign language education and also presents different typologies of learner interaction which have been identified in on-line message boards. Following that, the tasks which the two teachers encountered in the exchange between their two classes will be documented and discussed in detail.

2 Telecollaboration and foreign language education

Telecollaboration is defined by Belz in the following way:

> "…internationally-dispersed learners in parallel language classes use Internet communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat, threaded discussion, and MOOs (as well as other forms of electronically mediated communication), in order to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchange." (Belz, 2003a: 1)

As this definition suggests, telecollaboration covers a wide range of activities and exploits a wide variety of on-line communication tools. On a technical level, while early intercultural exchanges were almost exclusively e-mail based (Warschauer, 1995), educators now exploit a wide variety of communication tools including MOO's (von der Emde, Schneider & Kötter, 2001; Kötter, 2003), web-based message boards (Furstenberg *et al*., 2001) and videoconferencing (Kinginger *et al*., 1999; O'Dowd, 2000). The use of different communication tools (and combinations of them) can offer both teachers and learners various advantages. While videoconferencing, for example, may allow learners to see and speak to their partners in real time, MOO's and discussion boards provide easy access to transcripts of the interaction which can facilitate reflection and further study.

On a content level, telecollaborative exchanges deal with a varied and productive range of topics and tasks. In the past, writers such as Warschauer (1999) had been critical that many practitioners were simply engaging their learners in superficial pen-pal exchanges which involved an unreflective exchange of information and did not exploit the activity to the maximum. However, modern reports reveal a rich and creative range of projects which involve learners in comparative reviews of literature (Müller-Hartmann, 1999), in-depth investigation into aspects of the foreign culture and society (Kern, 1998), collaborative creation of websites (Belz, 2001) and carefully structured analysis of on-line cultural questionnaires (Furstenberg *et al*., 2001).

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On a research level, recent literature on telecollaboration appears to focus less on reporting general examples of good practice and instead is providing in-depth qualitative studies which deal with issues such as cultural differences in on-line behaviour (Kim & Bonk, 2002; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002), the influence of institutional and social factors on the outcomes of exchanges (Belz, 2002; Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003) and the importance of task and task design to the success of on-line exchange (Appel & Gilabert, 2002; Müller-Hartmann, 2000b). Research studies which involve action research and the collection of qualitative data have been found to be particularly suited to exploring the complex relationship between teachers, learners and interaction both on-line and in the classroom which telecollaboration involves (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

As regards the pedagogical benefits of intercultural exchanges, telecollaboration via e-mail and other electronic media has been found to support learner autonomy (Schwienhorst, 2000; Tella, 1991), to foster language awareness (Appel, 1999), to develop learners' writing skills (Eck, Legenhausen & Wolff, 1993; St. John & Cash, 1995), to improve grammatical correctness (Brammerts, 1996) and to develop higher order thinking skills (von der Emde *et al.*, 2001). The activity has also been seen as particularly suited to developing learners' intercultural communicative competence (Belz, 2003; Byram, 1997; O'Dowd, 2003). The misunderstandings and communication breakdowns which often occur in such exchanges have been shown to contribute to learners' understanding of the complex relationship between language and culture. Furthermore, the need to describe one's own culture to others can encourage learners to engage in a more critical reflection of their own social reality. Interacting with members of the target culture can also enable learners to move away from a definition of culture learning as being merely a matter of collecting facts and figures and instead to move towards an ethnographic understanding of culture which involves seeing cultural practices from the perspective of members of the foreign culture. Spradley explains this approach to culture in the following way:

> "…we do not eliminate an interest in behavior, customs, objects, or emotions. We have merely shifted the emphasis from these phenomena to their meaning. The ethnographer observes behavior, but goes beyond it to inquire about the meaning of that behavior. The ethnographer sees artefacts and natural objects but goes beyond them to discover what meanings people assign to these objects (Spradley, 1979: 6)."

However, in much of the literature to date, the role of the teacher in achieving the aims of telecollaborative projects, whether they be greater learner autonomy, intercultural competence or language awareness, has been generally neglected (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Müller-Hartmann, 2000a). While much research has looked at the immediate effects of exchanges on learners' opinions and language ability, little is known about how exchanges can be most effectively integrated into the foreign language classroom and what teachers can do in order to exploit the projects to the maximum. This appears to be due to a tendency by many educators to see the distant partners in telecollaborative projects as taking over the teachers' traditional role as expert and instructor. However, while learners naturally know a great deal about their own language and culture (implicitly, at least), this does not imply that they will be able to transmit this knowledge to their

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partners, nor does it mean that they will be able to analyse and interpret the correspondence they receive from their partners. For this reason, we would argue that teachers should not see their task as merely establishing the exchange and then taking on a generally passive role of organizer and trouble-shooter, but they should instead continue to play an integral part in their students' exchanges, integrating the telecollaboration into their contact classes and guiding the learners in their creation and analysis of the on-line interaction.

3 Classification of content on message board exchanges

On-line message boards, also known as bulletin boards or discussion forums, have recently become a popular tool in foreign language education. They have been used to enable students to publish and share their writing with others, to engage in on-line discussions with other learners and to facilitate coordination and the exchange of information between distant partners in telecollaborative projects. These asynchronous tools are often preferred to e-mail as they allow students to engage in many-to-many communication (Sutherland-Smith, 2003) and they enable teachers and course instructors to monitor and to guide student interaction if they feel this to be necessary. In distance courses, message boards have also been found to provide a sense of community and closeness for the participants who would otherwise not have many opportunities to come into contact together (Nunan, 1999).

Various authors have proposed classifications of the posts which learners submit to message boards and have attempted to identify which are the most suited to developing language and culture learning. Christian (1997) describes a three year study of an on-line literature exchange between middle school students in the USA. During this period, approximately 800 students used the 'First Class' on-line conferencing system to discuss the book *Anne Frank's Diary* and to explore how the themes of the book reflected and related to their own lives. To analyse the content of the on-line interaction, the author asks the question "What does the student writing do?" and he identifies in the collected material a taxonomy of five different types of writing, classifying them according to the effects of the on-line writing on the reader. These are:

- The writing performs for the writer.
- The writing reaches to an audience.
- The writing connects with the reader.
- The writing strives to connect with the reader in a unique and powerful way.
- The writing 'talks'; it incorporates elements of verbal conversation.
  (Christian, 1997: 51)

Christian stresses that these classifications do not refer to progressive levels of proficiency. Rather, they describe the extent of connectedness with the reader which the message achieves and also the form of the communication which is taking place on-line. His taxonomy moves from posts which are short, involving little risk-taking or any form of deep analysis ('performing writing') to a type of on-line writing which engages the reader with direct questions, requests elaboration on previous posts and includes cultural, regional and personal information which is not obviously related to the text

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('talking writing'). This type of post, Christian argues, will eventually lead to an on-line dialogue between the participants.

A more recent study by Lamy & Goodfellow (1999) looked at the different types of interaction taking place on message boards for learners of French as a foreign language and proposed a three type framework of 'monologues', 'reflective dialogues' and 'conversations' for organising asynchronous CMC discourse. 'Monologues' are contributions which, although they may be reflective in nature, do not contain an invitation for interaction and consequently are unlikely to lead to any exchange between learners. 'Conversations' refer to exchanges of a social nature which deal with trivial topics unrelated to the learning process. Such contributions are not considered by the authors to be particularly beneficial to the learning process as very little meaning is being negotiated and there is no evidence of focus on form occurring. Finally, 'reflective dialogues' involve posts in which language is the topic of discussion, understanding is negotiated and social interaction is developed. Successful language learning, the authors propose, will be best achieved by 'reflective conversations', interaction which is both reflective and conversational and which is maintained over time. Learners therefore need to be able to motivate others to take part in reflective discussion through the use of explicit questioning, as well as being able to contribute themselves. The authors found a very low number of multi-student reflective conversations in their data and suggest learners need "to be weaned away from 'monologues'" (1999: 61) and trained to engage in reflective interaction with their fellow learners.

Finally, Johnson *et al.* (2001) reported on an on-line course for student-teachers and they classified the on-line interaction into the categories of social exchanges, administrative posts, academic monologues and academic interaction. Similar to Lamy and Goodfellow, the authors found that their students' on-line interaction tended to be dominated by academic monologues which involved students commenting on the topics they were working on but never attempting to make links to the ideas expressed by fellow learners. However, the authors also established that, as students became more familiar with the on-line environment, there was a steady shift from academic monologues to academic interaction and a more productive learning environment.

Interestingly, the literature in this area appears to be lacking a classification of asynchronous on-line interaction which deals specifically with the cultural content of asynchronous intercultural telecollaboration. As part of the action research on this project, the content of the Trinity-Essen message board exchange was categorised according to cultural content and the researchers explored how the course instructors could train their learners to make effective contributions and how to analyse the posts of others.

4 Project background

The project reported here involved a message board exchange between two groups of foreign language learners at the Universities of Duisburg-Essen in Germany and Trinity College Dublin in Ireland. The two teachers had come into contact together through the IECC mailing list for teachers (www.iecc.org). The German students were taking a course in Irish Cultural Studies which was to last from mid-October to mid-February, while the Irish group were taking a year-long course (October to June) in German as a foreign language (taking into account holiday breaks, etc., this meant that the two

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groups would be in contact together for a period of approximately twelve weeks.) Apart from the on-line exchange, the Cultural Studies course in Essen involved the study of on-line modules about Irish culture and society which had been located on the university's virtual learning environment (www.linguistics-online.de), as well as one contact session each week. The Irish students of German had one language class per week in addition to their participation in the on-line exchange. As the exchange was aimed at developing both language and cultural competence, it was agreed that the Irish students would write in German and the Germans would respond in English.

The Irish teacher in Essen was eager to provide his students with a native's perspective on the on-line materials about Ireland which were being worked on in the course, while for the German teacher in Dublin the reason for the integration of the on-line exchange into the language class was to provide a challenge for first year students with above average competence in German, as well offering an opportunity for interested volunteer students from third and fourth year. Using their language skills to communicate in an intercultural set-up would allow for more integrated learning, would encourage greater learner autonomy and critical and analytical thinking, and would allow the students to experience language learning as a multi-faceted discipline.

The exchange was to take place on the message board of the German virtual learning environment. As the two classes were made up of 14 and 18 students, it was feared that interaction between all the students together would prove to be chaotic and unmanageable. For this reason, it was agreed that several sub-groups would be created on the board so that groups of two to three German students could work together with two members of the Irish group. The topics of the interaction were generally based on the content of the Germans' modules on Irish culture. Every two weeks one of the teachers would post themes for discussion related to the module being worked on and students were then required to make at least two posts related to these topics. These two posts were usually made up of an initial post in which students provided their partners with information and insights on how this particular topic was viewed in their home culture and also asked questions in order to elicit from their partners as much information as possible about the foreign perspective. In the second post, the students were to offer their views and reactions to their partners' posts. One example of a topic which was posted by one of the teachers can be seen here:

```
This week the German students have completed their second on-line
module which offers a brief overview of modern Irish history. Based
on this, they have been asked to decide which aspect or person from
recent Irish history most interests them.
     Now, here on the notice board, the German group should tell
their Irish partners which aspect (or person or event) they have
chosen and explain why. The Irish group should then explain how this
aspect of Irish history is considered in Ireland today. They should
also give their own opinions or views on this.
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Message Board Post Extract 1

5 Tasks and challenges for the teachers

In order to make the exchange as rich an intercultural learning experience as possible, teachers found that we were confronted with four central tasks. Each of these will now be looked at in some detail.

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5.1 Raising learners' awareness of intercultural learning

It was pointed out earlier in section two that our aim in this exchange was not to simply supply learners with information on foreign cultural products and practices, but rather to develop their understanding of the meanings which these products and practices have in the foreign culture. However, the pre-course questionnaires and interviews which were carried out in both classes revealed that many students' understanding of Cultural Studies or *Landeskunde* was based on collecting and learning facts and figures about the target culture. As the following interview excerpts illustrate, this understanding of culture learning would appear to come from their previous experiences with FL textbooks and classes:

> Patrick (from Germany): "At school we did not do much *Landeskunde*. We talked about politics in Great Britain, "Blacks" in America, sheep in Australia und the troubles in Northern Ireland. But we only got our textbook texts and old newspaper articles. I missed the reference to the countries and life there nowadays."

> Bernd (from Germany): "*Landeskunde* at school was like 'England has got…inhabitants' and so on."

> Nadine (from Germany): "Most *Landeskunde* classes just deal with facts and figures, i.e. how many mountains has a country, how high are they etc."

If learners bring such definitions of culture learning to their classes, it is fair to expect that they will also employ such definitions when they engage in an intercultural exchange with members of the target culture. For this reason, it was necessary during the early stages of the courses for the two teachers to broaden students' definitions of culture and increase their understanding of how cultures differ from each other. This was achieved by explicitly bringing learners to compare German and Irish perspectives on certain cultural behaviour in their classes, discussing short extracts from ethnographic publications (for example, Spradley (1979) and Agar (1984)) and creating worksheets based on German – English pragmatic differences as described by House (1996). As the following interview extracts from German students demonstrate, these activities combined with the message-board exchange brought learners to change their definitions of what Cultural Studies involved:

> Q: What is culture learning for you after this course?

> Laura (from Germany): Its about thinking. Its about getting information about another country and its people and then thinking about the differences between the two countries and even more its thinking about the relations between the two countries.

> Nadine (from Germany): It means learning about the other culture and my own culture. Because if I can't understand my own culture, I can't understand the foreign one. Because you can't compare. And what we do in this class is intercultural, absolutely.

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Christine (from Germany): We don't only talk about the facts but also the beliefs behind the facts.

Here it can be seen how learners were brought by the course work and the on-line exchange to see Cultural Studies as involving a comparative process, as well as reflecting on one's own culture and looking at "the beliefs behind the facts". This last comment by Christine clearly shows a growing awareness that cultural behaviour can hold different meanings in different cultural contexts.

5.2 Training learners to make effective contributions

Once learners have become aware that cultural products and practices can have different meanings in different cultures, they must also learn how to elicit these meanings and values from members of other cultures. Furthermore, they must be aware of how to express to others the values and principles which are embodied in their own behaviour.

These complex skills form an important part of Byram's intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997: 52). We would argue that learners cannot be expected to develop these skills naturally by simply taking part in on-line exchanges with distant partners. As the following extracts from some of the opening posts on the message board demonstrate, the students in this exchange were often unaware of how to go about eliciting information about the target culture or how to supply their partners with useful insights into their own culture:

Hello! My name is Dara and I am 19 years old. I started University three weeks ago. I am studying Germanic Languages, which is German, Dutch and Swedish. The course includes Literature, Srea Studies and, of course, spoken and written German.

I lived in Switzerlaand for two months and I have also been to Gerany and Austria. It is true that there aare many differences between Germany and Ireland. The Irish have become much more wealthy recently but the infra-structure in Germany is much better. Irelad still has to improve! I am looking forward to our future talks. Bye!

Message Board Post Extract 2 (translated)

Hello, how are you? I study English and Physical Education at the University of Essen and I want to become a teacher. This term we do some cultural studies concerning Ireland and I very interested in it because I actually do not know much about it. I have already read something about your country in our course and now I would like to ask you some questions.

Do you live in Northern or in Southern Ireland?

How many people live in your town? Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?

I have heard that regular churchgoing declines more and more in your country – is it true?

What are you doing in your free time? Do you often go to pubs? What do you think about Germans?

Irish people have the reputation of being very indirect and

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polite in their speaking style.
     How have you or your parents experienced the social and
economic change in the past 20 years?
     That's all for now. I am looking forward to hearing from you!
Veronika
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Message Board Post Extract 3

The first of these messages is quite representative of an introductory post by a student in such intercultural exchanges. The Irish student introduces himself and then gives some background information about Ireland. However, if one looks in more detail, it becomes evident that the post tells his German partners very little about Ireland. The message contains many statements about Ireland of a general nature which state that there are many differences between Ireland and Germany ("*It is true that there are many differences between Ireland and Germany*") and that Ireland has still to improve a great deal. However, it is hard to imagine the name of a country which could not replace that of Ireland in these cases.

The second message is the first contribution from Veronika, a German student. While the post clearly shows her interest in getting to know her partners' culture, the long list of questions is likely to appear long-winded and quite overwhelming for her Irish partners. Instead of offering any insights or information about her own culture in return, Veronika simply presents a long list of questions and, with that, abruptly ends her post ("*That's all for now. I am looking forward to hearing from you!*").

Although these posts were undoubtedly well intentioned, they were unlikely to either contribute to a rich intercultural dialogue or to develop a good working relationship between the groups. To increase student awareness of these issues, both classes were supplied regularly in their contact classes with worksheets containing examples of good and bad practice from their message board. With the help of the teachers, students examined these posts and discussed the characteristics which made a post interesting and useful. Apart from creating worksheets, the teachers also used the opportunity of classroom contact to model examples of possible posts for their students and encouraged learners to put their partners' posts into context by comparing their personalised information and perspectives about the target culture with more *factual* information from textbooks and on-line resources.

Feedback from the German students in the end-of-term interviews suggested that these awareness-raising exercises had been successful:

> Q: Based on your experience with the message board and our class work, what do you feel is necessary to communicate successfully with members of other cultures?
>
> Nadine: Maybe asking questions so they can say something on their own and that's important so its not that we are writing, writing, writing and not exchanging any questions for each other.
>
> Nathalie: It's like writing a letter, you have to ask how the other is, don't ask 10 questions one after another, say your own opinion as well so the other person gets something from it as well.

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Jenny: Sometimes it is hard to express yourself, for example when you are talking about National Pride and these topics, in case you will be misunderstood. Especially when you are writing in English. I am always so afraid, that's why I use a thousand smileys…[laughs]

Nathalie: Yeah, on-line everything just seems to sound so dramatic somehow. If you were talking normally, you would use a gesture but when you just write it, it can come across bad. And if you have to wait for a week, then it can really be misinterpreted.

Q: So how do you avoid this?

Nathalie: Smileys. And you think more about how you say something. You think more about how it is going to be understood by the other.

It is clear from these comments that the combination of class work and on-line interaction had helped to make learners more sensitive to the needs of their readers ("You think more about how it is going to be understood by the other") and, as Jenny's comments illustrate, had increased awareness of cultural misunderstandings.

5.3 Moving learners from monologues to dialogues

It was seen in section four that research on message board interaction had found a tendency for learners to make posts which supplied information or their own opinion but which rarely referred to the posts of others or looked to develop a genuine dialogue. An examination of the posts in this exchange revealed a similar tendency. It was found that 76% of the 202 posts made in the exchange by the German and Irish students were essentially monologic in nature. This meant that students used their posts to supply information about their home culture and to ask questions of their partners, but did not actually refer to the information that others had posted on the board. Only 24% of the posts involved learners critically reflecting on what they had learned about the target culture from their on-line partners or explicitly comparing aspects of both cultures. The difference between the two types of posts can be seen in the examples below:

Monologues
Function: Reporting factual or personal information about one's own culture

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[Anne from German writers] First of all it may help you to know that
I was born in the former GDR and that I and my parents left the
country in 1989, one year before the reunification followed. My
parents were completely against this socialist system there and we
finally got the permission to leave the country after 3 years of
hopeful waiting.
     When the borders were opened one year later, many of the
people who supported the communist regime for a long time, suddenly
moved to West Germany because now they could see their advantages
there. I have made the experience that such people aren't liked
because they are 'false' in some way.
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Message Board Post Extract 4

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Dialogues
Function: Critical reflection on home or target culture or explicitly comparing the two cultures

[Susan from Ireland writes] As far as morality is concerned (and especially sex), I would say that most Irish people are still very conservative. I also notice that when you are in contact with the English, it might be a generalization but they tend to have a completely different attitude than the Irish towards many moral questions. Traces of Catholicism or of not being open-minded are still there with us. [Text has been translated by the authors]

[Jan from Germany writes] In Germany you would never find somebody with pictures of historical persons or something like that. Even putting out the German flag for example for soccer championships etc. is still kind of controversial because of our bad recent history.

Message Board Post Extract 5

The difference between these posts is quite evident. While the first supplies the reader with information about the target culture as the native speaker experiences it and is quite factual in nature, the posts in extracts five and six are more reflective and show learners explicitly comparing the home and target cultures. While both types of posts are important for the intercultural learning process, an exchange which is dominated by the unreflective exchange of information about the two cultures is unlikely to lead to a greater cultural awareness. It is only when meaning is negotiated and cultures explicitly compared and contrasted that learners have the opportunity to become aware of different cultural perspectives (Müller-Hartmann, 2000).

Taking this into account, it was necessary for the teachers in this course to make students aware of the difference between monologues and dialogues in these exchanges and to encourage them to engage more in the latter. However, this proved to be a difficult task and the fact that the high percentage of monologues continued until the end of the exchange would suggest that we were not successful in this area.

We would suggest there were various reasons for this development. Firstly, it can be argued that the question and answer format of the monologic posts is a type of interaction which students are familiar with through traditional classroom interaction, as well as through face-to-face encounters with people from another country. Therefore, students may feel more comfortable engaging in this type of interaction in the e-learning environment. An illustration of this was the following question posed by one of the Irish students to their teacher : "I have answered all my questions now, so what do I do next?" The question, one that was asked regularly by students, demonstrates how students saw their task as being limited to exchanging questions and answers with their partners.

A further reason for this reluctance to engage in open reflection on the target culture and critical comparison between the home and target cultures can be attributed to the fact that, as they have to take on the roles of expert and provider of information about the home culture in the e-learning environment, they are unwilling to take on the added challenge of engaging in comparative and critical dialogue.

In the Irish case, one might also be tempted to attribute the lack of dialogic communication and reflection to the level of competency in the foreign language. However, the first year students participating in the project had either lived in a German speaking

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country for several years or at least had been to a German speaking country several times. Therefore, their reluctance to engage in dialogic communication is unlikely to have been based on their inhibitions or lack of competence to express complex thoughts in a foreign language.

5.4 Establishing and maintaining an effective relationship with teaching partners

It became apparent during this exchange that not only student-student interaction but also the teacher-teacher interaction is very influential on the outcomes of a telecollaborative project. During this project it was seen that, in order to set up a working on-line exchange, the teachers had to provide students with the relevant background information, define the parameters of the exchange, monitor the on-line interaction and guide the students in the creation and analysis of posts. In order to create familiarity with and confidence in the new e-learning environment, the teacher has to provide a traditional classroom environment in order to provide an opportunity for reflection and training. These aspects of the exchange can only be implemented through continuous dialogue between the teachers themselves.

As a first step in their collaboration together, the two teachers had to define their individual aims and course backgrounds to each other and agree on the content of their exchange. Furthermore, it was necessary for them to become familiar with their new tasks, the form of communication, their exchange partner's approach to the exchange and any problems and difficulties arising. The following short extracts from their own e-mail interaction illustrate how the teachers communicated together in order to avoid misunderstandings and communication breakdown between the students. In this case, the Irish students had asked their counterparts in Germany whether it was true that the situation in modern day Germany was similar to that of the Weimar Republic, as they had been told this in one of their classes. In the contact class in Essen, the German students had found this a particularly strange comment. In the following, the teacher of the Irish group explains to her partner in Germany the origins of the misunderstanding:

```
Hi Robert
I asked mine to put in a question about Germany relating to their
Landeskunde lecture....it came across quite harshly, in some cases,
atleast...They mentioned, that their Landeskunde Lecturer drew a
comparison between 1930 and now....Maybe you want to mention in your
class that there was no comparison drawn between the Germany of
today and the early/pre Nazi period, that comment was, according to
them, made with reference to the economic situation, unemployment,
inflation, economic decline. The lecturer is not aware of such a
statement even being made.... Which shows that they actually need
this explained....Just hope yours don't get too irritated by it.
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E-mail Extract 1

Apart from clearing up misunderstandings, it was necessary for the teachers to build up a relationship of trust together, to keep each other informed as to how the students and themselves were experiencing the exchange, and to reach agreements as to how the exchange was to develop from week to week Teaching in an e-learning environment meant for the

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teachers, above all, coordinating their own and their students' requirements and progress along with those of our counterparts and counterparts' students. The partner teachers may not always have similar conditions, motivation and aims and therefore must not be seen as an identical mirror image. It is these underlying differences that need to be articulated and communicated to the counterpart, as exemplified by the following e-mail excerpt:

Hi Katrin,
My plans for the coming weeks in my class are the following:
Tomorrow: Introduce module no.4
Dec 19: Project work in class. Websites are made.
Until when, did you say, could we continue the exchange together? Are your students willing and able to continue after Xmas - maybe until February? If so, maybe we could get them to actually produce sth together – a cross-cultural comparison of some product or practice in both cultures? Let me know your thoughts…
E-mail Extract 2

Hi Robert
we have one more week of teaching before the holidays, we are back on 6 January and we are happy to go until February. Does this make it very awkward for you over the 2 weeks before Christmas when you are still teaching and we are on term break already? I could ask some of the more reliable participants to keep it up, but then probably not for a group but as contact person for all of yours.
E-mail Extract 3

5 Conclusion

This paper reported on a message board exchange carried out between Irish and German foreign language students with the aim of developing their intercultural communicative competence. The research carried out on the exchange highlighted how students require both support and training in order to participate successfully in on-line intercultural exchanges. It was argued that this brings about new tasks and challenges for the teachers as they must provide this training and also play an active role in the telecollaboration by integrating the exchange into their contact classes and establishing a good working relationship with their partner teacher.

We would suggest that the outcomes of this research have three significant consequences for teachers and course developers involved in telecollaboration and on-line learning in general. First of all, it would be advisable that future work in the area should include the creation of materials (both off- and on-line) which provide trainee teachers with authentic examples of the misunderstandings and problems that past exchange participants have experienced. As Müller-Hartmann (1999) rightly points out, the literature in this area often tends to gloss over the problematic aspects of networked learning and focuses exclusively on the positive results of projects. However, it has been shown here and elsewhere (Belz, 2001; 2002) that telecollaboration is a learning activity which involves not only many organisational problems but also often results in misunderstandings and arguments between learners. Teachers need to be prepared for these events and should be given an opportunity in their training courses to explore how these problems can best be resolved.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Secondly, teacher-training courses should also provide future teachers with practice, not only in finding contacts and establishing exchanges, but also in how to train learners in the creation of their on-line correspondence and in the analysis of their partners' posts. A working knowledge of techniques in cultural investigation, such as ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979), may enable both teachers and learners to learn more effectively from the on-line exchanges.

Finally, taking into account this wide range of teacher-related tasks which were reported here, we would, along with Belz (2003), reject any arguments that an increase in the role of telecollaborative activities should mean a reduction in student-teacher contact hours. Language learners stand to benefit most from networked activities when they are firmly integrated into their contact classes. In class, they can receive guidance and instruction from their teachers and can reflect on their learning experiences with the support of their classmates.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press