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Intercultural learning via videoconferencing: a pilot exchange project

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Abstract

This article describes an exchange project carried out by foreign language classes in the University of León, Spain and the University of Northern Michigan, USA. The two groups integrated videoconferencing technology into a task based exchange in order to make students more aware of how they viewed their own and the target cultures. In the course of the project learners also experienced some of the challenges of inter-cultural communication. The development of the project is described and examples of intercultural learning are looked at. Some guidelines for the use of videoconferencing in such intercultural exchanges are also suggested.

1 Introduction

Undoubtedly one of the advantages of introducing new technologies into the language learning classroom is the opportunity they offer for authentic communication with members of other cultures. Various on-line technologies such as e-mail, IRC chat lines and MOOs have all been used by educators to allow language learners to exchange ideas with native speakers and learn about the target culture. (See Warschauer (1995) for examples of cross-cultural projects and Gaer (1999) for an overview of related World Wide Web resources.) However, high financial costs and inevitable technical problems have meant that videoconferencing technology has been slow to become popular among language educators, despite the capability of the medium to enable live face-to-face communication.

Meanwhile, the need to develop intercultural communicative competence in language learners is being constantly confirmed by research into the attitudes and opinions of learners who are spending time in the target culture. Keller (1991) and Coleman (1998) have shown that second and third level students of foreign languages are returning home from periods abroad with reinforced rather than weakened stereotypes of the target community. Furthermore, Coleman (1998) has also found that the returning students are actually liable to have a more negative attitude towards the foreign culture than before. Both writers conclude by calling for students to receive more preparation and training in the cultural challenges that their stay abroad will involve.

It was with this in mind that my class of English Language students at the University of León in Spain and a class of Spanish learners at the University of Northern Michigan,

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USA came together to exploit their videoconferencing facilities and carry out an exchange project based around the medium in the Winter semester 1998/1999. It was felt that the live/interactive nature of this new technology offered great possibilities for language practice and for a rich intercultural exchange. Although not all of the students involved in the exchange intended travelling abroad in the immediate future, it was felt that all language learners could benefit from interacting with native speakers and from being confronted with the challenges of intercultural communication.

As this project implemented videoconferencing technology to improve intercultural competence, it is perhaps useful to first of all review how both videoconferencing and the area of culture have been integrated into foreign language education. Following this, details of the project's development will be outlined and some examples of intercultural learning will be studied in detail. The paper concludes by looking at students' reactions to the exchange and by laying down some guidelines for the use of videoconferencing technology in similar cross-cultural exchanges.

2 Videoconferencing in the foreign language classroom

Videoconferencing is a relatively new medium of electronic communication which allows participants to see and hear each other in real time via TV screens. Although different forms of the technology have already been used in some areas of education over the past decade (for a review, see Roblyer 1997), the financial and technical challenges have meant that it has, by and large, stayed out of reach of most educators. Nevertheless reports of videoconferencing being introduced into language teaching are beginning to emerge in the academic literature and these show the technology being employed in two distinct ways. Firstly, projects such as ReLaTe (Buckett and Stringer, 1997) and the try-out reported by Goodfellow *et al*. (1996) have used videoconferencing for traditional teacher–student based classes where the teacher gave the lesson from one site while the students viewed and participated from another. They, and others, have noted the value of videoconferencing for linking students and teachers who would otherwise have been too far apart in order to work together (Buckett and Stringer, 1997) and also for exposing learners to tone and non-verbal aspects of spoken language which would normally be lost in written or audio conferences (Roblyer, 1997).

The second formula for using videoconferencing in language instruction has been to get language learners speaking to fellow students from the target cultures in exchanges where both sets of participants have an opportunity to speak both their L1 and L2 (i.e. student–student communication). The best known of these exchanges is probably the SAELN project (SAELN, 1996) where final year high school students in England spoke via videoconference with conversation partners in France and Germany on a one-to-one basis in order to practise their respective target languages. Both this and the Mission – Mendecino exchange, a similar project which is reported on the web pages of Pacific Bell (1997), report that student to student videoconferencing resulted in increased motivation and confidence among learners.

Videoconferencing, as used in language learning, has been based on mostly Internet or ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) technology. Internet based programs such as CUSeeMe and NetMeeting allow users to communicate with each other on a point-to-point or, in the case of the latter, multi-point connections, however in both

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cases the bandwidth of the Internet connections has so far limited the software's effectiveness as a learning tool (Buckett and Stringer, 1997). Although the ISDN systems are much more expensive to acquire and operate, the quality of the sound and images has proven to be of quite a high standard and therefore more suitable for the needs of those involved in language instruction.

Apart from the quality of the technology, the biggest challenge for language educators using videoconferencing is dealing with the effects of psychological distance on the content and style of the language used during the conferences. Although videoconferencing allows visual communication, researchers have pointed out that this does not mean that interaction will be the same as when participants are physically present at the same location. Rutter (1984) argues that a low number of social cues in a conversation, resulting from the lack of either physical presence or visual communication, contributes to psychological distance among participants and leads to more depersonalised content and a less spontaneous style in interaction. Esch (1995) asserts that the effects of such psychological distance can be a major barrier to language learning. In the same article she also outlines the challenges that cultural distance pose for the learner. The following section looks at the changing approaches to how the area of culture should be dealt with in the language classroom.

3 The role of culture in foreign language teaching

Increased cross-cultural contact through tourism, business as well as communication technologies has meant that the importance attributed to culture in the language classroom has grown steadily in recent years. This growth of intercultural interaction in our global village has also led to a change in attitudes as to how culture should be taught. These changes that are coming about in the theory and practice of teaching culture in the language classroom will now be examined.

In the 1980s Canale and Swain (1980) and later, van Ek (1987) both highlighted the importance of cultural knowledge and sociocultural competence in the language learning process. Others also made significant contributions to the subject by proposing a model of cultural analysis (Nostrand, 1978), goals of culture teaching (Sealye, 1984) and guidelines for the development of a cultural syllabus (Stern, 1992).

However, the area seems to have failed to play a major role in most textbooks and as a result, teachers appear to have taken an eclectic approach to the teaching of culture, using anecdotal observations and authentic texts as well as specifically developed 'culture capsules' and minidramas (Sealye, 1984) to inform their students about the target culture. Risager (1998) identifies the 'foreign-cultural' or 'monocultural' approach as being the most prevalent in classrooms over the past two decades. The extreme version of this approach concentrates on the principal aspects of the culture associated with the target language, while tending to avoid cultural variations and minorities which may also exist within the target group. The focus is on transmitting facts about the target culture, its people and their lifestyle. The relationship between the target culture and the learners' home culture is rarely taken into consideration and the implicit aims are for the learners to develop a positive attitude towards the culture they are studying and ultimately to take on the norms and values of this foreign culture in order to achieve 'native-like' competence in the target language (Alptekin, 1984; Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1998).

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For various reasons, writers in this area have in recent years begun to take issue with this approach to teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. Some of the more important criticisms are worth noting briefly. Byram, for example, has questioned the desirability and need for learners to try and experience the target culture as natives do. He insists that:

> It is not possible, nor desirable, for learners to identify with the other nor to deny their own identity and culture. Yet in terms of linguistic learning this has been the implicit aim for many years (Byram, 1998: 8).

Secondly, Kramsch (1993, 1998) has pointed out that the modern day realities of multiculturality, multiethnicity and regional nationalism make the description of common national traits a problematic exercise and warns that attempting to identify what is 'typical' of a people may lead to a misleading and over-simplified view of the target culture.

The alternative that has been put forward has become known as the intercultural approach. This proposes that teachers take into account both the learners' home and target cultures in their classes. Instead of encouraging learners to simply study and accept the target culture, teachers are called on to teach an appreciation of the differences and similarities that exist between the learners' culture and that of the target group. Students should be helped to talk in the target language about their own lives and culture in place of carrying out unrealistic learning activities based on situations in a foreign culture they do not know well enough (Prodromou, 1988). Meyer summarises intercultural competence in the following way:

> ...the ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures. Adequacy and flexibility imply an awareness of the cultural differences between one's own and the foreign culture and the ability to handle cross-cultural problems which result from these differences (Meyer, 1990: 137).

The intercultural approach has subsequently led to a new emphasis being placed on the awareness and understanding learners have of their own culture. Risager (1998) reports that both the Danish and British curricula treat the development of cultural self-awareness as one of the central aims of foreign language teaching, while Nostrand (1991) sees "empathy toward other cultures and perspective on one's own" as a prerequisite for achieving proficiency in a foreign language. Kramsch (1993) further develops the theme of self awareness in intercultural learning by elaborating on the complex web of perceptions and counter-perceptions that exist between the members of two interacting cultures. Apart from the actual cultures involved in any cross-cultural communication or learning situation, each culture's view of itself as well as its views of the other culture must also be taken into account by teachers when preparing students for intercultural interaction.

Due to their interactive nature, cross-cultural projects between classes using the World Wide Web or e-mail have proven to be an effective way of implementing this new approach and developing learners' intercultural competence. Technology-enhanced exchange projects such as those reported by Kern (1997) and Soh and Soon (1991) have

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given language learners an opportunity to find out about the target culture and at the same time discover how their own culture is viewed by others. Our project was similarly based on the principles of intercultural learning that have been outlined in this literature review, but in this case videoconferencing, and not the Internet, was the technology used to allow interaction between the two groups.

4 Project description

This author first made contact with Susan Martin, a lecturer in Spanish at Northern Michigan University, through the IECC Intercultural Classroom Connections mailing list in September 1998. Both were interested in developing the cultural aspect of their classes and they believed that the videoconferencing technology available to them would provide an interesting opportunity for intercultural interaction between two groups which would otherwise have practically no contact with the target culture. As can be seen by the learner profiles in Table 1, both groups of learners had been judged to have an Upper-Intermediate level in their foreign language, although the EFL class had been learning their L2 for some years more than their American counterparts. However, more importantly for the development of this project, none of the American group had been to Spain and only a small portion of the Spanish group had visited the USA. For this reason, in pre-project interviews, almost all participants admitted to basing their opinions and attitudes towards the other culture on what they had seen and learned in the home media and school system.

A short questionnaire investigating the attitudes of the Spanish group towards their own and the American cultures (Table 2) revealed a much more positive attitude to the home culture than to the American one, and also showed rather naïve attitudes towards how their own culture would be viewed by their foreign partners. This highlighted the need for learning activities that would make learners question their own stereotypes as well as reconsider how these had originated and how much they could be justified after intense interaction with real members of the target culture.

In order for the videoconferences to be as productive and as focussed as possible, three tasks and a task cycle were developed by the teachers. The tasks involved each group articulating and reflecting on the image they had of their home culture and then contrasting this image with the image the other group had of them and of themselves.

Table 1. *Learner profiles*

University of León	University of Northern Michigan
13 Students of EFL	10 Students of Spanish
Age: 17–19	Age:17–19
Level: Upper Intermediate	Level: Upper Intermediate
Years of L2: 9/10	Years of L2: 3/4
Had visited target culture: 10: No, 3:Yes	Had visited target culture: 10: No.

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Table 2. *Pre-project attitudes: Spanish group (N = 13)*

What adjectives would you use to describe Americans?
Most common responses: "Individualistic" (6), "Patriotic" (6), "Self-Confident" (4).
What adjectives would you use to describe the Spanish?
Most common responses: "Friendly" (7), "Fun"(7), "Home-loving" (5).
Will the American group have a positive image of Spain?
Yes (13). No: (0).
Further comments:
"We are known as nice people", "They probably only know the good things".

Each task was carried out in parallel by the two groups and then their differing results and reactions were compared and discussed when they came face to face in the videoconferences. In the week following the session the third part of the task cycle was completed when video recordings of the conferences were viewed by each group with their teacher so aspects of language and culture which had arisen in the conferences could be looked at and discussed in more detail. These recordings were to prove excellent 'raw material' for intercultural learning and gave students a second opportunity to learn from the contact sessions with the other group. The tasks carried out by the students were as follows:

1. Cultural questionnaires (drawn up by the teachers) based on factual knowledge and opinions about the two cultures, were completed by the two groups. Students were asked, for example, what was the biggest problem facing Spanish/American youth and if there was more sexual discrimination in one country or the other, etc. The results were then tabulated by the teachers and in the videoconference that followed the differing responses were compared, discussed and debated by the learners.
2. Both groups made home-made videos in which they had to present their own town and cultures to the other group. These were then exchanged by post and viewed by the partner class. The videoconference was based on each group's reactions to the video they had received as well as questions they had about its cultural content.
3. The final task involved the groups choosing a film from their country which they felt was in some way representative of their own lives and cultures. These were then exchanged and viewed by the group so, by the time of the videoconference, both groups had seen the same two films. The conference was based on reviews of the films as well as each group justifying why they had chosen their particular film and why they felt it representative of their home culture.

The three videoconference sessions each lasted approximately one hour and it is impor-

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tant to note that not all the time was spent discussing the task of the day. Each session was started by a warm-up activity such as a quiz, and quite often during the sessions conversations would move from one topic to another as students delved deeper into comments made by the other group. At all times the teachers at both sites acted as chairpersons, attempting to keep the conferences moving in a relaxed yet productive manner. In general the videoconferences consisted of half an hour's interaction in Spanish and a half an hour in English. In this way both groups had an opportunity to hear and speak their target language. However, very often the session developed its own dynamic and both languages were used interchangeably, depending on the topic of conversation as well as on the mood and ability of the students.

The videoconferencing technology used in this project operated on one ISDN line which was the equivalent of two telephone lines and involved a 128 Kb connection. The delay between sound and vision in these conditions was of 1.5 seconds. Students worked in a group-to-group setting where they sat together in front of a large screen which showed the other group as well as a smaller image of themselves. Although it would no doubt have added greater depth to the project, it was not possible to integrate an e-mail writing component into this particular exchange due to a lack of suitable facilities at one of the universities.

4.1 Stages of the project

Stage One:	Task carried out and completed in Spain and the USA.
Stage Two:	Videoconference: Groups 'meet' and compare results.
Stage Three:	Review in Spain and USA: Students view and discuss a video recording of the conference.

5 Some examples of intercultural learning from the project

From the very beginning of the project, each group's view of both the home and target cultures was challenged by the interaction in the videoconferences. Some of these are perhaps worth looking at in some detail.

The questionnaire exchange and videoconference which took place soon after revealed that the Spanish group's view of neither themselves nor of the Americans corresponded to the views held by the Michigan group. The American questionnaire showed that many of the students saw the Spaniards as aggressive, disapproving of Jews and chauvinistic in their attitudes to women. (The Spaniards responded that women were treated much more equally in Spain than in the USA.) The discussion via videoconferencing that ensued about the differences in opinion demonstrated that both groups had based opinions on the media and the historical background they had received. The American group in particular reported having based their opinions about the Spaniards on their recent lessons in Spanish history. In the videoconference each group exhibited a great deal of interest in finding out why their counterparts held the views they did and they eagerly encouraged each other to support their generalisations and stereotypes with examples and reasons for their opinions.

The recording of videos by both groups was based on Kramsch's (1993) descriptions

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of tasks for intercultural learning. Students set out to make a video representative of their towns and lives, taking into account what they knew about the target culture. The Spanish students therefore focussed on the medieval parts of León (knowing Northern American towns would not have such buildings), and also looked in detail at Spanish cuisine and nightlife. The American video highlighted the multi-ethnic origins of Northern Michigan's inhabitants as well as visiting an independent local radio station in order to explain the importance given in the USA to free speech. Both videos were notable for their avoidance of stereotypical images. The Spanish group did not include the bull fighting ring in their film, although, for many foreigners, this might have been the most 'Spanish' of León's landmarks. Similarly, the Americans did not show any football or baseball games on their tape.

Kramsch (1993: 208) reminds us that a people's image of a foreign culture is often the 'anti-image' of how they view themselves. The American group's reaction to the film chosen by the Spanish students proved to be a telling example of this, thereby proving to be a very useful intercultural learning activity. The film *Tésis* was chosen by the Spanish because of the popularity of the director among young Spaniards. Also, in the eyes of the Spanish group, the good looking cast and the film's theme of snuff movies seemed to get across a feeling of modernity and 'coolness'. Comments by the class showed that this was at least part of the image of Spain that they wished to present to their American counterparts. However this self-image was soon put to the test by the Americans. In the videoconference that followed the viewing, the Americans expressed incomprehension as to why their partner group had chosen such a violent film. They suggested that there was little difference between this and many mainstream American movies. Obviously the Americans had been expecting something very different to be chosen by the Spanish and it is fair to speculate that this was due to the more traditional image that they had of Spain, an image that would be very different to the way they saw themselves. Feedback by the America group to their teacher showed that the Spaniards had perhaps indirectly challenged this view, attempting to present a young, modern image. This particular discussion was a fascinating example of one group's view of itself clashing with the image that the other group had of them and exemplified the value of these tasks for intercultural learning.

6 Student feedback

Interviews with the students to assess their reactions to the videoconferencing medium and the project in general were carried out after each task was completed and finally when the exchange came to an end. Initial feedback showed that learners felt they had learned both about the target culture and (to an even greater extent) about how the other culture saw their country. This was confirmed in the end of project feedback where 100% of respondents claimed to have learned about these two topics. Furthermore at least half the Spanish group cited these different aspects of culture learning as the most interesting aspects of the project as a whole.

In almost all cases, Spanish students admitted to having underestimated what the Americans would know about Spain and its culture. One student commented:

I learned that it's not good to generalise, because even though many Americans don't

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> even know where Spain is, there are definitely some who know that we exist….

Another student reported having learned something about the target culture from an American counterpart who had spoken in a videoconference about attitudes to religion in the United States:

> The guy with blond hair and glasses, I don't remember his name, he was talking about the different religions in his area and I was surprised because he was speaking for 2 or 3 minutes like a parrot [i.e. a lot] about religion and he was really good doing that. It was a really good explanation.

An American participant remembered how surprised she had been by the contradictory images the two groups had held. Her comments reveal how exchanges such as this can help to develop student awareness of the different images which cultures can hold of each other and of themselves.

> It was amazing – everything we thought about them, they thought the opposite. For example we thought there was more machismo over there and they thought we had more of it.

In the task involving the analysis of the Spanish and American films, Spanish students felt they had learned less about American culture than in other sessions as the conversation had focussed more on the Spanish film (*Tésis*) than on the Americans' choice (*Good Will Hunting*). In this case it was necessary to point out to the learners in the post-videoconferencing session what could be deduced from their commentary on the Spanish film about American attitudes. One of the American students also reported being slightly disappointed with the cultural content of the course as it had tended to focus more on the analysis of stereotypes and intercultural perceptions rather than on more traditional aspects of culture learning such as customs, history and literature. It was interesting to note that this traditional content was what many students had expected from an exchange based on culture learning:

> We were learning what their opinions were on things instead of what their culture was really like. …It was more stereotypes than real culture.

Apart from developing intercultural awareness it was hoped that the project (and especially its videoconferencing element) would provide learners with both reasons and opportunities to practise their target language with native speakers. However, the relatively large number of participants in the Spanish group (10 to 13 attended each session) and the project's short duration made it difficult for all students to speak with their partners as much as they might have wished. As a result, the Spanish learners were less enthusiastic about videoconferencing when asked how they rated it as a tool for practising their foreign language and most did not believe they had learned much new vocabulary during the activities. During the student interviews one commented:

> The videoconferencing wasn't bad but I think we need more of the other activities

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> and ordinary conversation classes so we have more opportunities to talk. This way we will be more fluent.

The American group had started with smaller numbers (10) and even fewer of their group regularly attended the videoconferencing sessions. For this reason, those who did attend in the USA had many opportunities to speak and their attitude to the technology as a language learning tool was much more positive:

> This was a great learning experience for me. I liked seeing what they looked like, hearing their language and getting to practise my Spanish.

Overall, practical limitations such as group size, economic cost, sound quality and time shortage seem to imply that this technology alone will not fulfil students' language needs. Instead it needs to be combined with other language activities such as e-mail exchange and video production which will allow learners to practise the target language with native speakers to a greater extent.

Finally, the feedback interviews illustrated that the project had been received very positively by the learners and proved, as the reviewed literature suggests, that such technology enhanced exchanges can be very motivating for language learners. Respondents reacted well to each individual activity and all agreed that they had enjoyed the project in general.

7 Videoconferencing: lessons learned and guidelines for future use

The experience of using videoconferencing in this project and the feedback from the participating students have enabled this author to draw certain preliminary guidelines as to how this new medium can best be integrated into similar cross-cultural exchanges. Of course three one-hour sessions are insufficient to elicit concrete rules, however further videoconferences carried out by the same teachers since the reported project have so far confirmed the value of the following observations and guidelines.

Recordings of the videoconferences which were viewed by the teachers and by non-participant observers revealed several positive aspects of using the medium. Firstly, students were seen over the three sessions to have become more confident about their ability to interact with native speakers in the target language and more aware of their own body language and presentation skills. When using their L1 with the other group, students spoke more slowly and clearly, avoiding slang and fillers which might make comprehension more difficult for non-natives. It was clear that the participants were carefully watching the expressions of the other group on the screen in order to judge if they were understanding or not. When communication did break down, members of the same group were quick to jump in and help each other to explain things in a clearer, simpler fashion. This sensitivity to the particular needs of the non-native speaker in cross-cultural communication is an important element of intercultural communicative competence.

A further contribution made by videoconferencing to the project was its capacity to integrate all the advantages of live visual images into long-distance communication. This meant, for example, that students became more aware of the cultural differences in

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posture and appearance between their two countries. The Spanish in particular were surprised by the relaxed, 'laid back' posture and expressions of the American group, as well as their tendency to eat and drink in the classroom during the sessions. (The different cultural interpretations of this behaviour proved to be an interesting topic for conversation in one of the feedback sessions.) During the videoconferences it was possible for the groups to play video extracts, show pictures and even make short performances in order to illustrate points that were being discussed. One of the highlights of this was when some of the Spanish group performed different local dances in front of the cameras. All these visual aspects contributed to making the exchange lively and exciting and perhaps much more 'life-like' than a written project would have been.

The medium nevertheless has its limitations and drawbacks and these have already been well documented elsewhere in the literature (Schiller and Mitchell, 1992). The idea of one group of ten learners trying to interact simultaneously with another cannot be considered a 'natural' or ideal learning environment and this, combined with practical problems such as time lag, interruptions and the tendency for participants to sit passively in front of the video screen made it necessary to adopt certain guidelines in order to keep the sessions moving at a relaxed yet constructive pace. These can be summarised as follows:

- The frequent use of visual materials in the form of illustrations, photos and short video clips allows both students and teachers to take a break from keeping the conversation constantly going during the hour long session and also permits the groups to present colourful and interesting aspects of their home culture.
- As already pointed out by O'Connaill *et al*. (1993), the practical limitations of videoconferences mean that the medium is usually not suited to casual chats and general discussion. The content and structure of sessions should therefore be planned well in advance and participants should have a clear idea of what information they need to get from the other group by the end of the meeting.
- In order to get students used to the technology as well as to the practicalities of group to group interaction, sessions should start off with ice breaker activities such as short quizzes or vocabulary games where both groups get to interact with each other.
- When interacting, students should, when possible, address one particular member of the other group by name. In this way it is clear who has to respond to the comment or question, shyer students will be included in the discussions and this will also contribute to the creation of a more friendly, personal relationship between the two groups.
- Finally, it was found that non-verbal signals to show understanding or non-comprehension was much more effective than verbal responses as the latter had the effect (coupled with the time lag) of interrupting speakers in mid-sentence.

8 Conclusion

The central aim of this exchange was to encourage students to be more sensitive to the views and assumptions of their foreign counterparts when engaging in intercultural communication. It was hoped that students would recognise that their way of seeing themselves and the other culture is not necessarily the same as that of their counterparts.

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This was not to encourage a pointless debate on the rights and wrongs of these opinions but rather to develop both a greater respect for what is foreign and at the same time a better insight into how others see us. To achieve this, videoconferencing proved to be a powerful medium for intercultural learning between these two groups, enabling students to observe and interact with members of the target culture operating in their native language. The potential for such technology in the language classroom is surely awesome but, as has been pointed out, it is limited by a variety of factors – time, cost, logistics and technical quality. For these reasons this paper has attempted to lay down some guidelines for the effective use of the medium and has outlined some tasks that have been seen to work well in this environment. Discovering other culture learning activities which are best suited to this technology offers perhaps some interesting possibilities for future research.

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