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Critical success factors in a TRIDEM exchange

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Abstract

Computer-mediated-communication (CMC) tools allowing learners to be in contact with native speakers of their target language in other locations are becoming increasingly flexible, often combining different modes of communication in a single web- and internet-based environment. The literature on telecollaborative exchanges reveals, however, that online intercultural communication between language learners "often fails to achieve the intended pedagogical goals" (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006:624) and warns that "exposure and awareness of difference seem to reinforce, rather than bridge, feelings of difference" (Kern, 2000:256). Yet, research into the reasons for lack of success in CMC-based partnership-learning has, so far, only been carried out on a relatively small scale (see, for example, Thorne, 2005, Ware, 2005, O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). In autumn 2005, students of French at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), USA and adult learners of French at the Open University (OU), UK were joined by native French speakers studying for an MA in distance education at the Université de Franche Comté (UFC), France in a pilot Tridem project in which all participants worked on the completion of a series of collaborative tasks. The *Tridem* partners met over several weeks in an internet-mediated, audio-graphic conferencing environment. The project output, a shared reflection in French and English on cultural similarities and differences, took the form of several collaborative blogs. The paper draws on data from pre- and post-questionnaires, from the work published by the learners in the blogs and from post-treatment, semi-structured interviews with volunteer participants. Beyond considering some of the known factors influencing success and failure in CMC-based collaborations such as discrepancies in target language competence among learners, this article also explores affective issues and difficulties arising from varying levels of multimodal communicative competence. The insights gained are mapped against O'Dowd and Ritter's (2006) 'inventory of pitfalls' in telecollaboration. The result is a tentative framework which allows those involved in setting up and running telecollaborative exchanges to gauge both degree and nature of some of the risks they are likely to encounter.

Keywords: Telecollaboration, Tridem, asynchronous and synchronous language learning environments, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), multimodal communicative competence

1 Introduction

Networked computing and the ensuing wealth of opportunities for communication outside face-to-face language classroom settings continue to offer new potential as well

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as new challenges to research and language pedagogy. In an overview of trends in online language learning and research, Kern, Ware and Warschauer (2004) identify linguistic interaction, intercultural learning, and ICT literacy and identity as key areas of dynamic development. The current contribution is mainly concerned with linguistic interaction and intercultural learning and draws on findings from a three-way telecollaborative pilot project – a *Tridem* exchange – with participants from the US, the UK and France in 2005. Learners engaged in a series of collaborative tasks using blogs to produce presentations on intercultural issues. Concurrently, they used the OU's synchronous audio-graphic conferencing software, *Lyceum*, in timetabled online sessions with tutors to monitor progress, and in smaller, informal meetings scheduled by the participants to discuss their blog activities and to socialise. In line with the research reported by O'Dowd and Ritter (2006), preliminary findings from the present study imply that success in telecollaboration may depend on an array of often interconnected factors (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). They also suggest that asynchronous multimodal communication enjoyed greater popularity among participants than its synchronous counterpart.

The first part of this article is dedicated to a brief introduction to telecollaboration in general and virtual learning partnerships among three different groups of participants, i.e. *Tridems*, in particular. Next, the *Tridem* pilot project is presented. This includes information about the participants, the tools used and the structure of their exchanges. Finally, the paper provides a summary of the main challenges faced by the participants in terms of differences in target language competence, impact of affective variables, differential awareness of affordances in multimodal learning environments, and differential assessment of intercultural learning experience. While some these factors have been reported by other researchers (for lack of proficiency in target language competence see, for example, Belz 2001), others, such as the impact of varying levels of multimodal communicative competence among participants have, to the author's knowledge, as yet received hardly any attention (see, for example, Hampel & Hauck, 2006). In the subsequent discussion, the issues raised will be mapped against O'Dowd's and Ritter's (2006) structured overview of factors influencing success and failure in telecollaboration, an approach based on their contention that "a more discriminating perspective of potential challenges […] can help to further increase intercultural awareness and the likelihood of satisfying results" (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006:638). The concluding remarks will argue that challenges arising from the affordances of the online learning context – more specifically the constraints and possibilities for meaning making and communication offered by the available modes (Hampel, 2006) – need to be more systematically considered by research and practice in internet-mediated learning of languages and cultures.

2 Background: Telecollaboration

Of all the forms of internet-based language learning and teaching, it is telecollaboration that offers the greatest opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic collaboration of language learners on a global level (see Thorne, 2005). O'Dowd and Ritter (2006: 623) define telecollaboration as "the use of online communication tools to bring together language learners in different countries for the development of collaborative

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project work and intercultural exchange." Apart from the linguistic benefit, the potential increase in the participants' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) – comprising skills, attitudes, knowledge, and critical cultural awareness as established by Byram (1997) – may thus be the main attraction of such projects. Telecollaborative exchanges cover a wide range of activities and draw on a variety of both asynchronous and synchronous or quasi synchronous online tools ranging from email, discussion forums and chat to instant messaging, audio-, audio-graphic and video-conferencing. More recently, tools facilitating co-publishing of project work such as blogs and wikis have also started to gain in importance (Godwin Jones, 2003).

The pilot project which is the backdrop for this article was based on the use of two different online environments – one synchronous and one asynchronous – and linked learners from *three* different parts of the world in a *Tridem*. This approach was partly informed by findings from an earlier study carried out at the OU (see Hampel, Felix, Hauck & Coleman, 2005).

Pedagogically, one of the main aims of this study was to break away from the standard format of tandem exchanges, which can lead to confrontation between two groups of participants, with a consequent hardening of differences (see, for example, Kern, 2000). With a wider range of participants we wanted to attempt a more dynamic, comparative approach to intercultural encounter (Hauck & Lewis, forthcoming). Learners of French in the UK and the US from various ethnic backgrounds worked with native speakers in France with similarly mixed ethnic profiles such as, for example, a French participant of Moroccan origin. A secondary goal of the project was for learners to be able to publish their joint project output in blogs.

2.1 Critical success factors in synchronous online language learning

In the earlier study referred to above (Hampel *et al*., 2005), in order to find out more about the benefits and pitfalls of using audio-graphic conferencing tools to facilitate collaborative language learning across time, geographical space and individual difference, learners from the UK, Australia and Germany participated in an intensive exchange on the specific topic of *Heimat* and identity. Among other issues, the authors highlight the following critical success factors:

- Successful online communication depends on the participants' familiarity with the available tools and their meaning making potential and on their ability to cope with the simultaneity of several meaning making processes (e.g. in audio-graphic conferencing: audio channel + several shared graphic interfaces + (at times) text chat), i.e. the challenge of having to multi-task.
- Personality inherent issues such as "tolerance of ambiguity" and "locus of control" (White, 1999) have a direct influence on the learners' ability to assume responsibility for the shared control over the learning process offered in online environments. Tolerance of ambiguity relates to the learners' (and tutors') reaction to periods of uncertainty and confusion experienced in new learning processes (e.g., learning of languages and cultures through telecollaboration) and environments (e.g., audio-graphic conferencing). Locus of control refers to whether they see internal factors (e.g., ability to manage one's expectations) or

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> external factors (e.g., affordances of a specific CMC application) as key components for their success or failure. (Hampel *et al.*, 2005:25-28)

Thus, learners and tutors with an external locus of control experiencing language and/or technological anxieties tend to blame the CMC application if they run into difficulties. Yet, anxieties caused by the learning context and those related to the language learning process are not necessarily inextricably linked, and some learners' perceived anxieties around the foreign language might actually be related to the way in which communication has to be carried out in an online learning environment, or, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) put it, the communicative potential provided by each available tool. The *Tridem* pilot project was designed with these observations in mind.

3 The TRIDEM project: Methodological approach, participants, tools and structure of the exchange

3.1 Methodological approach

Research aims were to study the relationship between the affordances of synchronous and asynchronous multimodal environments and their impact on

- learner experience and interaction
- the development of ICC.

The action research protocol was jointly agreed among all three partner institutions. The prime aim was to assemble a comprehensive body of data through

- pre- and post-treatment questionnaires
- post-treatment semi-structured interviews
- screen data capture (using CAMTASIA)
- audio recordings (synchronous environment)
- student production (synchronous and asynchronous environment/blogs

The findings presented in section 4 are based on a preliminary qualitative and quantitative analysis of learner feedback from the questionnaires and – to a lesser extent – learner evaluations posted to the project blogs. Some of the feedback referred to in section 4.1 is based on comments made by participants during post-treatment semi-structured interviews with 9 volunteers. Table 1 gives an overview of the information elicited through the questionnaires.

3.2 Participants

This project brought together the following exchange partners:

- 5 adult learners from the Open University (UK)
- 10 campus based students from Carnegie Mellon University (USA) and
- 10 French native speakers enrolled in a MA programme for distance education

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Table 1 *Information obtained through pre- and post-treatment questionnaires*

Questionnaires	
Pre-questionnaire	**Post-questionnaire**
ICT background	Reaction to the learning environments and tasks chosen for the exchange
Language background (perceived proficiency level)	Perceived cultural learning
Priorities in skills acquisition	
Perceived features of successful language learning	
Anxieties in language learning contexts (based on Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale)	
Importance attached to awareness of learning environment and its affordances	

(Master FOAD[1]) at the Université de Franche Comté (France) taught partly on site partly at a distance.

The student participants were complemented by a team of 7 tutor-researchers from all three institutions. Table 2 summarises some of the circumstances under which each learner group took part in the project.

While the UK learners were already familiar with the audio-graphic conferencing application, *Lyceum*, – their 'natural' tuition environment – the French and American students had to be trained in the use of this application. However, more than half of the participants (3 from the UK, 4 from the US, and 7 from France) had already created and managed a blog or at least contributed to one. Table 3 provides information regarding the learners' diverse backgrounds.

3.2 Tools

Lyceum provides multiple synchronous audio channels for live online discussion as well as a limited version of synchronous text chat, and several shared graphic interfaces (for a more detailed description of the available modes and their affordances see Hampel & Hauck, 2006). In addition, 10 password-protected blogs were created for groups of two or three students using a freely-available application (http://www.blogger.com).

3.2.1 Why blogs?

Hiler (2002) stresses that blogging has the capacity to engage people in collaborative

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Table 2 *General circumstances of participation at each institution*

	Participants (n=25)		
Institutions	**Open University (5)**	**Carnegie Mellon University (10)**	**Université de Franche Comté (10)**
Participation during term time	-	√	√
Participation linked to course work	-	√	√
Participation linked to continuous and end of course assessment	-	√	√
Participation from home during scheduled synchronous sessions	√	-	√
Participation from a computer lab during scheduled synchronous sessions	-	√	-
Participation from home during informal synchronous sessions	√	√	√
Posted to blogs from home	√	√	√
Familiarity with audio-graphic conferencing (*Lyceum*)	√	-	-
Familiarity with blogs	√	√	√

Table 3 *Learner backgrounds*

Participants (n=25)		**Learner backgrounds**	
Open University (5)	Mature students, i.e. on average older than their American and French partners	Various ethnic backgrounds Studying French at advanced level; at time of project in gap period between the end of one OU course and the beginning of the next	Experience of travel outside the UK
Carnegie Mellon University (10)	First year students	Various ethnic backgrounds Studying French at advanced beginners level	Relatively little experience of travel outside the US
Université de Franche Comté (10)	Graduates with a professional interest in the use of ICT for educational purposes	Various ethnic backgrounds Intermediate to advanced level speakers of English	Experience of travel outside France

activity, knowledge sharing and debate, and Williams and Jacobs (2004: 1) see blogging as "a product of convenience rather than design" that has evolved along lines similar to other forms of human communication. Jacobs (2003: 1) describes blogging as follows:

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Table 4 *Structure of the exchange and use of learning environments*

***Tridem* pilot project**				
Week	**Steps**	**Environment**		**Activity**
			Who?	**What?**
1 + 2	'warm-up' Period	Blogs	tutors	a. create blogs b. send invitations to members from each participating institution
			students	a. familiarise with basic blog functionalities (written entries, comments, pictures + text or captions) b. post individual introductory profiles
		Lyceum	tutors	run two online training sessions at each institution with focus on technical aspects/ features of learning environment
			students	a. 'play' with tools b. get a 'feel' for their meaning making potential
3-8	main phase	Blogs	tutors	a. every fortnight post an outline for a collaborative task which required students to make use of the specific affordances of either *Lyceum* or their blog b. post reminders for scheduled synchronous sessions c. read/look at student's work
			students	a. use the foreign language b. help their partners to practise their foreign language c. prepare/publish information about their immediate (e.g. student accommodation, family home, etc.) and wider environment (e.g. facilities used during leisure time activities) and its characteristics d. comment on cultural differences/ similarities e. reflect on experience during the project as a whole
		Lyceum	tutors	a. facilitate fortnightly-scheduled online sessions where members of two *Tridem*s are allocated to larger groups b. make sure that everybody contributes/ gets an opportunity to talk c. monitor progress
			students	a. meet members of other *Tridem*s b. make presentations c. comment on/discuss content of presentations
10	final week	Blogs	tutors	read student evaluations (see below)
			students	post individual or joint evaluation of a. work done during the exchange b. different ways of working during the exchange (synchronous/asynchronous, oral/written, mother tongue/ foreign language) c. usefulness of learning environments/tools
		Lyceum	tutors students	facilitate discussion of evaluations summarise and discuss their evaluations

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> "Based on the reverse chronological posting of news items, invariably containing hyperlinks to third party sites, and an opportunity for readers to enter personal responses to articles, this otherwise quite organic and unstructured format of delivering information via the World Wide Web (WWW) came to be known as 'blogging', after 'web log' was abbreviated to 'blog'."

Using an asynchronous environment alongside a synchronous application for this telecollaborative exchange was based on the idea that a tool, such as a blog, facilitates self-publishing of project work and encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of the participants, who, as Godwin Jones (2003:13) points out, are more likely to "be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real audience. This same degree of personal responsibility is lacking in discussion forums." Moreover, it was hoped that the interspersed use of an asynchronous environment between synchronous online meetings would:

- foster a minimum level of continuous interaction among the learners
- have a positive effect on the momentum of the project.

In both online environments, learners had access to tools which enabled them to design, author, edit and – in the case of blogs – publish their own multimodal texts, that is texts where "several semiotic modes" are used "in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined – they may for instance reinforce each other […], fulfil complementary roles […] or be hierarchically ordered." (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001:20)

3.3 Structure of the exchange

The duration of the project was ten weeks. Following the principle of Tandem language learning (Little & Brammerts. 1996) where the same amount of time is dedicated to each of the languages involved, participants were asked to use French and English each 50% of the time in both environments and to avoid switching back and forth between the two languages. Table 4 gives an overview of the structure of the exchange including the use of the learning environments:

The asynchronous student work in the blogs complemented the more formal and scheduled synchronous sessions, providing participants with the possibility of exchanging ideas and jointly-prepared presentations for online meetings and/or to publish work prepared in *Lyceum* afterwards in the blogs. Students were also asked to use this forum for their shared reflection on their experiences during the project.

Some preliminary findings from the pilot project are presented in the next section. It will, however, be some time before more rigorous conclusions can be drawn from the copious data collected.

4 Preliminary findings

The pre-questionnaire (n=25) provided useful bio-data and showed that most respondents wanted primarily to enhance their speaking (12) and/or listening skills (10)

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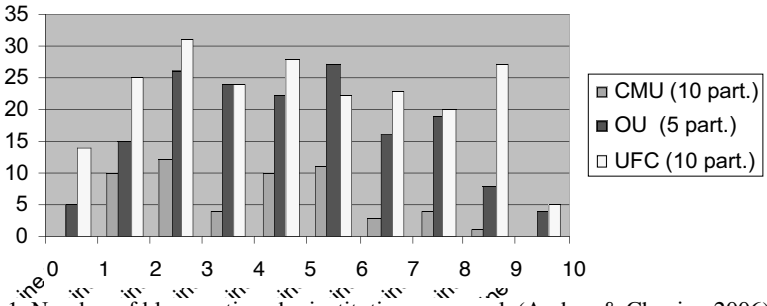


Fig. 1 Number of blog postings by institutions per week (Audras & Chanier, 2006)

rather than reading, writing or grammar. Only four participants declared initially that they wanted to concentrate on improving their writing in French. Yet, the increasing popularity enjoyed by the blogs during the exchange indicates that the participants' focus in terms of skills development experienced a shift, that it proved too challenging for *Tridem* partners to arrange synchronous meetings outside the scheduled events or that one might have been a consequence of the other (see section 4.3). In line with the research aims outlined above and the focus of the information gathered in the pre- and post-treatment questionnaires, the following four sections concentrate on findings regarding discrepancies in target language competence, affective variables, differential awareness of learning environment specific affordances, and differential assessment of cultural knowledge gain.

4.1 Linguistic competence

The suggested use of both languages during the exchange was supposed to alleviate the differences in target language competence, if not remedy the situation completely. However, the difficulties seemed at times insurmountable. In their post treatment interviews, all US participants mentioned feelings of inferiority in both environments and intense moments of performance anxiety during the synchronous online meetings as the main reasons for a sharp drop in their motivation, despite their enthusiastic participation during the 'warm-up' sessions in the audio-graphic conferencing environment. These feelings had a direct impact on their readiness to contribute to the French part of the synchronous sessions and are probably also responsible for a significantly lower number of postings to the blogs by the US partners as illustrated in Figure 1.

The *Tridem* partners and some members of the project team interpreted this low level of participation as a lack of commitment or, as the following reaction of a French participant to a posting of her American blog partner shows, as the intention to contribute just the minimum necessary to the project:[2]

2. Neither the British nor the French partners, however, were aware of the fact that the US students were learning French 'on the side' operating under extreme time constraints and often stretched to their limits by a very tightly scheduled study programme.

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" … Son intervention est très neutre et distante comme si elle publiait un message par obligation."

Translation: Her participation is very neutral and distant, as if she were writing a message as a matter of duty.

This interpretation is in line with Belz's (2001) findings suggesting that a lack of proficiency in the target language can lead to students writing shorter messages than their partners which can be seen as a lack of openness and friendliness. Such assumptions indicate that – apart from target language competence and personal and/or geographical time constraints – there are other key factors like, for example, affective issues influencing success or failure in telecollaborative encounters.

4.2 Affective variables

The majority of respondents (16) had initially expressed the view that:

- 'enthusiasm and motivation' (rank 1),
- 'willingness to communicate' (rank 2), and
- 'ability to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses' (rank 3)

were important for successful language learning.

The French participants had ranked 'being self-aware' in fourth position whereas the British students opted for 'being able to take risks' and the American learners for 'being able to seek help'. All had thus acknowledged the important role played by affective variables and metacognitive knowledge – particularly self-knowledge – and metacognitive strategies such as learner self-management (for a more detailed explanation on the role of metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive strategies and CMC see Hauck 2005). While most participants found group support *quite important* (10) or *very important* (7), they manifested very different language anxiety profiles, with American students consistently opting for responses indicating lower self-confidence levels, and French partners at the opposite end . Those among the US learners, however, who had manifested higher confidence levels at the outset, seemed to welcome the challenge of making linguistically more daring moves:

"I was very excited about the online sessions. I thought it was a very interesting experience to be able to talk to people in other countries in French and English. I found it very challenging though, which is good" (US participant)

These observations bear out findings from previous studies carried out at the OU (Hauck 2005, Hauck & Hurd, 2005, and Hampel *et al.*, 2005) which reveal that the impact of affective factors and meta-cognition remains under-researched in CMC-based language learning and their explicit recognition a pedagogical desideratum.

Half of the respondents found 'not seeing or not being seen by the other learners' to be neither a positive nor a negative experience and some (5) even found it to be an outright positive event. Interestingly enough, representative feedback from the latter viewpoint

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Table 5 *Importance attached to awareness of learning context*

	Participants (n=25)				
	Essential	**Very important**	**Quite important**	**Useful but not essential**	**Not important at all**
When learning a language online awareness of the learning environment (i.e. finding out what you can do with tools such as Websites,blogs, e-mail, chat rooms, video-conferencing,etc.) is ...	9	7	4	4	1
When learning a language online support in achieving such awareness (i.e. initial training in the use of the available tools) is …	6	9	6	4	0
When learning a language online, choice of tools (e.g. Websites, blogs, e-mail, chat-rooms, video-conferencing, etc.) is …	6	10	4	4	1

is consistent with the higher confidence levels manifested by the French partners at the beginning of the project:

> "*Ne pas voir la personne en face de moi est quelque chose d'excitant. Je pose des questions que je ne poserais pas si je voyais et si je connaissais la personne. Cela permet de découvrir la personne sans avoir d'a priori*."
>
> Translation: I find that it is exciting not to see the person in front of me. I ask questions which I would not ask if I saw the person and if I knew her/him. This allows me to discover the person without any preconceived ideas.

The differences in importance attached to seeing one's partner in a telecollaborative exchange corroborates learner reactions to the lack of body language observed by Hauck and Hurd (2005:n.p.):

> "[W]hile participants in online language learning may experience a 'loss of embodiment', this is – at times – perceived as an advantage as it allows learners to remain 'incognito' and to speak more freely."

Yet, some of the less linguistically able participants in the present study found having to speak to an 'invisible' audience anxiety-inducing. This emphasizes the affective dimension of virtual contact between language learners and points to the important influence of learning context specific affordances on success or failure in telecollaboration.

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4.3 Learning context

Those who contributed regularly to the blogs became confident users of this asynchronous CMC tool whereas – despite the initial training sessions and four subsequent scheduled online meetings – not all learners were able to make full use of the resources available in *Lyceum* by the end of the project. While a few created, for example, quite sophisticated presentations of their living space including photos and captions, a floor plan of their apartment, and an accompanying document describing special features – all of which were subsequently published in one of the blogs – others remained totally unaware of available tools and their potential for making meaning and representation and thus for language learning in general and intercultural communication in particular.

The majority of respondents (16) though had initially agreed that 'awareness of the learning environment' was *very important* if not *essential* when learning a language online and had attributed similar importance to 'support in achieving such awareness'. Most participants had thus recognised the significance of both contextual knowledge – a vital part of learner self-management knowledge as defined by Rubin (2001) – and multimodal communicative competence as defined by Royce (2002:92) that is "the ability to understand the combined potential of various modes for making meaning."

Moreover the task design encouraged students to get together informally in *Lyceum* in between scheduled meetings and to contribute regularly to their blogs in order to become increasingly familiar with the available tools (modes) and their affordances. Yet, *Tridem* members only managed an average of 2–3 informal synchronous gatherings. As Fig. 2 illustrates, some *Tridems* did not meet outside the scheduled events at all.[3]

Halfway into the project, the project team therefore decided to merge some Tridems to reduce the number of blogs and to ensure that – at least in the asynchronous environment – more active participants met similarly-minded counterparts and to compensate for the smaller number of UK partners. Those who did manage to get together in *Lyceum*, though, seem to have appreciated the opportunity to meet their partners on a more intimate level:

> "Mostly, in our private meetings, we shared more information about ourselves. I would say the main purpose of our meetings was to socialise. They were always interesting because I got to see things about X that I wouldn't otherwise get to see." US participant

Overall learners contributed more actively to the blogs (Fig. 3). A juxtaposition of the data (in Fig. 4) shows the difference in usage of both environments: The benefits drawn from working in an asynchronous environment are summarised by participants as follows:

> "It allowed us to form a sort of relationship which was very conducive to learning." UK participant

3. Only those informal synchronous sessions could be counted that had been explicitly arranged by *Tridem* members in their respective blogs.

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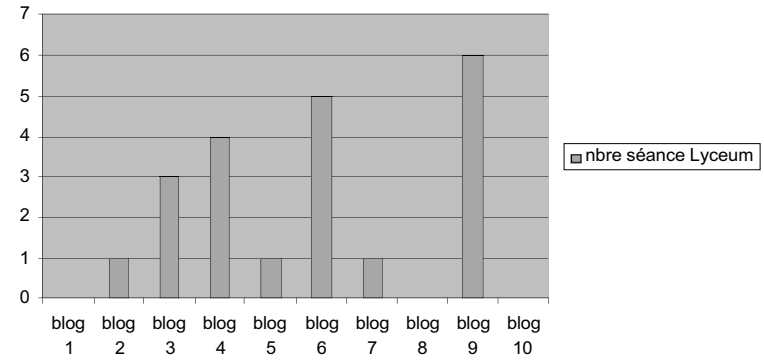


Fig. 2 Number of informal *Lyceum* sessions per *Tridem* (before merger of *Tridem*s in week 5; Audras & Chanier 2006)

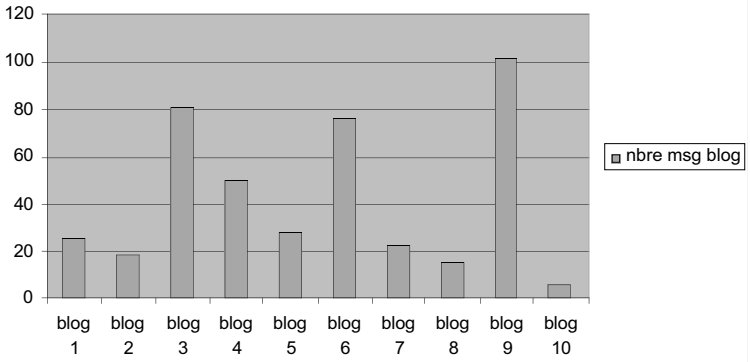


Fig. 3 Number of messages posted per *Tridem* (before merger of *Tridem*s in Week 5; Audras & Chanier 2006)

"Le fait d'avoir des traces de l'évolution des relations entre le groupe. J'ai fait l'expérience en relisant l'ensemble des messages, dès le début du travail. J'ai remarqué que les expressions changeaient au fur et à mesure de l'évolution des échanges."

Translation: There were traces of the way the relationship in the group had evolved. I have re-read all the postings from the very beginning. I have realised that the way we expressed ourselves changed in accordance with the progress of the project.

4.4 Cultural learning

Data from the post-questionnaires shows that the majority of respondents (14) found it useful to have a concrete outcome to work towards. Feedback on the task, however, which had been designed along the US participants' syllabus, was less unanimous:

"I found them very interesting. Most of the time, we would start out talking about

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that and end up talking about a completely different topic. […] It was really neat though to have that base to grow from." (US participant)

"J'ai trouvé les thèmes un peu trop « classiques » et ils n'offraient pas véritablement la possibilité de négocier, de reformuler, de défendre des idées."

Translation: I found the topics a little too "classical" and they did not really offer the possibility of negotiating with your partners, to express things in different ways, to defend different viewpoints.

"I enjoyed it. I did not find the tasks boring because you could make them as simple or complex as you wanted. People's contributions were interesting and the differences in cultures and lifestyles were fascinating. I found it rewarding."
UK participant

Asked to name up to three new facts they had discovered about their partners' culture(s) in the course of the project over half (9) of those who responded agreed on having learned more about their partners as individuals rather than about their respective cultures. The following reply indicates, however, that nonetheless some 'hidden' cultural learning took place:

"We didn't speak so deeply about each others culture, but I was able to learn a lot about my partner as a person. She likes to ballroom dance, particularly the tango, she enjoys learning many languages, and she also has a drive to help support breast cancer awareness. These are all attributes that are very similar to me. Through this, I realized that even though we're from different countries, we still have so much in common and share many interests. And this was a comforting feeling." (US participant)

The following is a representative selection of answers from those who did name up to three new cultural facts they had learned:

"The architecture and home planning is different (open kitchen… courtyards. School systems are different." (US participant)

"Habitudes alimentaires – Vie plus calme: rapport avec la nature / sport très fort - Personnes très ouvertes et curieuses."

Translation: Eating habits – a calmer life: relationship with nature / strong interest in sports – very open and curious people.

"The traditional Moroccan house is built around an attractive courtyard open to the sky. Moroccan food is very varied and looks and tastes wonderful. In the US students start their working day very early." (UK participant)

Two respondents felt that participating in the project had changed their view of their

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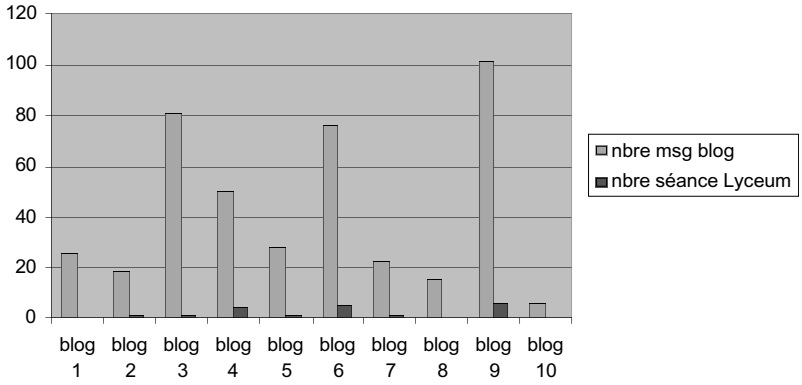


Fig. 4 Number of informal *Lyceum* sessions compared with number of messages posted to blogs (Audras & Chanier 2006)

partners' culture(s). One of them made the following observation:

> "I did not fully understand the reasons why immigrant ghettos had arisen in France until my partner explained the background. I had no idea that my Moroccan partner would have found inspiration in a book written by Martin Gray about the tragic loss of his family during and after the second world war - I now have this book and look forward to learning where she found her inspiration and to sharing it."
> UK participant

Another respondent felt that the project had confirmed her previous impressions about their partners' culture giving the following example:

> "*Leur goût pour le sport dans les grandes universités par exemple*."
>
> Translation: Their taste for sport in the big universities, for example.

Unlike many telecollaborative exchanges where the outcome is mainly a "confirmation of negative attitudes and stereotypes towards the target culture" (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006:624) the *Tridem* project could thus be classified as a successful instance of "internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education" (Thorne, 2005). Yet, such an assessment would be premature and ignore important lessons learnt by the project team. The reasons are discussed in the following section.

5 Discussion

Although there seemed to be an overall positive evaluation of the project as well as some tangible cultural knowledge gain by the learners – at least among those who responded to the post-treatment questionnaire – the imbalance of contributions to the blogs (see Fig. 1) and the comparatively low number of opportunities seized by participants to meet their exchange partners on an informal level (see Fig. 2) as well as a

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closer look at some of the project evaluations posted to the blogs leaves the author with the impression that the Tridem project is a case of 'failed communication' in telecollaborative interaction (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Such exchanges are characterised by low levels of participation and often end in indifference if not tension between participants. On the basis of a comprehensive review of the literature on 'failed communication' in telecollaboration complemented by their own experience O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) propose a structured inventory of factors which may lead to cases of failure in online exchanges and show how problem areas at various levels such as, for example, individual, sociocultural and institutional factors, are often interconnected. Some of these have also come to the fore in the present pilot project:

5.1 Socio-institutional factors and learner motivation and expectations

First of all there are institutional aspects extensively researched and documented by Belz and Müller-Hartmann (see, for example, Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003) such as divergent academic calendars and different approaches to assessment. While the US term had started in early September, the French participants whose course commenced at the beginning of October determined the overall start date of the project, a moment where the British students had just finished their exams. Not long into the project, then, the Americans turned out to be much more oriented towards grades and thus task focused than their *Tridem* partners which – apart from the time pressure and affective factors mentioned earlier – explains their minimalist, to-the-point interaction and seems to confirm Ware's (2005) observations regarding reasons for low group functionality in the context of an exchange between advanced learners of English and German in the US and Germany. In both instances the American participants asked far fewer personal questions and made fewer attempts to establish interpersonal relationships with their partners.

In the *Tridem* project, however, the French participants had been asked to keep a project diary documenting every single interaction with their partners in both environments thus creating a comprehensive portfolio of the exchange as a whole. The British students, on the other hand, were not bound to the project by any form of assessment and were mainly interested in practising their French and making international contacts. This underlines the important influence of differences in degree and nature of participant motivation between both individual partners and entire groups on the outcome of online partnerships identified by Ware (2005). Comparable to the structure of her study, success in the *Tridem* project would have meant that students frequently checked movements in the asynchronous environment and invested a considerable amount of time to post comments, new messages, picture material and/or sound files which – in the case of one entire group of participants – clashed with the scale of their remaining academic commitments.

5.2 Level of intercultural competence and cultural differences in communicative style and behaviour

O'Dowd (2003) highlights how time constraints and the linguistic ability to engage in effective exchanges with the partner impact on the extent to which intercultural

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competence can be developed and/or further enhanced through telecollaboration. He sees the key to interculturally rich relationships in the partners' ability to express personal opinions, asking questions and inviting feedback bearing the sociopragmatic rules of the target language in mind and – as he stresses on another occasion (O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004) – the tutors' ability to support learners in sending culturally rich messages. In the present project, the US participants were – at least from a linguistic point of view - clearly disadvantaged in this respect and could simply not engage in interculturally rich exchanges in the target language. The team of tutor-researchers involved had focused mainly on technological challenges posed by the chosen online environments during their preparatory work with the participants. However, bearing sociopragmatic rules of the partners' language in mind might remain a challenge in projects where partners from three or more countries are involved, considering that each partner group is likely to be multicultural in itself nowadays (see, for example, comment on Moroccan houses in section 4.3). Moreover, it is by now well established that the internet itself and thus internet-based applications such as audio-graphic conferencing, also reflect cultural principles and values. The challenge becomes greater yet, if one bears in mind that users of the Internet – including online language learners – are influenced by their culture specific communicative and behavioural norms which might well be different from those of other internet users like, for example, their telecollaborative partners (see, for example, Belz, 2003).

5.3 Tutor-tutor relationship

Of significance, O'Dowd and Eberbach (2004) and O'Dowd and Ritter (2006:627) also take into account collaboration between tutors in online exchanges who "contrary to other team-teaching efforts […] often do not even know each other face to face" and emphasize the need "to develop a good online working relationship together in order to co-ordinate and reach agreement on the many aspects of the exchange". Although all tutor-researchers were committed to a student-centred, communicative, meaning-focused, collaborative, social-constructivist approach in the *Tridem* project, dissonances in interpretation of student behaviour and tutor interventions – particularly in the asynchronous environment - could not be prevented. These observations are in line with one of the seven factors for failure identified by Shield and Weininger (1999) in the context of a MOO-based project where not all teachers seemed clear about the underlying concepts of learner autonomy and reflect what Hampel *et al*. (2005:25) in agreement with Windschitl (2002) call a 'pedagogical dilemma', i.e. situations where "the tutors' reactions reflect how they themselves were once taught." The impact of differences in tutor perceptions and behaviour on progress and outcome of the pilot project will be considered by the author in a separate analysis of the data collected.

5.4 Risk assessment of **Tridem** *project after O'Dowd and Ritter (2006)*

Overall O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) distinguish 11 different factors distributed over four main levels of potential dysfunction in telecollaboration. In a new approach, Table 6 maps the present pilot project against the identified problem areas

The result is a framework which allows those planning future telecollaborative

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Table 6 *Risk assessment of the* Tridem *pilot project after O'Dowd & Ritter (2006)*

Level	**Factor**	**Degree of risk**				
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Individual	Current level of intercultural competence		√			
	Motivation and expectation					√
Classroom	Teacher-teacher relationship			√		
	Task design			√		
	Learner-matching procedures				√	
	Local group dynamics		√			
	Pre-exchange briefing					√
Socio-institutional	Chosen medium and degree of access	√				
	General organisation of the students' course of study					√
	Differences in prestige values of cultures and languages	√				
Interaction	Cultural differences in communicative style and behaviour			√		

exchanges to carry out a pre-exchange risk assessment with projects consistently scoring at the higher end of the spectrum being classified as 'high risk' and thus more likely to end in 'failed communication'. In the case of the *Tridem* exchange though the outcome is rather a *post*-project assessment of the disruptive features presented and discussed above and can inform future iterations of the study. Thus the *Tridem* pilot could tentatively be classified as low to medium risk in 7 categories covering all four levels and arises as 'higher' or even 'high risk' in 4 categories on three levels: the individual learner's or learner groups' presuppositions and expectations, learner-matching procedures, the pre-exchange briefing, and the general organisation of the students' course of study. While one could argue with O'Dowd and Ritter (2006:630) that "there will almost always be differences among learners with respect to how they hope to benefit from an exchange and how much time they are willing to invest in it," the answer to the question of how participants should be allocated, i.e. in pairs, *Tridems*, or larger groups is less straightforward. It was hoped that teams of three could compensate for the occasional less active participant. A factor underscored by the project team in this context was the differences in foreign language proficiency.

The differences in approach to the project manifested by members of the project team, i.e. among individual tutor-researchers, led to discrepancies with regard to the content of the pre-exchange briefings. Participant evaluations show clearly that there was, for example, insufficient factual knowledge about partners and their backgrounds, and their potential expectations. There were also 'high risk' factors with regard to the general organisation of the students' course of study mirroring instances first identified by Belz and Müller-Hartmann (2003) and complemented by O'Dowd and Ritter (2006), i.e. misalignment of the academic calendars of the partners involved, culture-specific

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assessment patterns, different educational backgrounds of the tutor-researchers and their particular interests in the exchange, differences in terms of students contact hours and physical organisation of each participating institution, groups of learners following totally different courses – or, as in the case of the British partners, no course at all – and different teaching and learning philosophies at each of the participating universities.

Last but not least the preliminary findings in terms of differences in awareness of learning environment specific affordances among exchange partners (see section 4.3) and their impact on the learners' multimodal and thus indirectly also on their intercultural communicative competence suggest that the framework outlined above needs to be expanded by another factor, if not an entire level of potential dysfunction in telecollaboration.

The next and final section looks at conclusions that can be drawn from the insights gained so far.

6 Conclusions

The critical success factors discussed in the context of the telecollaborative pilot project presented and analysed in this article illustrate that a positive or negative outcome of these learning endeavours can hardly ever be attributed to one single aspect of the exchange, but rather depends on a variety of interrelated issues. Furthermore, the findings indicate that while those involved in such exchanges might have to take partial interaction failure into consideration, it seems possible to gauge degree and nature of the risks they are taking.

O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) stress, however, that careful consideration of their 'inventory' of pitfalls does not necessarily guarantee a successful outcome to those who use online communication tools with the aim of linking language learners from different geographical locations. They see it, rather, as a reference guide and, thus, as a way of making sure that areas of conflict and misunderstanding can be turned into key moments of cultural learning for both tutors and learners. In addition the *Tridem* experience suggests that it is in fact possible, though not unproblematic to bring together learners with different aims and motivations in a positive shared experience. More difficult to accommodate than disparities of age or motivation seem to be learners who lack:

a. any grounding in self-knowledge and –management and are therefore more prone to feelings of inferiority and anxiety
b. multimodal communicative competence and can therefore not engage in interculturally rich exchanges (often regardless of their competence level in the foreign language) (Hauck & Lewis, forthcoming).

The findings from the *Tridem* project also suggest that the extent to which telecollaborative partners can draw benefit from the aforementioned key moments of cultural learning also depends on their current level of multimodal communicative competence that is their ability to make efficient use of the meaning making resources available to them online in order to engage in interculturally rich interaction. Ideally, then, those learners able "to choose, not merely with full competence within one mode

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[…] but with full awareness of the affordances of many modes and of the media and their sites of appearance" (Kress, 2003:49), would also experience comparatively higher levels of intercultural knowledge gain in telecollaboration. It therefore seems paramount that successful instances of informed use of multimodal environments in online exchanges feature both in pre-exchange briefings and as an integral part of the content of an exchange.

It is surprising though how little research has looked at affective factors – learner self-management and language anxiety in particular – and learning context-related issues with regard to failed communication in online exchanges. Yet, as Hampel (2006:112) contends, "[w]e cannot expect learners to be competent users of the new media who are aware of the affordances and how to use them constructively." Varying levels of multimodal communicative competence among exchange partners and their influence on the intercultural learning experience therefore warrant further rigorous investigation. Similarly the tutors' role in terms of making learners aware of the constraints and possibilities for meaning making and communication offered in multimodal online environments needs to be more thoroughly explored.

Finally the increasing convergence of technologies and the resulting surge of cognitive and affective demands on tutors and learners suggest the need for a more differentiated understanding of CMC and ICC. It also raises the question whether 'success' or 'failure' continue to be operable concepts in the context of online language learning in general and telecollaboration in particular. Should they not rather be replaced by 'relative awareness gain' with regard to both intercultural differences and 'cultural characteristics' of the learning environment and its use?

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