



Films and Blogs: an authentic approach to improve the writing skill – An intercultural project-based framework in the Senior High State School

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This paper presents the implementation and the positive findings of a research involving a telecollaborative, e-twinning project which linked two Senior State High school classes, one from Greece and one from Italy. The research aimed at investigating whether films and blogs in the English class can foster the development of writing skills, promote intercultural awareness and enhance the cultivation of new literacies. The research showed that the project succeeded in motivating the students who, through their on-line communication achieved cultural literacy and other new literacies to a large degree.



Η εργασία αυτή παρουσιάζει την εφαρμογή και τα θετικά ευρήματα ενός ερευνητικού πειράματος το οποίο, μέσω της ηλεκτρονικής αδελφοποίησης συνέδεσε δύο τάξεις Κρατικών Λυκείων, μία από την Ελλάδα και μία από την Ιταλία. Στόχος του πειράματος ήταν να διερευνηθεί αν η χρήση κινηματογραφικών ταινιών και ιστολογίων (blogs) στο μάθημα των Αγγλικών μπορεί να βελτιώσει την ανάπτυξη της ικανότητας του γραπτού λόγου, να προωθήσει την διαπολιτισμική ικανότητα και να συμβάλει στην καλλιέργεια νέων εγγραμματισμών (new literacies). Η γενική προσέγγιση σε αυτή την έρευνα ήταν βασισμένη στην σύγκριση και αντιπαράθεση των δύο πολιτισμών. Η έρευνα έδειξε ότι το πρόγραμμα πέτυχε την αύξηση του ενδιαφέροντος των μαθητών οι οποίοι, μέσω της ηλεκτρονικής επικοινωνίας τους, απέκτησαν σε μεγάλο βαθμό διαπολιτισμική ικανότητα και εξοικειώθηκαν με νέους εγγραμματισμούς.

Introduction

The current multicultural European setting and the needs of our globalized world outline the necessity to promote intercultural education. Moreover, new technologies have created new multiple literacies which the learners are required to develop so as to function in the modern, diverse technological contexts. The research presented in this paper was based on a telecollaborative, e-twinning project which linked two Senior High school classes. The focus of the

research was, on the one hand, the development of intercultural communicative competence and of new literacies (digital and media literacy) by the senior high state school learners and, on the other, the improvement of the writing skill and promotion of group work. In addition, the research explored the potential of a well known teaching tool, the film, and of one of the most recent Web 2.0 tools, blogs, to intrigue the learners and promote English as an international language.

More analytically, the questions this research addressed can be summarized as follows:

- What are the needs adolescent students perceive as important in an English Foreign Language (EFL) secondary/vocational educational context?
- Can a telecollaborative project (using Blogs and films) contribute to the language learning process and specifically to the development of the writing skill?
- What materials and tasks should be chosen to motivate learners and develop their interpersonal communicative skills and intercultural competence?
- Does online communication technology and study of films facilitate increased students' participation and the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence by the learners?
- What kind of language do the learners engage in during a
- blog activity? Is blog communication a new species of communication?
- How can media, cultural and digital literacy facilitate the achievement of one another and altogether help EFL students learn English, use it as an international language and become independent learners?

One of the main reasons for conducting the specific research was that the researcher and her learners considered familiarization with other cultures and contact with people from other cultures - especially by using the latest technological tools - very important. Therefore, it was a challenge for the researcher to promote multiple literacies, to empower students to use the new technologies to enhance their lives and as Kellner (1998) points out, to create a better culture and society based on respect for multicultural difference. Although this was a small-scale country-specific research it is hoped that it has contributed to a degree to the relatively new area of EFL intercultural telecollaboration by using one of the latest Internet tools, i.e. blogs. The project promoted communicative, collaborative, effective and autonomous language learning.

As far as the teaching context is concerned, the first class participating in the project was from a Senior Music High School from Sparta, Greece, and the second class was from a Vocational High School from Bari, Italy. The literacies involved in this project except for the cultural literacy, were 'media' and 'digital' literacy. Media literacy in this teaching situation was approached through the study of films while digital literacy mainly through the use of blogs. The project lasted three months, starting in September 2008 and ending in December 2008. The students of both schools watched and worked on two films: "My Big Greek Fat Wedding" by Joel Zwick and "Moonstruck" by Norman Jewison.

Literature review

Before describing the project it is essential that the theoretical framework be set. Until the end of the previous century the objective of language learning was defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language. According to most linguists and to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2001:13), [which provides basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks etc. across Europe], communicative competence is defined in terms of three sub-competences: the linguistic, the sociolinguistic and the pragmatic competence. However, during the 21st century there has been significant development and change in foreign language education. Today's intercultural encounters

are far more numerous and of greater importance than in any previous time in the past due to the rise of new technologies, globalization of the economy resulting in multinational corporations and changes in immigration patterns resulting in multi-cultural societies (Samovar & Porter 2003). These intercultural encounters have resulted in an important shift from the previously common goal of communicative competence to that of intercultural communicative competence or else Cultural Literacy.

Commenting on this shift, Papaefthimiou-Lytra (2004) re-defines the concept of communicative competence from the conventional bipolar one (communication between a native language speaker and a non-native one) to a post-modernist multipolar one (communication among non-native language speakers).

Intercultural communicative competence can be defined as the linguistic, social and psychological abilities that contribute to a successful interaction with individuals or groups from other cultures (Killick 2001). Outlining the interrelation between language and culture, Kramsch (1998) asserts that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. Language is extremely complex, mostly in terms of the human interaction involved in language use. Only by discovering the meanings, values and practices of the group they interact, can learners of a new language negotiate and create a new reality with their interlocutors, “a shared world of interaction and experience” (Byram & Fleming 1998: 3). Moreover, according to Chen & Starosta (as cited in Samovar & Porter 2003), intercultural communicative competence comprises three interrelated components:

- intercultural sensitivity, which refers to the development of a readiness to understand and appreciate cultural differences in intercultural communication;
- intercultural awareness, which refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect thinking and behaviour;
- intercultural adroitness, which refers to the skills that are necessary for someone to act effectively in intercultural interactions.

Intercultural communicative competence is therefore an umbrella term. The three interrelated components of Intercultural Communicative Competence mentioned above all result from and in communicative competence.

Consequently, the intercultural communicative approach is now more than ever- due to the expanding European Union- essential in foreign language learning (Vlachos & Papaefthymiou-Lytra 2008). The English language is nowadays widely considered an international language. According to Crystal (cited in McKay 2002), a language achieves global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. In many countries among which Greece and Italy, the countries where the students of this study come from, English is given special priority by requiring its study as a foreign language. According to the reports of the Greek and the Italian curricula found in Eurybase, intercultural learning is imperative as it encourages the development of the students’ personalities and breaks down cultural barriers. Finally, the importance of intercultural teaching in EFL education is also emphasized by the CEFR (2001) the basic aim of which is “to achieve greater unity among its members” (ibid:2).

Another working hypothesis throughout this study is that nowadays there are new multiple literacies or else ‘multiliteracies’. These new kind of literacies are defined as “a set of open-ended and flexible multiple literacies required to function in diverse contexts and technological contexts” (The New London Group cited in Leu et al 2004: 17). Two of these new literacies are digital and media literacy. Digital literacy is one of the hottest literacies under discussion nowadays. Glisten (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel 2006) defines it as “the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide variety of sources when it is presented via computers and, particularly, through

the medium of the internet” (ibid: 22). According to Ba, Tally & Tsialas (2002), digital literacy is viewed as a set of habits students use in their interaction with information technologies for learning, work and fun. Some of these habits are: their communication literacy - how to use email, blogs and other tools to talk to peers and adults; and their web literacy - how they use the web to find and judge information and their skill at creating web-based material themselves. In many educational policy documents digital literacy is one of the educational goals (Lankshear & Knobel 2006, Hartzoulakis 2008). Media literacy, on the other hand, entails “the knowledge of how media work, how they construct meanings, how they serve as a form of cultural pedagogy, and how they function in everyday life” (Kellner 1997: 4).

In this project the achievement of the above literacies was achieved through the use of two tools. The first tool was the video and specifically films because they are authentic material and allow for a variety of activities that can cater for different styles and for all types of learners (visual, auditory and kinesthetic). Stempleski and Tomalin (1990) sustain that students are mostly motivated when language is experienced in a lively way through video which combines moving pictures and sound. We will agree with Tomalin (1991) who states that one of the main aims of teaching English is to instill to the students the idea that language learning is a happy experience and video creates an attractive enjoyable environment for such experience to take place.

The use of video is generally based on the theory of language learning that language acquisition is located in the active, creative response to what other people say, in expressing thoughts, feelings and opinions. Ryan (1998) suggests that “the teacher’s task is to manipulate the students’ enthusiasm for film viewing in a way that develops a positive attitude towards language learning” (ibid: 2). Moreover, as Gardner (1993) supports, it is true that language teachers should construct activities that exploit the children’s potential and abilities, according to the different types of their intelligence. Brinton (1991) rightly adds the following benefits of using video and other media into the classroom: video can help students to call up existing ‘schemata’ (Kramsch 1998) which are the general structures of expectation that exist in people’s minds and are moulded by their culture.

Regarding the social domain, the researcher would agree with Kilickaya (2004) that “successful language learning requires language users to know that culture underlies language in order to get the meaning across” (ibid:4). If the pedagogical aim is cultural familiarization (Tudor 1987), as it is the case with this study, it is essential that the materials used be produced for a native speaker audience. Films, according to Essberger (cited in Kanellopoulou 2005), are authentic materials because “they are broadcast material intended for a native-speaker” (ibid: 63). Apart from helping students improve their English language abilities and fostering intercultural understanding, films can also promote independent research skills and sharpen critical thinking skills. Therefore, using films in EFL can help students achieve Media Literacy.

The other tool used in the project presented in this paper was the blog (or else weblog), which is mostly described as an electronic journal that allows the user to keep records of his/her writing on a website that is updated frequently (Johnson 2004). The blog is one of the applications of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). According to Warshauer (1996: 2) CMC is the most revolutionary development in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) “since it is the only one which involves direct human-to-human communication rather than human-to-machine”. The blog belongs to the Web 2.0 generation and is one of the most recent internet tools the revolutionary characteristic of which is the participation at many different levels. This tool is used for the purpose of telecollaboration, that is, the use of Internet communicative tools to link linguistically and culturally disparate groups of language learners and teachers for purposes of social interaction and project-based intercultural collaboration (O’ Dowd 2007).

A well-known telecollaborative model is that of E-Twinning which is “a network of schools and educators within the European Union which avails of the tools and platforms provided on the E-Twinning portal to engage their students in collaborative cross-curricular international projects” (ibid: 85). Central to the E-Twinning model and to this study was collaboration and project work. On the first hand, the theoretical arguments for collaboration derive mainly from Vygotsky’s perception of learning. According to Vygotsky (cited in Slauti 2005) language is the key to cognitive development and learning is conceived as a social process, an interaction between the learner and the world around. Expanding on this view, Slauti (2005) claims that the development of and growing accessibility to technology facilitates and encourages collaborative practice. Project work, on the other hand, is a theme and task-centered mode of teaching and learning. Project work results from a joint process of negotiation between all participants (Legutke & Thomas 1991). Among many linguists, Shetzer & Warschauer (in Warshauer & Kern 2000) claim that the development of literacy and communication skills in new on-line media is critical to success in almost all walks of life. In line with this consideration, the working hypothesis throughout this study was that technology is seen not only as a tool for teaching English but also as an educational aim in its own right.

A term coined by the researcher and used throughout the study is that of “Blogspeak”. This term derives from the relevant term “Netspeak” that Crystal (2006: 19) uses as an alternative term to Internet language. Thus, ‘Blogspeak’ refers to the language used in blogs. As Crystal (2006) argues for Netspeak - and which consequently applies to Blogspeak- the language on the Net “displays the process of writing in its naked, unedited form” (ibid: 15). Blogspeak is identical to neither speech nor writing, but selectively and adaptively displays properties of both. According to Hyland (2002), some of the effects of new communication technologies on writing practices are the following: on-line writing combines written texts with visual and audio media, it encourages non-linear writing and reading processes, it changes the notions of authorship, authority and intertextuality and it facilitates entry to new on-line discourse communities. Apart from the fact that new literacies are made of different ‘technical’ stuff from conventional literacies, they are also made of different ‘ethos stuff’ (Lankshear & Knobel 2006: 82).

In summary, adopting Warschauer’s (2002) claim that “...both language and technology are tools for individual and societal development” (ibid: 453), films and blogs were used in this study as tools firstly for the development of intercultural communicative competence and secondly for the development of media and digital Literacy. It is also argued that blog literacy belongs to the so called ‘new literacies’ because its practice privileges participation over publishing and because there are some distinctive characteristics in the language used in blogs.

The research design

To start with the main aims of this research, this project attempted to make students able to:

- understand, appreciate and present their culture to people from other cultures;
- acquire interaction strategies that would promote comity;
- understand, evaluate, discriminate and criticize films;
- use media as means of expression and communication by producing film reviews;
- practise collaborative writing;
- write on a blog and use its functions;
- use the English language as an international language to cooperate with people from other countries and surf on the Internet.

As far as the teaching context and procedure is concerned both schools were equipped with modern computer laboratories. All students were 17 years old and were familiar with group-work, with the

use of video and the implementation of new technology in their learning. There were 20 students in each class and their linguistic background in the English language ranged from pre intermediate to upper intermediate level or else according to the CEFR (2001) the “B1” and “B2” Level accordingly. The students of both classes were divided into four mixed-ability groups of five learners.

The project was conducted in 20 teaching hours and both classes watched both films. The Greek class however, focused more on “My Big Greek Fat Wedding” while the Italian class focused more on “Moonstruck”. These films were chosen firstly because they were comedies - the learners’ preference- and on the assumption that they had curriculum relevancy and some relevancy to the lives of the students (Denning undated). Specifically, they contained a lot of cultural elements of Greece and Italy and they both dealt with interesting themes, such as the social themes of love, marriage, family relations and national stereotypes. The films were separated into three excerpts and for teaching each excerpt three stages were designed, following Crawford’s (2000) and Hardisty and Windeatt’s (1989) structure of video- and computer-based lessons respectively:

- a) The preparatory stage, during which the learners got prepared to watch and understand the film (pre-viewing stage) as well as to communicate with their e-twinning partners through the class blog in an effective way (pre-blog stage).
- b) The while-watching stage, during which the learners watched the excerpt and completed communicative tasks in their class so as to understand the overall meaning of the excerpt, focusing on the cultural elements and on the comparison of the two cultures. This stage included the on-line communication in the blog between the e-twinning partners. During their interaction they commented on the two films and exchanged cultural information.
- c) The post-viewing and post-blog stage, during which the learners reflected on the cultural elements dealt with in the films and in the class blog (<http://greekitalianculutre.blogspot.com>).

In total, three blog sessions took place; the first two were asynchronous during which the learners exchanged cultural information by answering questions posed by the researcher in terms of the two films connecting the theme with their cultures, societies and lives. The last blog session was synchronous during which the learners exchanged opinions about the project and chatted about their interests and their future communication.

As mentioned above, one of the main aims of this project was to promote intercultural awareness through communicative language learning. The general approach followed to achieve this aim was a cross-cultural project-based one. The communicative and the comparative approaches were the ones used throughout this project and the tasks were designed having these approaches as the underlying theories. The researcher following Nunan’s (1989) and other linguists’ guidelines for designing communicative tasks tried to design tasks that had a strong purpose which the students could understand and which they found socially and culturally relevant. The main focus was on meaning and on the comparison of the two cultures making sure that the students found the electronic medium appropriate for fulfilling the purpose. The tasks involved elements from the culture of the students and the ‘other’ culture because as Vlachos (2008:5) points out “intercultural awareness can be cultivated when learners develop an understanding of how their culture contrasts with that of their interlocutors”. This comparison method can minimize cultural bias by making learners aware of their own perceptions and those of others (Byram cited in Mountford & Wadham-Smith 2000, Vlachos 2009). An example of a task which was based on comparative approach was the one dealing with national stereotypes; the students were asked to attribute to the Greeks and the Italians the traits which characterize them as a nation. Through this task students also discussed the national stereotypes promoted by the films, they developed critical film awareness (Fukunaga 1998) and achieved a degree of media literacy.

The tasks not only focused on culture products, ideas and behaviours but they also aimed at developing the linguistic, sociolinguistic and/or pragmatic competence, that is, the communicative competence. The tasks also asked students to use their imagination which lies in the heart of learning. There was integration of skills and they enhanced language awareness and promoted the development of metacognitive skills. Finally, there was task continuity as the on-line activities and the in-class activities were all part of a cohesive whole. There were totally twenty lessons and for each lesson the researcher designed a lesson plan. All the lesson plans and teacher notes were published on a blog addressed to the participating teachers (www.e-twinningproject.blogspot.com). The findings of the research were based both on quantitative and on qualitative data. On the first hand, the quantitative data came firstly from the processing of the two questionnaires completed by the learners and analyzed in the statistical package "SPSS" and secondly from the assessment of the film reviews that the participating groups produced and which were analyzed with the help of Microsoft Excel. Specifically, the learners of both schools completed two questionnaires: a) one at the beginning of the project aiming at investigating the linguistic and technological background of the learners in connection with learning the English language, their needs, teaching practices and preferences and their cultural knowledge and sensitivity and b) one at the end of the project aiming at investigating if and to what degree the aims of the project were achieved. Moreover, the learners were taught the genre of film review and in groups they wrote two film reviews: a) one at the beginning of the project for the first film they watched and b) another one at the end of the project for the second film they watched (totally 16 film reviews were produced). Peer feedback took place after each review was produced and the final products of the groups were published and are available in the project blog. On the other hand, the qualitative data came from the processing of Blogspeak, that is, the language used in the messages of the learners during the first two asynchronous blog sessions.

Presentation of the findings and discussion

Based on the processing of the above qualitative and quantitative data the following conclusions can be drawn.

The project was based on the needs and preferences of the learners. According to the results from the two questionnaires, the majority of the Greek and the Italian students considered working with films - and specifically with comedies- and blogs as important and they all believed they needed more practice in Writing. They also considered familiarization with other cultures and contact with people from other cultures very important. The researcher took into consideration the students' needs and desires and gave the students the chance to exchange cultural information by working with two comedies and communicating through a class blog. After the completion of the project the majority of the students expressed their satisfaction with the project and their desire to continue the project, keep contact with their e-twinning peers and get familiar with other cultures.

In terms of the development of the writing skill, the results from the processing of the film reviews showed an improvement in the students' writing performance in the genre of film reviews which may be attributed to the quality and efficiency of the project, the teachers' efficiency and the teaching methods. Moreover, peer feedback was quite successful and contributed to the students' improvement. Both teachers also reported that after the project was over, the students' participation in class increased (compared to that before the project) and there has been a steady improvement in their performance since then. Generally, the students' active participation in the blog fostered increased collaboration and students' motivation and contributed to the language learning process. Tables 1 and 2 present the students' opinion regarding the benefits they gained from the project.

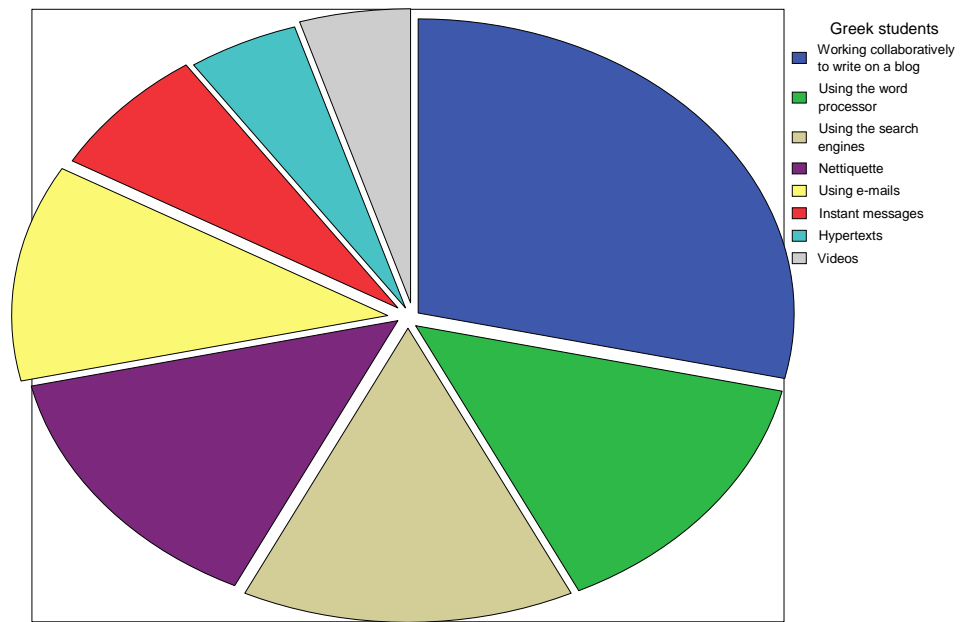


Table 1. What the Greek students thought the project helped them learn or improve.

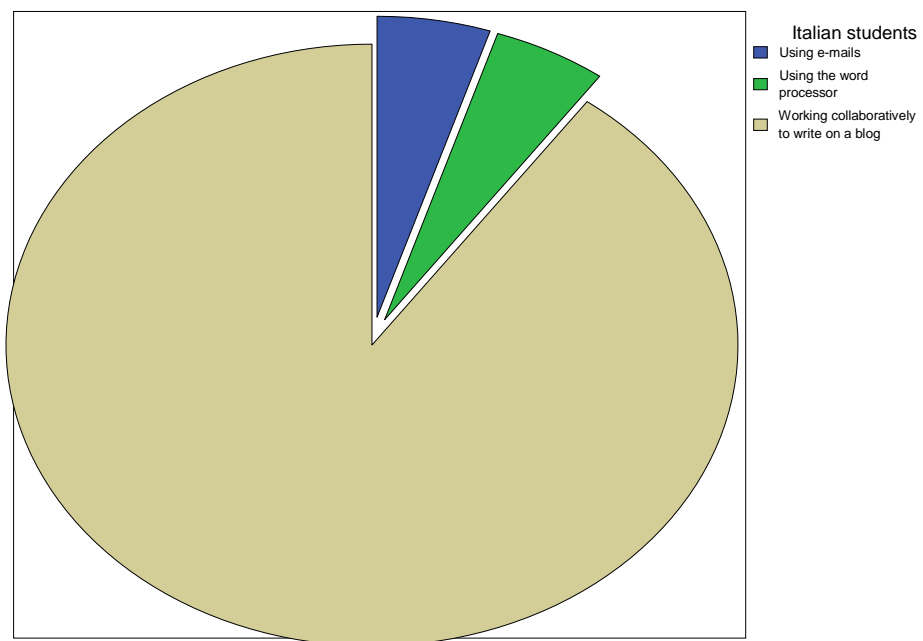


Table 2. What the Italian students thought the project helped them learn or improve.

Based on the number and quality of similarities and differences between the two cultures as reported by the students, it can be argued that the use of the comparative approach intrigued the students and generally the choice of materials and tasks was successful. In addition, the findings showed that participation in blogs fostered increased collaboration and students' motivation. Specifically, the students' involvement increased during the second blog session. There was equal

group participation and the students dealt with a variety of themes going beyond the ones provided by the researcher and suggested by the films. Although the students had different writing styles and they came from different cultural backgrounds, they succeeded in communicating. It is worth noticing that the blog provided heavy contextualization: it resembled a multiparty conversation among strangers who were becoming acquaintances. During the first blog session there was one-to-one group interaction. During the second session however, all the groups interacted with more than one group and for one question many answers were provided. Towards the end of the project the students became more interested in their partners' personal lives and interests.

Many opportunities for intercultural communicative competence or else 'intercultural adroitness' were given. Obviously, each group and/or each student reached a different degree of intercultural awareness. One can assume that some groups or students achieved intercultural communicative competence to some degree but the data from this small-scale study do not allow us to draw any definite conclusions about the degree of intercultural communicative competence the students achieved or did not achieve. Besides, as Kramsch (1993) supports, increased intercultural competence is only likely to be revealed through further long-term study of the students involved. Still, it can be assumed that the project was a starting point for the students who can explore different cultures in the future. The fact that 90% of all students wanted to keep contact with their partners after the project shows that the project succeeded in promoting a 'comity' among the learners. The teachers also reported that they enjoyed their active role, they continued to learn and developed their capacities as intercultural speakers and in tandem with their learners they gained their own awareness of the nature of the intercultural interaction that took place. The students, finally, gained cultural literacy as they succeeded in presenting their culture to people from other countries and learned many things about their own and about another culture. Through their participation and interest in the other culture, all groups seemed to have achieved a degree of intercultural awareness. Sometimes cultural differences intervened in meaning and the groups seemed antagonistic but generally there were not serious misunderstandings or "flame wars".

Blogspeak, that is, the language the learners engaged in during the blog sessions, is a new species of communication because the discourse found in the blog was interactive, displaying both oral and written discourse features. If one examines the formality of Blogspeak, s/he will see that there was a balance between the inherent informality of the medium and the formality of the learning situation. During the on-line communication the students had the chance to prove their cultural adroitness and developed interpersonal communication while exchanging ideas and information with their e-twinning partners. The features that were unique in Blogspeak were found chiefly in graphology and are the following: a) There was exaggerated use of spelling and punctuation, b) the language was loosely structured with many typographical errors, c) the language was a mixture of informal letter and essay, of spoken monologue and dialogue and d) there was use of emoticons. Undoubtedly though, the social advantages (students' interaction and socialization through the blog and the exchange of valuable cultural information) outweighed the semantic disadvantages (relaxation of rules of spelling, punctuation and capitalization).

The students from both countries had some stereotypes concerning the others (some were even cultivated by the films) and they in turns tried to deconstruct these stereotypes, that is, to minimize their existence and criticize the films. In that sense, one can say that they achieved some degree of critical and media literacy.

In tandem with cultural and media literacy the students achieved a degree of digital literacy – and more specifically communication literacy and succeeded in collaborating using English as an international language. Besides, the students, by using the on-line dictionaries and the web for information, achieved a degree of web literacy and learned how to learn. Finally, apart from the fact

that the students used English as an international language to communicate, they also showed some interest in the language of the other country.

The findings of the present research are in accordance with the findings of greater researches in Greece like the ones of Kourtis-Kazoulis (2001) and Vlachos (2006 & 2009). Vlachos' research involves the acquisition of 'multipolar' communicative competence while Kourtis-Kazoulis' research involves the acquisition of 'bipolar' communicative competence. Both researches showed that on-line communication between learners of different countries can motivate the learners and result in the achievement of some degree of cultural and digital literacy and in the promotion of communicative, collaborative, effective and autonomous language learning.

The results are also similar with other researches in the area worldwide most of which though, are at university level. The present research differs from the following ones in that it made use of a new Internet tool, that of the blog. To start with, Gray and Stockwell (1998) studied an Australian-Japanese telecollaborative partnership and reported finding many positive comments in students' post-project questionnaires that seemed to imply intercultural learning. O' Dowd (2003), in his research on a year-long e-mail exchange between Spanish and English second year university language learners, found that the students who were able to successfully develop their intercultural communicative competence had found a receptive audience for the expressions of their own cultural identity. They had been forced to look at their home culture from a new perspective through the questions and comments of their partners, and through dialogue with their partner they had begun to understand the different ways a culture's products and practices can be experienced. Moreover, during a Spanish-American telecollaboration (O' Dowd 2005) it was proven that the different levels of access to technology, the differences in the course requirements at the two institutions and the negative and stereotypical attitudes which each group held towards the other groups' culture influenced negatively the development and outcome of the project. In the present study however, the institutional and sociocultural contexts were similar and compatible. Still, we agree with O' Dowd (2004) that teachers are to play a constant role in organizing and adapting their guidelines and activities according to the circumstances which they and their partner-teachers find emerging. Finally, among the findings of Fedderholdt's (2001) study about a Japanese-Danish partnership was that the students' knowledge of the other culture had increased and post-project questionnaires showed that students in both countries had only superficial knowledge about each other before the project.

Limitations of the research

Undoubtedly, the above findings are based on a small scale project of limited duration and the conclusions drawn are tentative. One of the limitations was that due to the time constraints of the research only three blog sessions were conducted whereas, more on-line communication would be more beneficial to both students and the researcher. There was also an institutional constraint as far as the Italian class was concerned; since the Italian school was vocational their curriculum burdened the students with extra work during the project, something which tired the students and their teacher towards the end of the project. Besides, due to the unfamiliarity of the teachers and some students with blogs, some technical problems occurred during the project. Therefore, to eliminate contradictions associated with the use of computer tools, it would be desirable that students have a computer literacy workshop or at least 'test sessions' prior to their engagement with telecollaborative projects.

Concluding remarks and recommendations for further research

Building a strong theoretical framework for telecollaborative research is significant. However, there is need for telecollaborative models to be adaptable to different contexts of use because lack of knowledge of the institutional and sociocultural contexts in which each school and class operates may lead to failure of the project. It would be also 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. Many researchers, among which Warshauer & Whittaker (1997), argue that when CALL is fully incorporated in EFL teaching, it encourages motivation, the development of language learning skills and the students' social development, and thus, results in more learning. However, according to Chapelle (1997) empirical researchers should also address critical questions concerning both the kind of language learners produce in CALL activities and the quality of language learning experience.

Teacher-training courses on the other hand, should 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 (Sprandley, 1979), may enable both teachers and learners to learn more effectively from the on-line exchanges. Another way to help the instructors conduct successful telecollaboration projects is to analyze the classroom transcripts of instructors who have worked with their students on how to interact online and then conduct evaluations on how effective this training was. Teachers should also try to keep the communication through the Internet educational, that is, quite formal without much 'netspeak' (Rzesnik & Drzewinska 2004). Finally, to integrate telecollaborative intercultural projects in EFL will require change in attitudes, in approach and practice amongst teachers and learners; it will require fuller integration into administrative procedures and syllabuses.

To sum up, the present research centred on the implementation of an e-twinning project between two European High schools with the aim of promoting intercultural awareness and facilitating English language learning. The underlying theory of this research was that intercultural materials can be combined with technological tools to positively contribute the teaching act. The underlying message of this paper is that telecollaborative projects across international educational institutes contribute to the development of intercultural awareness and digital and media literacy. Finally, it is hoped that this research will inspire other researchers to make other relevant or complementary researches as the body of telecollaborative research can draw not only from comparative, cross-cultural reviews but also from culturally and geographically comparisons.

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