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Anita Virga, Brian Zuccala

What Really Works in Telecollaborative Pedagogy? A Case Study of an Algerian- Moldovan Project

Rachida Sadouni

University Blida 2, Algeria

Abstract This chapter presents and discusses an international telecollaborative text-writing and translation project conducted during the second semester of a translation course in 2017, 2018 and 2019. The participants were non-native intermediate students of French from universities in Algeria and Moldova. This paper firstly provides theoretical background on telecollaboration and its benefits for learners from different geographical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Secondly, it analyses the challenges of telecollaborating via asynchronous and exolingual communication (email). To do this, I analyse student perspectives on the efficacy of the approach in the form of reports administered before and after the telecollaborations. The chapter concludes that telecollaboration between learners from different backgrounds is difficult, but can succeed and remains an opportunity to develop linguistic, cultural and digital skills along with intercultural awareness. In the conclusions I give an overall evaluation of the case study, and suggestions for a future telecollaborative work.

Keywords Email. Intercultural competence. Telecollaboration. Translation. Text-writing.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 PTAM. A Telecollaborative Project Connecting North Africa and Eastern Europe. – 3 Methodology. – 4 Analysis of Pre-Learning and Post-Learning Reports. – 4.1 Analysis of Pre-Learning Reports. – 4.2 Analysis of Post-Learning Reports. – 5 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

This chapter deals with PTAM¹ (Project of Telecollaboration Algeria-Moldova), a text-writing and translation telecollaborative project that has linked, respectively in 2017, 2018 and 2019, 2nd year undergraduate learners of French in the department of French, at the University of Blida 2, Algeria, and their peers, enrolled in a translation course, in the department of interpreting, translation and applied linguistics at Moldova State University. My aim is to demonstrate the role of this telecollaboration in developing students' linguistic and intercultural skills. I also discuss and analyse the successes and failures of the project and suggest possible interventions for improved efficacy in the future.

The following sections will highlight PTAM's aims and motivations, as a telecollaboration that has involved two countries on different continents, and with different languages and cultures. Above all, the two countries do not have official diplomatic ties. What follows is an introduction to the PTAM telecollaboration; a statement of its methodology; findings and discussion; and conclusions which offer an overall evaluation of PTAM telecollaboration and its implications.

2 PTAM. A Telecollaborative Project Connecting North Africa and Eastern Europe

Nowadays, it is important for university students to effectively communicate with their peers around the world in order to facilitate learning and to develop their linguistic skills and intercultural competence.² Future career prospects may also be dependent on the networks they establish during their studies. In this context, Lee and Markey (2014, 281) suggest that

[i]n the fast-growing, globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people across cultures is vital. Ensuring that our students attain the effective intercultural communication skills needed today is of paramount importance.

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1 Upon launch in 2017, the instructors agreed to call the project: PTAM (Project of Translation Algeria-Moldova). In 2019, they changed the name into Project of Telecollaboration Algeria-Moldova (PTAM). This change was decided upon because translation is only a task among others in this project with telecollaboration being the most important.

2 Cf. Chun 2015; Helm 2015; Schenker 2012; Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora, Serna Collazos 2016; Hammer, Maylath 2014; Cebuc, Sadouni 2017; Maylath 2018; Sadouni, Cebuc 2018; Tomé 2009; Cabrales 2011; Guth, Helm 2010; Thorne 2003; Baggioni 1995.

One interesting and enriching way students can do this is to participate in telecollaborative projects, or what is also known as virtual exchange and online international exchange (OIE) whenever they have the opportunity (Lewis, O'Rourke, Dooly 2016; Godwin-Jones 2019). For Byram (1992), telecollaboration helps learners to “re-examine their way of seeing foreigners, to change the patterns they have of foreign cultures and peoples in general, and of the culture studied in particular [My translation from French into English]” (cited in Sadouni, Bekara 2020, 143). OIE also offers students the opportunity to become more confident by stepping out of their comfort zone and traditional learning environment (Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora, Serna Collazos 2016).

In order to ascertain the extent to which telecollaboration can work between students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and to help them develop their skills, two instructors of translation, from Algeria and Moldova respectively, have integrated a telecollaborative project into their programmes: PTAM (Project of Telecollaboration Algeria-Moldova). Unlike “[m]ost telecollaborative projects [which] are designed to link students who are studying each other’s language” (Develotte, Mangenot, Zourou 2007, 276), PTAM links Berber³ and Arabic native speakers from Algeria and Romanian native speakers from Moldova. To the best of our knowledge, PTAM is the only and first ever telecollaboration that brings together students from an African country and Moldova. PTAM is an exolingual telecollaborative project (Dimitrovska 2020; Holtzer 2003), where French is used as the only language of exchange and text-writing. Before continuing, I would like to offer some background to the initiative.

In September 2016, I participated via Skype in an international conference organised by the Faculty of Languages and Foreign Literatures, Moldova State University. It was the first time I encountered colleagues from Moldova. A few days after the conference, I contacted the organiser of the conference, Prof. Ludmila Zbant, and suggested a telecollaboration between students in Algeria and their peers in Moldova. Prof. Zbant accepted the offer, and appointed Mrs. Larisa Cebuc as the coordinator of the project at MSU. Following a series of Skype meetings with Mrs. Cebuc, we set up terms for this brand new telecollaborative project between North Africa and Moldova. The programme launched in February 2017.

Through PTAM, the instructors seek to place “emphasis on language as a resource for building relationships of significance, and

3 Although Berber has been promoted to an official language in Algeria (since 2016), it is taught in very few schools and universities across Algeria. It is not taught at the university of Blida 2 as the languages of instruction are Arabic, French, English and Italian. Therefore, we will refer to Arabic as a target language in the context of this paper.

not a focus on ‘language’ in the abstract sense of units within a linguistic system” (Thorne 2010, cited in Godwin-Jones 2019, 17). In other words, the two instructors in PTAM telecollaboration aim to allow students, who are unfamiliar with each others’ cultures, to correctly communicate and write texts in French, and translate culture-bound terms and features embedded in these texts into the respective official languages of their countries. As such, this telecollaboration has an added educational value, as it uses a non-native language to learn about one own’s history, heritage and traditions, and to present it in a way that is attractive to others (Gajek 2018). PTAM, as a bilateral exchange (Helm 2015; Godwin-Jones 2019), belongs to the third category of telecollaboration projects, “collective collaboration, where all the project participants are simultaneously involved” (Marczak 2013, 158). PTAM’s principle is inspired by TAPP,⁴ but it is conducted differently.

The instructors have agreed that the email, as a web 1.0 tool (Gajek 2018), would be a suitable means of cross-cultural communication between PTAM participants thanks to its numerous benefits for the teachers and the students alike.⁵ Email is also more formal than other means of verbal and non-verbal communication and allows sharing different attachments (texts, photos, videos) in a professional way. It is rapid, free and gap-bridging (Schott 2000; Lagraña 2010). Although miscommunication and misunderstanding may emerge (Throne 2003; Belz, Müller-Hartmann 2003), email interaction remains a very good tool to document, record and trace conversations in contrast to face-to-face oral interactions (Belz, Müller-Hartmann 2003). In addition to email, in-country students use mobile technology to discuss their collaborative work, to send attachments (some Algerian students reported not having a personal computer), and to keep up with the different tasks forming the project. In addition to email, Skype and Facebook are used, but are not compulsory means of communication. Also, informal in-class discussions (Turula, Raith 2015, 25) take place between the instructors and their students: whether to give instructions to some teams, to remind others about deadlines, to answer students’ questions, to give clarifications and to suggest problem-solving when necessary (Sadouni, Cebuc 2018).

PTAM is what Godwin-Jones (2019, 9) terms an e-tandem telecollaboration. It is conducted in parallel to translation classes, for a period of six weeks, during the second semester, between February

⁴ TAPP (Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project) is a multilateral telecollaboration project, first launched in 2001. More info can be found on https://www.ndsu.edu/english/transatlantic_and_pacific_translations.

⁵ McPherson 1996; Liaw 1998; 2001; 2003; 2006; O’Dowd 2003; Cabrales 2011; Marczak 2013; Helm 2015.

and April of each academic year, given that both cooperating universities have the same academic calendar. Before each edition of PTAM begins, both instructors organise regular Skype meetings and exchange emails, between July and August (summer holidays in both countries) to choose the nature of the text-writing tasks, to improve pre- and post-learning reports based on the former collaborations, to set tentative deadlines and to share any useful suggestions. As such, PTAM is the result of personal efforts on the part of the instructors with the result of allowing students to use their respective target languages in a more meaningful way than in traditional class settings (cf. Jauregi 2016). It is worth mentioning that PTAM is not integrated into the curriculum in both universities due to complicated administrative procedures on both sides but remains an informal learning and teaching network between the two instructors and their students.

For the instructors, the project is about enriching their teaching experience, and going beyond the traditional educational space:

The very act of carrying out an intercultural online exchange is an educational experience in itself [...]. From the teacher's perspective, one can experientially learn to telecollaborate as well as reflectively confront this experience with one's teaching style and other relevant individual characteristics. (Turula, Raith 2015, 19)

The instructors on PTAM are engaged as “intercultural mediators” (Ensor, Kleban, Rodrigues 2017, 5) by combining traditional roles in class and online ones (Ensor, Kleban, Rodrigues 2017). They have agreed that since students of both sides are unfamiliar with each others' cultures, it would be interesting and more beneficial to share original texts about their respective cultures. In this context, texts are seen by Kern (2008) as an important tool “to identify (and sometimes to transform) the linguistic and sociocultural codes that organize meaning within a society”. The same author believes that “connections to various discourse worlds, cultural concepts, and myths make texts interesting from the standpoint of learning a new language and culture” (Kern 2008, 374). These texts are respectively translated into Arabic and Romanian. Being aware that cultural translation remains difficult (Lederer 1998; Cordonnier 2002; Lecuit et al. 2011; Petit 2014), the instructors aim through this telecollaboration to see how students would overcome cultural differences when translating each others' texts. To succeed in this task, other not less important objectives of PTAM have been set to see how communication works between students unfamiliar with each others' culture, how the team-work is organised, and what skills students would develop.

3 Methodology

Two hundred and nineteen Algerian students and seventy-nine Moldovan students participated in PTAM, between 2017 and 2019. Reflecting demographic trends at both universities, female students significantly outnumbered their male counterparts (269 to 29). The age of the students ranged between 18 and 25. The significant difference in the number of participants in Algeria as opposed to Moldova can be explained by the fact that the Algerian instructor teaches large groups of 45-55 students, whereas her Moldovan colleague teaches less than half this number (14-20). This is a consequence of the demography of Algeria, which has a much younger population than Moldova. Foreign language learning is also gaining more and more popularity in Algeria.

The telecollaboration takes place in a blended learning context;⁶ i.e. the instructors mixed between in-class and distant learning modes.

PTAM is composed of five tasks. The first four tasks (pre-learning report, writing, translation, and post-learning report) are based on the TAPP telecollaboration (Vandepitte et al. 2018; Noronha Cunha et al. 2019). The pre- and post-learning reports were originally designed in English by Birthe Moustén, a TAPP member (Steinmann, Sadouov 2018), but they have been modified and translated into French, in line with the specific goals and requirements of PTAM context. The final task, the video, was designed by the PTAM instructors (Sadouni, Cebuc 2018; Cebuc, Sadouni 2017).

Due to large class sizes on the Algerian side, the instructors agreed to have students participate as groups. Groups are preferred also because “[i]t is valuable for the development of group identity and, thus, supports the collaborative working process” (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 181). Also, groups “stimulate a more personal interaction” (Develotte, Mangenot, Zourou 2007, 279). As such, students were divided into in-country teams. In the first year of PTAM telecollaboration, 16 pairs were created as the Algerian instructor was teaching four groups (45-55 students per group). Algerian teams were made up of five to eight students, whereas the Moldovan ones involved only two to three students. In 2018 and 2019, eight pairs were matched as the Algerian instructor was fortunate enough to teach an unusually small group of 24 students. It was this group which she selected to participate in the project. Each in-country team was managed by a leader. The leader oversaw communicating and exchanging with the overseas team leader on behalf of the members of his/her team. As such, he/she oversaw sending emails to the corresponding partners, receiving emails from them, liaising with the instructors, and asking (and

⁶ Lindner, Méndez Garcia 2014; Thorne 2003; Orsini-Jones, Lee 2018; Alcantud Díaz 2016.

responding to) any questions and/or information requests on behalf of his/her team. The leader was instructed to copy both instructors into each email sent to the partner. In this way, the instructors were able to effectively manage the project. However, it is worth mentioning that this task was not always carried out by all team leaders, as some failed to copy one or both instructors when exchanging with their partners. Predicting that this would happen, the instructors regularly reminded all team leaders, in class or via email, to copy both instructors in any email.

The first task assigned to students in PTAM telecollaboration was exchanging a pre-learning report. This represents “the establishing-contact or getting-to-know phase” (Müller-Hartmann 2007): “It is the basis for initiating dialogical learning. In order to work together, learners must initially get to know each other and learn about each others’ backgrounds, personalities and feelings” (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 173).

Students were given four days in which to fill in the report and to email it as MSWord attachment to the leader of their respective in-country team. After that, the team-leader of both sides sent all the team pre-learning reports to the other party overseas, as MSWord attachments via email (cf. Moustén et al. 2012). The pre-learning report provided a presentation of each participant, (name, age, hobbies, countries visited, any personal information wanted to be shared). As such, “this important phase is decisive in allowing learners to discover their partners’ likes and dislikes, as well as their private and educational context” (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 181). One interesting piece of personal information shared was in 2018, when a male student from Algeria wrote: “I hate animals, but I don’t like saying it to other people”. What can be made of the last example is that in the Algerian cultural context, it is shameful for men, in contrast to women, to declare publicly that they hate animals. This is explained by the fact that in patriarchal Algerian society, men are discouraged of displaying weakness or fragility of any kind. Therefore, the male student shared this thought as personal information, being aware that it would only be read by his Moldovan partner. If asked in front of his classmates in class, this student would never have declared such a thing.

The pre-learning report contains three questions: 1) What obstacles may you encounter during this telecollaboration?; 2) What do you expect to learn from this telecollaboration; 3) What skills do you think you will need for this telecollaboration? Seeking to improve PTAM telecollaboration each year, the two instructors modified the pre-learning report (deleting some questions and replacing them with others) over the course of the three editions. Before moving to task two, students may interact and ask questions related to each others’ backgrounds or their cultures.

In the second task, students were asked to write and share original texts in French. This task serves as “the establishing-dialogue

phase” (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 175). One of the main conditions in text-writing is that texts should present one or many aspects of the original culture. Students are given eight days to write the texts before they are shared via email with the overseas partner. They are then sent to the respective instructor for review. In this way both instructors make sure to avoid any misunderstandings or “breakdown of communication” (O’Dowd, Ritter 2006, 627).

Each PTAM edition was dedicated to a specific text type: fairy tales in 2017, descriptive texts in 2018 and argumentative texts in 2019. From 2017 to 2019, the instructors noticed that of all the teams, two Algerian teams failed to send their texts by the due date, whether because of lack of commitment among some team members, or lack of organisation within the team, whereas their Moldovan peers always sent theirs within the deadline. One of the explanations that can be given here is that whereas the Moldovan instructor saw her students three times a week, and reminded them consistently about the tasks and the deadlines, her Algerian colleague met hers once a week. Furthermore, not all of them attended the class although it was compulsory.

In the third task of the PTAM telecollaboration, students are asked to translate the original texts received from their counterparts, into the official language of their respective countries. This task is designed as a “critical reflection phase” and to promote “discussion of issues that came up, [and] negotiation of misunderstandings” (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 173). They are given a deadline of twelve days to complete the translation and to send it to their respective instructors, for correction and feedback via email and in class. During this phase, students are consistently reminded to interact with the original authors while working on the translation in order to make sure that they render the meaning in the target language and culture, and to ask any questions or request any clarifications, when necessary. In this phase we noticed very few interactions, as most of the teams busied themselves with the translation of the original texts without any exchange with the original authors. In this context, an example from 2017 is instructive. In this case, the Algerian team omitted to translate the word “ie” in the target text. When asked why they did so, they told me that they thought it may have been a typing error because such a word did not exist in French. I thought the same, of course, but to make sure, I emailed my Moldovan colleague to inform her about the “typing error”. To my surprise and to that of my students, the Moldovan colleague informed me that the word “ie” is a Moldovan culture-bound word, used to refer to a traditional shirt worn by men and women alike, in Moldova, Romania and Ukraine. This example shows that interaction is a key element in the telecollaboration, and all details that seem unusual in the texts should be discussed with their original authors.

Another observation emerging from the PTAM translations was that the ones done by Moldovan students into Romanian were of much better quality than those translated by Algerian students into Arabic. The reason behind this is that French and Romanian are closely related languages. This makes translation between these two languages less difficult than from French into Arabic.

In the fourth task, students were asked to share a post-learning report with the corresponding team leader in the other country. The post-learning report consisted of two parts. The first part contained seven questions related to the organisation of teamwork, respect of the deadlines and overall impressions about the partner's text. The second part contained four questions on what had been learned during the project, difficulties encountered, and skills used and developed. In 2019, in order to ascertain the impact of PTAM on their students, the instructors added the following question: "Would you participate in a future PTAM telecollaboration if you have the opportunity?" All students answered in the affirmative. This means that they were satisfied with the very first academic and virtual exchange, and were eager to participate again.

The fifth task in the PTAM programme involved sharing videos. Students from each country are asked to make collective or individual videos to share with the other party. The instructors believe that asking students to make videos at the end of the project offers an informal way to express their feelings on their first participation in an international telecollaboration, and also to make a good impression on their partners at the partner university. It gave the students the opportunity to see their overseas partners for the first time since they started collaborating, as they had been acquainted only by email addresses and names when completing the first four tasks of the project. In 2017, all Moldovan teams shared their videos, but only three Algerian students (team leaders who made individual videos) did so. Most of them, who were female, told me that they did not want to share personal videos with strangers. In 2018, the same thing was reported. However, in 2019, there was an improvement, as most Algerian teams shared their videos. This was no accident. Based on the failure of this task in 2017 and 2018, the Algerian instructor shared some former PTAM videos with her students, in class, in order to encourage them to do the same. Among eight teams, three shared their videos, and one team shared an audio recording.

At the end of each PTAM telecollaboration, an award ceremony was organised. The instructors, in each country, organised a ceremony to award certificates to the teams for the best original texts, best translations and best videos. Also, certificates were given to team leaders and members who showed strong commitment while working on the project. The award ceremony has become a tradition to motivate students and to encourage further contributions in the future.

In the following sections, examples from pre- and post-learning reports are given. An analysis follows, along with discussions.

4 Analysis of Pre-Learning and Post-Learning Reports

4.1 Analysis of Pre-Learning Reports

As mentioned above, students were asked to complete a pre-learning report before the start of the telecollaboration. It appears from this report that students expressed their eagerness to discover a new culture and allow the partner to learn from theirs. They also demonstrated intercultural communicative competence skills by “showing openness and curiosity towards the partners” (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 183):

I want to discover the culture and let my partner discover mine. (Algerian participant 2018)

I am curious to learn about Algerian traditions. (Moldovan participant 2018)

I guess that my partner may ignore our culture. This is why through this project, I will enrich my partner’s knowledge about our culture, as I expect to learn a lot about his/her culture. (Moldovan participant 2017)

They also wrote about their expectations and potential difficulties as they perceived them in the telecollaboration at different stages of the project:

I am afraid that I will lack vocabulary in French and will not be able to communicate with my partner. (Algerian participant 2018)

The students in this project are non-native speakers of French. Therefore, I am afraid that we would have communication problems. (Moldovan participant 2018)

The Internet connection I am using is of bad quality. (Moldovan participant 2017)

I expect to learn about my partner’s studies, his/her hobbies, the foreign languages he/she knows. (Moldovan participant 2019)

From the above quotes, it is apparent that students showed “attitudes of openness, respect (valuing all cultures), and curiosity and discov-

ery (tolerating ambiguity) [which] are viewed as fundamental to intercultural competence” (Deardorff 2006, 255). Furthermore, students seemed to be aware of the difficulties that may occur during the exchange, such as bad Internet connection or poor communication skills in French. They were also aware of “cultural identities and knowledge of self and otherness” (Chun 2015, 10). However, what is interesting is that no student of either side mentioned stereotypes. This is because of the almost total unfamiliarity with the other cultures.

4.2 Analysis of Post-Learning Reports

The examples that will follow are taken from 2018 and 2019 post-learning reports. Post-learning reports from the 2017 are not included because they are very basic, as they contained only nine questions about time dedicated to accomplishing the project, and an overall evaluation on the partner’s original text. The post-learning report has been modified and improved since then (Sadouni, Cebuc 2018).

From the post-learning reports, it appears that the Moldovan teams all worked as unified teams, whereas some team leaders from Algeria complained about their in-country partners because they did not work as they should have done, and did not participate fully in accomplishing tasks. Consequently, they had to independently complete most of their tasks in order to meet all the requirements. Some Moldovan students complained that their Algerian partners were not committed to the project, and they took too long to answer their emails or that the original texts they sent were not cohesive. As a coordinator of this project, I am compelled to agree with the Moldovan students in this regard. It was a challenge to ensure compliance with the deadlines for the various tasks since we met only once a week, they did not reply on a regular basis to my emails. My Moldovan counterpart was able to supervise the project more effectively making use of supplementary tasks and supervision facilitated by the fact that she saw her students three times a week in class. My Moldovan counterpart also told me that her students were frustrated when their Algerian counterparts failed to reply to their questions about ambiguity in the original text. Another reason for the lack of involvement by Algerian students is, in my opinion, the fact that they are not students of translation, but rather students of French. As such, they are very aware that once they graduate, they will not work as translators but, in most cases, as French language teachers. Unlike their Moldovan partners who showed a high degree of diligence and commitment to achieving the learning outcomes of the project, the Algerian students were mostly grade-oriented and not willing to make of this project an enriching academic experience.

It is clear, then, that in telecollaboration, unforeseen obstacles can emerge for many reasons (Jauregi 2016). Despite all the gaps reported, students from both sides declared that they were happy to discover a new culture and a new country. They were glad to communicate with students from different backgrounds. Some students described the project as “a new experience” and a “wonderful experience”. Others acknowledged that after completing the project, they had overcome the anxiety they experienced before they started. They became more confident when speaking in French, both in their own estimation and in the estimation of the instructor. As for the benefits of participation in PTAM, students from both countries declared that the telecollaboration allowed them to improve their linguistic skills, to enrich their vocabulary and communication skills, as well as translation skills. To put it differently, students “like the experience and think that it is useful for their learning process, which boosts their motivation, and hence contributes to create a beneficial setting for optimizing language learning processes” (Jauregi 2016, 170).

As for team-work, while some students reported that they encountered no obstacles because they worked closely as a unified team [“We had no obstacles because we are a united team” (Moldovan participant 2019)], others declared that the lack of commitment on the part of members of their teams hindered effective collaboration [“The members of my team did not commit themselves in all the tasks of the project” (Algerian participant 2019)]. In addition to email, some teams reported that they used other synchronous means of communication and organised face-to-face meetings: “We communicated face-to-face at the university, by email and on Messenger” (Moldovan participant 2019). Others reported the number of times they met to organise the team work: “We met twice a week to work together” (Moldovan participant 2019). These examples show that Moldovan students had a healthy spirit of teamwork. We have concluded that for some Algerian team members, this telecollaboration was seen “as [a set of] academic tasks rather than communicative moves” (Ware 2005, 76).

An interesting byproduct of the programme concerns the trans-languaging (trilingual Berber-Arabic-French in Algeria, and bilingual Romanian-French in Moldova) that occurred between students inside and outside the classroom. For Algerian students, French was used in-class between the students, and between the students and their teacher, as it is the language of instruction. Outside the classroom, colloquial Algerian Arabic was used for the reason that Berber, as the language of the minority, only occurred between students of Berber origins, and was not used among students from different

linguistic backgrounds.⁷ As for students in Moldova, I cannot say for sure whether French or Romanian, or both, were used when working on the project inside and outside the classroom.

The PTAM instructors cannot say which of the languages mentioned above were used in Facebook and Skype exchanges as their use was informal and unrecorded, and the instructors did not interact with students via these two means.

To sum up, the reader should keep in mind that in PTAM telecollaboration, the exchange was performed in French between out-country students, between in-country students (in class) and the instructors of both countries. Arabic and Romanian were only used in the phase of translation, when Algerian and Moldovan students were respectively asked to translate their partners' texts into the official language of their native country.

As for learning about a new culture, all students declared that they learned about new traditions and discovered a new way of life. Above all, they reported that each other's culture was something totally new for them, and that they were happy to get to know each other:

I learned that Algeria is a country rich in traditions and customs. (Moldovan participant 2019)

We discovered a new way of living in a society quite different from our own. (Moldovan participant 2019)

[Moldovans] have a culture different from that of Algerians and I am very happy to get in touch with them. (Algerian participant 2019)

I learned how the wedding party takes place in Algeria. (Moldovan participant 2018)

It is a pleasure to make new contact with people who live in another country. (Algerian participant 2018)

These findings relate to what Gajek (2018, 11) calls "cultural and intercultural awareness" as students "not only learn about other cultures but also understand their native culture and its values better. The findings are also in line with what Marczak points out as "inter-

7 As strange as this seems to be, although Arabic and Berber languages have been coexisting in Algeria since the spread of Islam in North-Africa in the 7th century CE, people from Arab backgrounds, in Algeria, can neither speak nor write Berber, whereas people from Berber backgrounds can. Thus, Arabs and Berbers communicate in dialect Arabic. The main reason is that unlike (standard) Arabic, which has been compulsorily taught from elementary school, since 1962 (Algeria's independence), Berber was introduced only recently as a subject in a few regions of Algeria, and it is not compulsory.

cultural learning, [...] where learners interact with representatives of other cultures” (2013, 163). As reported, students got acquainted with each others’ sociocultural traditions thanks to PTAM telecollaboration. These findings are consistent with Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora and Serna Collazos who believe that “the integration of telecollaboration as a pedagogical tool in language teaching expands the treatment of cultures” (2016, 60), i.e. students learn about cultures, not in books, but in the real world and by making direct contact with people from different cultures. The findings also confirm Rafieyan’s assertion about one of the benefits of telecollaboration for students, which is “to interact with each other and exchange cultural knowledge about their countries” (129).

As for using French as a common language of writing and exchange, students from both sides, as intermediate learners of French, reported that by using “monolingual exchange” (Lewis, O’Rourke, Dooly 2016, 1), they gained a lot from it, as they were able to develop their communication skills:

Communication with a foreign student is an opportunity to enrich our vocabulary and develop knowledge about the general culture of another country. (Moldovan participant 2019)

I am very happy because French is the language of communication in this project. I benefited from this greatly because I had difficulties. Now, I have overcome them. (Algerian participant 2019)

Communication with a stranger is an easy job, especially since we use the same language to communicate with each other and also each responds to the other in an honorable way. (Moldovan participant 2019)

It is good to write in French with a person who speaks Romanian. (Algerian participant 2018)

Despite these positive impressions about using French in this telecollaboration, I think that unlike their Moldovan partners who seemed to know how to write a professional email in French, Algerian students did not develop their linguistic skills in French to the level of fluency.⁸ This is evident from emails they sent to the other parties or to their teacher. Many of them have attachments, but not texts. The ones with texts are poorly written (very short using very simple words). On the contrary, Moldovan students were less successful than their Algerian peers when speaking French in the recorded vid-

⁸ Yet, it must be acknowledged that this is a high expectation.

eo. In other words, Moldovan students did not have good pronunciation where Algerian students did. A very good explanation to this is that, although Moldova is a member-country of the International Organisation of la Francophonie, unlike Algeria, Algerian students have a good mastery of French, as a legacy of 132 years of colonial rule.

When it comes to partner involvement, all Algerian students reported that their Moldovan counterparts were very good partners, but the vast majority of the latter complained about the lack of commitment on the part of their Algerian peers. This is what Ware (2005) calls “missed communication”. In these cases Moldovan students showed “negative affect” toward their Algerian partners (Belz 2007), and reported “a lack of friendliness and motivation” (O’Dowd, Ritter 2006) on their part:

Our partner did not answer our questions and asked us nothing about the text he received. (Moldovan participant 2019)

The Algerian partner needed more time to respond to my emails. (Moldovan participant 2019)

The attitude and the reaction of Algerian students toward their Moldovan peers goes with what Helm (2015) describes as “working and interacting in order to be awarded grades” (201), or what McPherson (1996) calls “more from a sense of duty than from genuine interest” (41). In the context of this paper, ‘sense of duty’ refers to the fact that Algerian students only cooperate when they are obliged to. Which is the case during PTAM telecollaboration, as the instructor informed them that they would be graded on each task. We believe for our part that the lack of commitment by Algerian students may be explained by the fact that they did not place much importance on the telecollaboration as they were studying French, in contrast with their Moldovan peers who were future translators, and as such, needed to interact more, especially during the translation task.

Moldovan students found that the texts produced by their Algerian peers lacked good grammatical structure and cohesion:

We had translation problems with the syntax because the source text does not have a clear structure and the sentences are too long. So, we had to cut the sentences into smaller units and add logical connectors to create consistency and cohesion. (Moldovan participant 2019)

As for culture-bound terms, both Algerian and Moldovan students reported that, due to their unfamiliarity with each others’ culture, and despite the integration of pictures within the original texts, they found it difficult to translate certain culture-bound terms correctly.

Algerian students solved the problem by using phonetic transcription, sometimes followed by a footnote explanation in the target text, for culture specific terms such as *martishor*, *malanca*, *mamaliga*, *placinta*, *ie*, *Pashtele Blajinilor*, *drushka*, *crishma*, and *Laur Balaur*. Some teams also reproduced the pictures included in the source texts to make the target texts clearer. The Moldovan students reported that it was quite difficult to translate French words from Arab or Berber origins, such as *burnous*, *henni*, *haïk*, *fouta*, *gandoura*, or terms related to Algerian culture and Islamic features, such as *Eid El Fitr*, *Al-Maghreb*, *Harz*, *baroud*, *sarwal*, *yennayar*, *adhan*, and *l'ham lahlou*. Moldovan students reported that in order to solve this problem, they had to look for these terms on Google. They also emailed their Algerian partners to help them with the meaning. They noted that not all their emails were answered.

As for the skills students learned, all of them reported that they learned beneficial things and could overcome some difficulties they had had before this project:

It was difficult at first but now I know how to use email. (Algerian participant 2019)

I had a lot of problems in the beginning because I had never used email before, but thanks to this project, I learned how to use it and I overcame these obstacles. (Algerian participant 2019)

Thanks to this project I [...] learned how to work in a team. (Moldovan participant 2018)

Other students reported that at the end of the telecollaboration, they got more familiar with email and developed digital skills, or what Çiftçi and Savaş (2018) call “digital literacy”. However, it should be noted that unlike all Moldovan students who had regular access to the Internet, both at home and at the university via Wi-Fi, as reported by them, and confirmed by their teacher, some of their Algerian partners did not. The reason is that these students live in university residences where only one Internet room is available, and where there is no Wi-Fi connection. The same is to be said about the university campus where Wi-Fi is unavailable. Although all Algerian students who participated in PTAM telecollaboration did have a 4G Internet connection on their phones, they were unable to produce and share Word documents as easily as they would have by using a computer.

Another skill students learned from PTAM experience is the development of their intercultural competence as for:

Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, be-

liefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role. (Byram 1997, cited in Deardorff 2006, 247)

Both pre- and post-learning reports sum-up students' fears, hopes, joy, and eagerness to get in touch with the Other and to learn from him/her, or what Schenker calls "overall enjoyment of the exchange" (2012, 454) or as termed by Ceo-DiFrancesco, Mora, Serna Collazos "enjoyment of interaction with others" (2016, 64). Also, when students expressed their desire to repeat a similar experience, once again, this denotes a willing of openness to new people and new cultures in a world characterised by globalisation. Although both instructors played the pedagogical, social, managerial and technical roles (Müller-Hartmann 2007, 169) while running the project, it appears that Moldovan students were always in the lead as they were very well organised and committed. One explanation that might be given here is that the Algerian instructor used to meet her students once a week, as opposed to her Moldovan colleague who had class with her students three times a week. Thus, the Moldovan instructor had more in-class time to fulfil these roles. Furthermore, it appears from the above examples that Algerian students are not as familiar with emails as Moldovan students. The exchange was slowed down by the fact that the Algerian instructor was obliged to spend some time at the beginning of the programme teaching students to set up and use email.

These observations lead me to conclude that sometimes students who are used to an in-person learning environment find it difficult to shift to working via an electronic exchange as it requires a level of digital literacy. To the best of my knowledge, Algerian students who participated in PTAM had never been in telecollaborative projects before, nor had they worked with their teachers using professional means of communication, such as the email.

Before moving on to conclusions, it is worth mentioning that after I sent this chapter for review, a fourth PTAM telecollaboration took place from 5 February through 17 March 2020. A great deal of the tasks assigned were achieved when the world was experiencing lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overnight, universities around the world emptied and shifted to online-teaching. In the context of PTAM, this did not affect the students because only the task related to the video remained incomplete. To complete the task, Algerian students individually recorded a short video from home. Then, team leaders compiled the footage and shared it with the Moldovan partners and the respective instructors. Only one Algerian team did not share a video despite reminders sent to the team leader. Moldovan students worked differently. In the lead, as always during the project, they made their videos before the COVID-19 situation. They were able to produce much better and higher quality vid-

eos than those produced by their Algerian peers because they were able to work in groups outside the home.

It should be kept in mind that situations similar to COVID-19 could happen in the future. This is why PTAM instructors will consider developing more tools, platforms and strategies to facilitate the telecollaboration in general, and the electronic exchange, in particular. Among these means, Zoom, podcasting and blogs can be used. The instructors can post assignments, remind of deadlines, mentor, and students can work on the different phases in teams, and turn the assigned tasks in due time. Blogs and platforms can also help students to exchange online via forums. These tools will help both instructors and their respective students to be present at once, like in the classroom.

5 Conclusions

In this study, I shared my three-year experience in conducting a telecollaborative project at university level. I conclude that for telecollaboration to be effective, good coordination and preparation between the instructors involved is needed “for both teachers to develop a good online working relationship together in order to co-ordinate and reach agreement on the many aspects of the exchange” (O’Dowd, Ritter 2006, 627). However, learners may face some difficulties and fail to communicate as they do come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To show this, I focused my study on two levels of factors that contribute to failed communication, namely: individual and interaction levels (Helm 2015).

The study also shed light on the strong as well as the weak points in the PTAM telecollaboration. What was lacking most, in my opinion, in PTAM telecollaboration were the “skills of discovery”, the ones which “are needed in situations where individuals have little prior knowledge of the foreign culture or when interlocutors are unable to explain what is obvious for them in their ‘taken-for-granted reality” (Byram 1997, cited in Belz 2007, 134). Upon this experience, it is urgent that due to the importance of in-class discussions, and face-to-face meetings, more hours in the curriculum should be dedicated to the translation class I teach, in order to ensure that the four role categories (Müller-Hartmann 2007) within telecollaboration are achieved.

All in all, despite difficulties and weaknesses noted in PTAM telecollaboration, this experience has allowed students to become more autonomous, more responsible and aware of cultural differences, and to develop their linguistic skills, as well as intercultural and digital competences. Therefore, it is of no doubt that PTAM has contributed to foster students’ language and translation learning, and, as such, constitutes a very useful and enriching practice in students’ academic life and future career.

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