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# A Telecollaborative International Exchange for Foreign Language Learning and Reflective Teaching

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**Abstract** This chapter shares the reflections on a joint international research educational project, involving Columbia University students studying Italian, and Italian pre-service teachers enrolled in an MA in Teaching Italian as a Foreign Language at the University of Urbino, Italy. The northern hemisphere autumn term 2014 iteration of the project is taken as a case study to discuss the effectiveness of teleconferencing for foreign language learning and teaching. The results showed that the videoconference sessions positively affected the learning process of students, and simultaneously fostered reflective teaching in pre-service teachers.

**Keywords** Distance learning. Pre-service teachers. Foreign language teaching. Reflective teaching. Intercultural competence.

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## 1 Introduction

In the field of foreign language instruction there is little doubt that online teaching and learning, which today articulates in a variety of asynchronous and/or synchronous ways, including email exchanges, discussion boards, online chats, wikis, video tandems, blended learning, and teleconferencing, is a fruitful and successful pedagogical resource. Over the past thirty years, in fact, a vast number of studies have highlighted the variety of new and exciting opportunities that Distance Learning (DL) can offer to our students, not only in order to master language skills, but also to promote intercultural competence.<sup>1</sup> Scholars point out that these types of social computer-based activities engage students in a wider array of issues, opening up new learning environments for pragmatics and social relationships (Belz 2007; Thorne, Black, Sykes 2009), and promoting stimulating “intercultural tensions” (Chapelle 2009, 747) that allow new ways of communicating (Hampel, Stickler 2012).

This chapter shares reflections on a joint international research educational project, which involves students studying Italian language (LLs) at Columbia University, and Italian pre-service teachers (PSTs) enrolled in an MA in Teaching Italian to Foreigners at the University of Urbino, Italy (see also Carloni, Franzè 2012). In this computer-mediated exchange, LLs and PSTs are paired up and tasked with reviewing major grammatical points and discussing Italian culture during four videoconferences scheduled over a two-month period.<sup>2</sup> Along the lines of traditional telecollaborations, the original motivator for the project was the desire to offer LLs an additional chance to practice the language outside of the classroom, providing an opportunity to interact in Italian with Italian native speakers in an authentic context using Skype. After all, “the relative isolation of instructed L2 settings, although potentially very productive for learning about language, can be seen as limited” (Thorne, Black, Sykes 2009, 804). Thus, teleconferencing represents the opportunity to open up the classroom to external stimulations. By involving teachers in training, the project, however, has a second – yet equally important – benefit, as it simultaneously gives the Italian PSTs the chance to practice teaching Italian in a technology-mediated environment. The involvement of teachers in training provides in fact a new angle of research, as of today still underexplored, from which to observe computer-assisted language learning. The aim of this chapter is to reflect simultaneously on the effectiveness not only of learn-

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1 Goodfellow et al. 1996; Byram, Gribkova, Starkey 2002; Belz 2007; Blake 2009; Guth, Marini-Maio 2010; O’Dowd 2011; 2016.

2 Cf. Dey-Plissonneau, Blin 2016, for a similar project.

ing but also of teaching a foreign language via teleconferencing. In this study we observe how a series of videoconference sessions, coherently integrated with a traditional course programme, affects the learning process of a foreign language in LLs and, simultaneously, fosters reflective teaching in the PSTs. During the exchange, PSTs were invited to perform reflection-on-action in order to establish which type of input was more effective in a technology-enhanced learning environment. By rating the effectiveness of the two types of input (written texts and videos) that they provided to the LLs - in terms of student motivation, engagement, output production, fluency, sociopragmatic and interactional skills - the goal here is to ultimately investigate how LLs learn in a more solid way and, specifically, what activities effectively promote learning in a virtual space. The improvement in both LLs' language skills and intercultural competence and PSTs' pedagogical growth are measured through questionnaires and recordings of the online sessions. Discussions on this experience offer insightful findings, which are important to reflect on the validity of videoconference practices within or versus a traditional classroom setting.

This international collaboration has been successfully implemented for six years. In recognition of its potential the project was awarded a grant for Hybrid Course Redesign by the office of the Provost in 2016, and a grant from the Language Resource Center, both at Columbia University, in 2017. These grants allowed for further implementations and expanded the potentialities of this collaboration. The project has been officially integrated as a fundamental requirement of an Italian Advanced Course at Columbia University that was taught in the Spring of 2018 as the first hybrid course in the Italian department at this institution. This chapter describes the general framework of the project, its objectives, and the method used to assess its efficacy. Because of the small number of students in language classes and MA programmes of this kind, generalised conclusions are not attainable, so the focus is on the qualitative aspect of this experience. The data collected during the 2014 iteration of the project are used as a case-study to engage in further reflections on the pedagogical value of such a collaboration and its role in the training process of future teachers of a foreign language. This article, then, offers no definitive results, but rather offers reflections on a teaching experience that highlights the strengths of telecollaboration, arguing for further implementation of such collaborative projects as an opportunity not only for foreign language improvement, but also for professional growth.

## 2 Videoconferencing and Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

Pedagogical research exploring the potentials of computer-assisted education has developed to such an extent that it is difficult to keep track of the many technological resources and computer-based methods that are available to language teachers today. Institutions everywhere support and promote projects and collaborations that allow distance learning through teleconferencing, accepted as a valid teaching format almost comparable to a classroom experience (Blake 2009). Specifically, regarding the benefits of teleconferencing within a language classroom, O'Dowd (2016) offers a detailed overview of the history of teleconferencing, its diverse formats, and the issues that may occur when using this tool for learning. His studies point out how a computer-mediated exchange can become a source of authentic learning material that cannot be found in textbooks and that can contribute to expand and broaden students' critical awareness.

Alongside the positive results for students' individual motivation and intercultural communicative competence, pointed out by numerous scholars (Goodfellow et al. 1996; Blake 2009; O'Dowd 2011), O'Dowd paints a fuller picture by focusing also on the logistical, technical, and practical difficulties that may arise at the beginning of a videoconferencing exchange. In terms of logistical complications, he points out that there could be groups of students from different institutions and that are in different parts of the world. Technical issues may be the result of slow or unstable Internet connections, while practical issues may arise when dealing with a different academic calendar, a different grading system to assess the teleconference exchange, or culturally different modes of teaching and learning (O'Dowd 2011).<sup>3</sup>

Video-mediated interactions may even cause greater problems in terms of turn-taking than audio-only as more interruptions may occur (O'Malley et al. 1996, 187). With regard to gaze, especially when used to give feedback, speakers adopt a more confident style when they interact face-to-face. In a video-mediated virtual space, however, research shows that they seem to delay their interaction, because they feel less confident "that they understand each other well"

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**3** O'Dowd discusses issues that could interfere during teleconference: "the socio-institutional, the classroom, the individual and interaction levels [...]. The individual level referred to the learners' psychobiographical and educational background; the classroom level referred to how the exchange was organized and carried out in both classes; the socioinstitutional level dealt with the different levels of access to technology, institutional attitudes to online learning, etc.; and the interactional level looked at the actual quality and nature of the communication that takes places between the partner classes (O'Dowd 2011, 351-2).

and make up by increasing the level of “unsolicited information” (O’Malley et al. 1996, 190).

Several scholars have focused on the dynamics that take place during a teleconference exchange and compared physical face-to-face versus video-mediated lessons. Despite the positive results that some studies may initially indicate, O’Malley et al. ultimately speculate that participants seeing one another does not necessarily improve speakers’ performance (cf. Boyle et al. 1994, cited in O’Malley et al. 1996). Similarly, the delay in transmission that may occur can put speakers’ responses out of sync, affecting the interaction between speakers, and at times even restraining or distorting their normal use of body language (speaking clues versus visual clues) when they are in front of a camera (Goodfellow et al. 1996).

While today we can choose from a variety of programmes and applications to enhance and upgrade our online learning experience, our brief overview has shown that teleconferencing can present many variables. While recognising the challenges indicated by the scholars cited above, some of which were encountered in our own study, our focus is on the constant positive feedback, which showed that unexpected difficulties or technical obstacles did not undermine the success of this collaboration. The results presented in this chapter aim to challenge, inspire and motivate other LLs and PSTs who want to participate in similar projects. The many successful iterations of this specific programme demonstrate that any technical niggles are by far compensated for by the immense value that providing such spaces for communicative exchange provides.

More importantly, by engaging with trainee teachers of Italian (PSTs), our project presents a new perspective from which to investigate computer-mediated teaching experiences. Drawing upon Garret’s definition of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which is to be understood as a “dynamic complex in which technology, theory, and pedagogy are inseparably interwoven” (Garret 2009, 720), this project acknowledges the necessity of sound pedagogical instruction at the basis of a successful language exchange, and adds an original element to the already varied practices used in telecollaboration. In this respect, we define this project as a ‘critical telecollaboration’, where critical is understood as “alternative applications to telecollaboration in order to better exploit the educational potential of this activity” (O’Dowd 2016, 297).<sup>4</sup>

With a double target in mind – LLs’ linguistic improvement and PSTs’ professional growth – the structure of the online lessons is carefully controlled to ensure positive results. After all, as Goodfel-

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. O’Dowd 2016 for an extensive outline of the various existing telecollaborative partnerships and networks.

low et al. already suggested in 1996, reproducing an almost equivalent experience to the classroom is not enough and the quality of the online sessions depends on solid pedagogical design so that “lesson planning remains a *sine qua non* for best practice using technology as it is for the classroom” (Blake 2009, 823). Solid training of the PSTs that took place during this experience has become a key element of this teleconference exchange, instrumental for its successful outcome.

As stated earlier, due to the specificity of the exchange and the small number of participants, the data collected may not provide generalisable conclusions. Nonetheless, the pedagogical training of PSTs within a teleconference learning space was an unexplored area that called for further research. This study aims to provide some initial thoughts and ideas for those who would like to further explore the possibilities of computer-mediated collaborations that involve LLs and PSTs.

### **3 The General Framework of the Project**

#### **3.1 Participants’ Backgrounds**

The participants of this project are students enrolled in an Advanced Italian language course at Columbia University (LLs) and pre-service teachers (PSTs) studying to become instructors of Italian as a second and foreign language in a Master’s programme at the University of Urbino, Italy. The numbers of participants vary at each iteration, thus the pairing up and some of the logistics cannot be decided beforehand. In general, the number of participants is around ten to twelve students and ten to twelve pre-service teachers. So far, the number of participants has never been even, so that at times two students were assigned to a PST or (more rarely) two PSTs to the same student.

The project is made up of four 30-minute online lessons, conducted over four weeks, usually corresponding to the last weeks of the semester in the United States. PSTs and LLs have one week’s time to organise, independently, the exact day and time of their meeting.

##### **3.1.1 Language Learners**

Through the encounters with native speakers, LLs are exposed to a virtual yet authentic environment with the main goal of promoting and fostering not only their language skills, but also their intercultural competence. For example, the rationale for Schenker’s email exchange project between groups of American and German students was that “in order to prepare students to communicate successfully

with people of different backgrounds, we must foster intercultural competence” (2012, 450). From a similar perspective,

[e]valuating CALL provides a particularly rich challenge, demanding a holistic view of materials and their use without losing sight of specific theoretical implications. If technology-based materials and tasks are to be evaluated in terms of the opportunities they provide learners for SLA, then frameworks and guidelines are needed. (Chapelle 2009, 748)

In line with such ‘holistic view’, the ideal learning environment at Columbia University coincides with an Italian Advanced Conversation course, the main focus of which is to offer intense practice in the spoken language through the selection of various topics on contemporary Italian culture. The course, which meets twice a week for 75 minutes, is attended by students with diverse backgrounds. While some come directly from the four-semester university curricular track, with little or no experience in speaking the language outside of a classroom, others have already spent a semester at an Italian university and want to continue to cultivate their mastery of the language. There are also learners who have lived in Italy for some time in the past, but are still fluent, and have joined the class to acquire a more formal practice of the language. This often results in a heterogeneous group, for linguistic and cultural competence, age gap, and personal background, in which, however, everyone wants to have a chance to talk, participate, and improve their language skills and cultural expertise. The international collaboration reported here has originated from a desire to respond precisely to the needs of this varied body of LLs, offering them another opportunity to engage with the language outside the classroom.

### 3.1.2 Pre-Service Teachers

The second objective of this telecollaboration is reflective teaching experience targeted at monitoring the development of PSTs’ online-specific foreign language teaching competences. The PSTs participate in this exchange project after attending a 30-hour course on the didactics of Italian as a Second and Foreign language, offered during the first semester of the MA programme. In the course, PSTs learn how to devise lesson plans and create teaching materials that foster the development of communicative skills and language awareness within a communicative theoretical framework (Savignon 1997). For the PSTs, the video-mediated lessons are part of a required laboratory course that concludes their training in pedagogy. By offering them a virtual, yet authentic context in which to test their mate-

rials, this exchange responds to their immediate need to practice the methodologies and techniques learned during the MA programme.

The project aims to help PSTs become reflective practitioners while reflecting on the implementation and development of a teaching competences in desktop videoconferencing:

A reflective teacher needs a kind of educational technology which does more than extend her capacity to administer drill and practice. Most interesting to her is an educational technology which helps students to become aware of their own intuitive understandings, to fall into cognitive confusions and explore new directions of understanding and action. (Schön 1983, 333)

As reflective practitioners, PSTs need to become aware of their belief systems by consistently analysing how their teaching practices, that is their theories-in-action, reflect their espoused theories, that is the theories they believe in (Argyris, Schön 1978):

When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory; furthermore, the individual may or may not be aware of the incompatibility of the two theories. (Argyris, Schön 1974, 7)

Within a reflective teaching framework, the PSTs involved in the project are thus expected to learn how to monitor their pedagogical practices to become aware of their belief systems. In this respect, to become effective reflective practitioners, the PSTs are provided with tasks targeted making implicit beliefs explicit (Williams, Burden 1997). PSTs are required to carry out *reflection on action*, namely the analysis and evaluation of teaching practices and learning processes in technology-enhanced learning environments after class using various tools (Schön 1983). Connelly and Clandinin define the difference between *reflection in action* and *reflection on action* as follows: “both terms name the method used in the act of thinking practically [...]; [however, the distinction between the two terms] separates thinking during practice from thinking after or before” (1986, 294).

Through *reflection on action*, the PSTs involved in the project are asked to monitor their foreign language teaching practices and evaluate the development of their foreign language teaching competences in a transnational video-mediated online teaching/learning environment. The reflective practice thus fosters the development of the

pedagogical growth of global teachers through teacher training internationalisation (Kissock, Richardson 2010). Since specific pedagogical competences are pivotal in designing effective online activities (Goodfellow et al. 1996; Blake 2009; Guichon 2009; Murphy, Shelley, Baumann 2010), PSTs are expected to reflect on the development of a series of online, telecollaborative, pedagogical and digital competences, such as those elaborated by O'Dowd (2015) and Ernest et al. (2013). O'Dowd (2015) developed a model of organisational, pedagogical and digital competences as well as attitudes and beliefs that telecollaborative teachers need to develop to teach effectively in the new technology-enhanced environments. To collaborate successfully online, PSTs also need to develop competences, such as: planning and managing activities that are relevant for learners; managing online lessons, which entails managing time during lessons including time allocation for each activity; developing and communicating clear instructions and rules for the implementation of and participation in the activities including timings and responsibilities for each activity; during lessons, managing the rules regulating participation in the activities including timing and responsibilities for each activity (Ernest et al. 2013). In this context, it is important to notice that the competences necessary to teach effectively and collaboratively online can only be acquired through hands-on experiences (O'Dowd 2015) such as those provided by the project.

### 3.2 Roles for Language Learners vs Pre-Service Teachers

The collaboration follows eight steps, from setting up and defining lesson topics to lesson design and structure. Then feedback on the lesson is provided by the project coordinators and the planning begins for the actual collaboration followed by the participants' feedback. Each step is described below with the respective roles for LLs and PSTs.

1. *Pairs are set up*  
Before the exchange begins, LLs are partnered with Italian PSTs by the two coordinators of the project and provided with guidelines in order to prevent and/or limit unexpected issues as much as possible. These instructions outline the various stages, the objectives, and the contents of the project, from the initial steps of establishing contact with the assigned partner, to the necessary details regarding the implementation of each specific lesson, including materials design and lesson management.
2. *Lesson topics are defined*  
The online sessions parallel the syllabus of the Advanced Italian course, focusing on a topic previously introduced and discussed in class with their language instructors, such as im-

migration, work life, and childhood memories, to name a few. Online lessons become an integral part of the programme, during which LLs engage with a topic in a one-on-one session, counting for 20% of their final grade. Each online lesson, therefore, is unique and aims to give LLs a chance to talk about a topic with a lesson exclusively designed for them.

3. *Lesson design and structure*

Once the topics are defined, PSTs start structuring the online lessons independently. The lessons must include two parts, one focusing on grammar and the other on communication. PSTs are required to create form-focused exercises, i.e. language awareness activities, and communicative activities related, respectively, to the grammar and cultural topics provided in the Columbia University Advanced Italian Course syllabus. The form-focused activities are, ideally, highly contextualised and should be targeted at helping students revise grammar topics they already studied in class. For the activities planned (i.e. pre- or post-reading activities), PSTs must pick either a written input or a video and create the teaching materials autonomously. PSTs need to devise foreign language teaching materials suitable to a technology-enhanced learning environment.

4. *Feedback on the lesson*

PSTs are required to send their proposed lesson plans to the coordinators to receive feedback on the structure of the unit designed and level of language in their lesson. If changes are necessary, PSTs are required to apply them within a couple of days.

5. *Beginning of the exchange. Sharing activities with LLs and day/time set up*

The meetings start after eight weeks have been completed in the semester. In keeping with the collaboration guidelines, a few days before each Skype meeting, PSTs send to their assigned LL(s) the form-focused activities along with the pre- and while-reading/while-viewing activities, which LLs can carry out autonomously before the online lessons. At this point, via email, PSTs and LLs also find a day and a time for their lesson. Although they are free to schedule the specific day/time of their virtual meeting, since each lesson becomes complementary to the syllabus, it must take place within one week of the related in-class lessons.

6. *Online lesson*

In part I, the sessions are entirely held in Italian and start with feedback on the form-focused tasks. The correction of the pre- and while-reading/while-viewing activities follows.

In part II, PSTs and LLs engage in post-reading/post-viewing activities, such as open-ended questions, role playing,

problem solving and decision-making tasks. In one of the iterations of the project, for example, LLs engaged with the topic of 'The city'. PSTs, thus, looked for meaningful videos or readings that could stimulate conversation and engagement from LLs. The activities were always preceded by exercises aimed at reviewing and expanding vocabulary and were followed by reading comprehension activities, through multiple choice or true/false questions, and/or open questions. Finally, PSTs concluded the lesson with a less closely guided task, in which LLs could engage in free conversation. Because very often PSTs decided to prepare a lesson that introduced their own city, often the final task resembled something like this: "Now that you have learned about my city, imagine that you had to convince a friend to go there on vacation. What would you tell your friend? How would you convince him?". Role play activities like this one, thus, did not focus on personal questions regarding the LLs' own ideas about the city or their own city, but aimed at testing simultaneously what the LLs had learned during the lesson exclusively designed for them. PSTs are required to record each lesson.

7. *Feedback questionnaires*

Both LLs and PSTs fill out questionnaires to leave immediate feedback as soon as they finish each lesson, for a total of four post-lesson questionnaires.

8. *Final feedback questionnaires*

Both LLs and PSTs fill out a final questionnaire assessing their experience of learning/teaching Italian online.

Before the online exchange takes place, the asynchronous moment, when the form-focused activity is sent and there is time for input and discussion beforehand (see step 5), aims to remove any obstacle that may occur. This procedure is intended to circumvent unexpected technical issues like slowness in sending/receiving links and/or attachments, and incorrect file formats. It also aims to facilitate the online lessons, giving LLs the necessary time to complete the exercises at their own pace, and consequently reduce inactivity during the online sessions. As a consequence, the level of stress of the LLs is also reduced, giving them the time to carry out the grammar activity alone and without pressure, contributing to the LLs' sense of self-efficacy since they are likely to feel less threatened when receiving feedback on work which they have been afforded ample time to complete beforehand. After the correction of the grammar activities, and of some initial conversation, LLs are also more likely to feel comfortable engaging in dialogue with Italian native speakers. Moreover, the choice of sharing the input for the communicative tasks before the meeting also gives them the chance to read it as many times as

necessary, to review the vocabulary, and, ultimately, to adequately prepare for the actual discussion. This practice accommodates LLs' learning approaches, as learners can activate their preferred cognitive styles. Additionally, the communicative tasks aim at triggering LLs' oral interaction in Italian within an intercultural framework. Overall, through the various activities, PSTs promote LLs' output and sociopragmatic skills in a highly interactive and contextualised setting. It is interesting to mention that in all iterations of the project, PSTs and LLs usually, and spontaneously, continue engaging with the lesson much longer than the minimum time of thirty minutes required by the project guidelines.

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Language Learners' Questionnaires

In order to monitor the interaction closely and scientifically, at the end of each online lesson LLs are asked to complete online questionnaires based on a five-point Likert scale, ranked 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in the first set of the following eight closed-ended statements:

- Speaking with an Italian native speaker has been useful.
- I had the chance to practice my knowledge of Italian.
- My Skype partner put me at ease.
- The lesson was well-structured and interesting.
- My Skype partner suggested fun and original activities.
- My Skype partner suggested interesting readings/videos.
- I learnt something I did not know of Italian culture.
- I am excited to have my next online lesson (first three questionnaires) / I wished the project included more online sessions (last questionnaire).

The questionnaire is not anonymous and it includes a second section with another set of questions, which asks LLs to comment more in depth, in English or in Italian, on certain aspects of the collaboration.

- What is your Skype partner's name? Does (s)he speak clearly? Do you have difficulties to understand him/her?
- Was the grammar section helpful or not? Was it well-structured or confused and/or too easy/difficult?
- Would you have preferred to just have a conversation on the weekly topic?
- How was the cultural topic of the week presented to you? Provide details on the kind of activity you received in preparation to the discussion (whether audio-video, only audio or only reading).
- How did you feel before, during and after each lesson?

- How was the experience of learning Italian on Skype? Would you recommend it to other students of Italian?

These open-ended questions aim to retrieve further information that can ultimately help the coordinators monitor the experience even more closely. Moreover, in the space of a paragraph, LLs have a better opportunity to illustrate what is happening during the online sessions and to give feedback on the project. These questions aim to determine the degree to which LLs' understanding and engagement with the language has changed over the course of the project.

By assessing the input chosen by their PSTs and critically engaging with the overall structure of the lesson, LLs provide insightful feedback that is useful not only to observe the development of the PSTs' teaching skills but also to assess and adjust the general requirements of the activity. The second set of questions allows for determining the sociopragmatic value of the project by investigating LLs' and PSTs' personal intercultural exchanges, and to further examine ways in which a videoconference can be successfully integrated into their more traditional face-to-face lesson in class.

## 4.2 Pre-Service Teachers' Questionnaires

Taking part in the telecollaborative project, the PSTs face two challenges for the first time: teaching Italian as a foreign language and developing online-specific foreign language teaching competences suitable to desktop videoconferencing.

PSTs' reflective teaching practice is carried out through online post-lesson questionnaires and the analysis of the audio recordings of the desktop videoconferences. After each online lesson, PSTs complete a semi-structured online questionnaire, designed to help them reflect on and critically think about their video-mediated teaching practices, containing both closed-ended questions, based on a five-point Likert scale, and open-ended questions such as the following:

- Examples of closed-ended questions:
  - How effective were your form-focused activities?
  - How effective were your communicative activities?
  - How comfortable did your student feel during the lesson?
  - How well did you manage the lesson?
  - How satisfied are you with your lesson?
- Examples of open-ended questions:
  - What cultural topic did you focus on during the lesson? To what extent did your student find the topic motivating? Explain why.
  - During the lesson, what did you notice about your student's sociopragmatic skills? Why?

- What types of difficulties did you encounter while conducting video-mediated lessons, and what, instead, did you find easy?
- What did you find particularly effective in the lessons you designed?

The post-lesson questionnaires also require PSTs to formulate and answer a question of their own, providing further insight into the development of their reflections and professional growth. Moreover, PSTs record the audio portion of each Skype-mediated lesson – when permission is granted by the LLs – via free online *Callburner* recording software<sup>5</sup> to listen to as part of the reflective teaching process. The following case study includes some examples of self-generated questions and considerations regarding the value of these audio recordings of the lessons.

## 5 A Case Study

In the northern hemisphere autumn term of 2014, the teleconference exchange involved eleven American undergraduate LLs attending an Italian Advanced Conversation II course and seven Italian PSTs. The effectiveness of the collaboration, according to the framework described, is discussed based on the responses collected from the questionnaires. In this case, due to the uneven number of participants, four PSTs worked with two LLs each, while three worked with just one student/LL each.

### 5.1 Language Learners. Results and Comments

LLs responded overall positively, assigning the experience of learning Italian through telecollaboration a value of 4 or 5 on the 5-point Likert scale throughout the project. LLs were also consistent in their interest in having more online lessons because they had gradually become more comfortable with the online form of learning and with their partner. The data collected from the open-ended questions also revealed that most LLs admitted that, by the time they got to the last session, their ability to understand their Italian native speaker PST had improved so that “the conversation had become easier and more fluid”, as one of the students wrote.

LLs found the grammar review not only useful but also “necessary”. Ten LLs consistently responded that they liked to engage with a form-focused activity and that they regarded it as “useful” for their

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<sup>5</sup> <https://callburner.en.softonic.com>.

linguistic improvement. Unexpectedly, the grammar review that preceded the online conversation was rated as an important section of the online lesson and was welcomed enthusiastically by all participants throughout the four lessons. As several LLs mentioned in their comments, they appreciated the fact that their PSTs “could actually correct and explain” any incorrect answer and grammatical inaccuracy and, therefore, recognised the unique pedagogical value of this online language exchange.

In terms of sociopragmatic exchange, while at the beginning five LLs admitted to feeling comfortable but definitely more “distant”, “nervous”, or “scared” by the overall experience, by the end of the project all of them had clearly established a connection with their respective partners. Some LLs wrote that they “felt sorry that this experience was ending”, and one even expressed the desire to stay in touch, via email or “becoming Facebook friends”.

In general, the responses were positive and all ten LLs who answered the final questionnaire recognised the benefits of the one-to-one sessions in developing language speaking skills. While one LL wrote that “it is the most practical way to learn and most realistic”, another said that she “found it really nice to continue practising Italian outside the classroom and with a real Italian student”. All the LLs consistently wrote that they would encourage other peers to engage in similar projects, which demonstrates that learning through telecollaboration improved their motivation and contributed to a general improvement in self-esteem and confidence while speaking the foreign language.

Ultimately, as shown, the responses to the questionnaires confirm that, for all participating LLs, this online exchange was an opportunity to further engage with the target language. They pointed out its pedagogical value especially given the difficulty of finding other opportunities to practice the foreign language in an authentic environment. Contrary to other studies (cf. O’Malley et al. 1996) favouring face-to-face over video-mediated interactions, LLs commented on the importance of the video component, which helped them “to understand the partner better”, or allowed “a natural and intimate conversation” and so that LLs upgraded the experience afforded by this language exchange.

## 5.2 Pre-Service Teachers. Results and Comments

PSTs’ responses and comments, collected through the online post-lesson questionnaires after each video-mediated lesson, can be divided into a number of areas ranging from motivation to time and rule management, form-focused activities, communicative activities, personalised activities, the use of authentic materials and dialogic interaction.

Finally, the improvement revealed by their self-generated questions and responses reveal impressions that can be traced across the four lessons. In this context, it is worth mentioning that after each lesson PSTs shared their reflections, comments, ideas, and doubts with their peers through *Penzu*, a free online journal.<sup>6</sup>

According to their responses to the questionnaires, all seven PSTs confirmed that they had learned first-hand how to signal and manage the time slots allocated to the different activities throughout the lesson, which Ernest et al. (2013) consider a pivotal competence in online learning. This responsibility required that PSTs handle time effectively. In this respect, after the third lesson, one PST wrote, “Is it possible to carry out all the activities in 30 minutes? Yes, it is, because I managed to do that successfully”.

Complying with a set of rules, including timing, was another challenge for PSTs teaching in a digitally mediated learning environment. The seven PSTs felt that they had gradually learned how to implement rules effectively in Skype-mediated lessons, which is a key competence in online teaching as previously mentioned (Ernest et al. 2013). During the first video conferencing lesson, introducing the rationale behind the activities implemented and the strategies adopted as well as “explain[ing] clearly to students what is expected from them during an exchange: deadlines, performance objectives, learning outcomes, etc”. (O’Dowd 2015, 68) helped these PSTs learn how to manage rules successfully.

While, as mentioned earlier, LLs highly valued the form-focused activities – which met their needs and expectations –, three of the seven PSTs pointed out that LLs reacted differently to the form-focused exercises during the four meetings. During the first and second online lessons, these PSTs noticed that contextualised form-focused activities targeting both grammar and lexis were too difficult for LLs; focusing on two different language aspects concurrently in fact caused cognitive overload. As a result, these PSTs adjusted their teaching practice for the following lessons, tailoring activities to their LLs’ individual needs. The other four PSTs, who devised form-focused activities targeting only grammar, did not report any problems on the part of the LLs.

At this stage, Littlewood’s (2000) descriptions of role playing and problem-solving tasks is extremely useful when comparing form-focused activities with communicative activities. In role playing:

- Learners are asked to imagine themselves in a situation which could occur outside of the classroom. This could be anything from a simple occurrence like meeting a friend in the street,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://penzu.com>.

to a much more complex event such as a series of business negotiations.

- [Learners] are asked to adopt a specific role in the situation. In some cases, they may simply have to act as themselves. In others, they may have to adopt a simulated identity.
- [Learners] are asked to behave as if the situation really existed, in accordance with their roles. (Littlewood 2000, 49)

In problem-solving tasks,

learners must not only share information, they must also discuss or evaluate this information in order to solve a problem. Some constituents [of problem solving] are:

- The range of communicative functions that occurs is further widened. In particular, learners will now be involved in going beyond surface facts, in order to analyse, explain and evaluate them.
- This further increases the unpredictability of the interaction. More and more frequently, learners will need to explore their repertoire in order to express ideas for which they have not been specifically prepared.
- There is more scope for disagreement and negotiation. Learners therefore have to manage the interaction more skilfully at the interpersonal level, for example, by learning ways of interrupting or disagreeing without offence. (Littlewood 2000, 33)

As a result, six of the seven PSTs rated their form-focused exercises as becoming progressively more effective although they did not rate them as highly effective and engaging as the role-playing and problem-solving tasks. Over the four lessons, the six PSTs reported an increase in their ability to design and implement these communicative activities fostering students' output and engagement. Moreover, all seven PSTs perceived LLs to be increasingly at ease while engaged in the communicative tasks, which suggests that PSTs had learned to a rather remarkable extent how to "model social presence and online identity for [...] [their] students and help to create an online community of trust and learning" (O' Dowd 2015, 68).

The information PSTs gathered about the LLs during the preliminary get-to-know meeting - which had been scheduled for the first time in the autumn 2014 case study - was especially instrumental in fostering personalisation in designing materials, which had become a pivotal practice for PSTs. All seven PSTs thus devised teaching materials that increasingly catered to LLs' interests and language needs, which shows that PSTs developed to a rather good degree the ability to "apply [...] [their] knowledge of the culture and language of the

partner class to organize culturally and linguistically rich tasks for the exchange” (O’ Dowd 2015, 67).

As for enhancing dialogic interaction and motivation, questionnaires following the first online lesson showed all PSTs’ awareness of the key role that motivation plays in foreign language teaching and learning. As one PST wrote, “Motivation accounts for 75% of the success of the lesson. Strong motivation is contagious: even teaching may be extremely motivating!”. Six of the seven PSTs pinpointed the pivotal role motivation plays in enhancing LLs’ effective engagement in conversation; at the same time, three of the seven PSTs also noticed how motivating teaching can be for instructors when the tasks designed trigger higher order thinking skills and engagement, such as when students are engaged in problem-solving tasks fostering critical thinking and negotiation of meaning extensively. As a result, PSTs focused on the development of their task design and task selection competences extensively. To foster motivation, as consistently demonstrated in their lesson design, all seven PSTs also searched for highly engaging topics and inputs to promote extensive video-mediated interaction. This search, however, was often a challenge for PSTs as three of them pointed out; for example, one participant said that “on the basis of the first and the second lesson, looking for a suitable input triggering also motivation is really time-consuming”. All seven PSTs highlighted “the added value of the authentic input” they had used to devise effective teaching materials. Four of the seven PSTs noticed that authentic input was especially instrumental in fostering LLs’ motivation and output in video-mediated lessons. Another of the seven PSTs pointed out that “videos seemed to be more motivating for LLs - also thanks to the paralinguistic information conveyed and the context provided - but [that] LLs appeared to recall information retrieved while reading a written text better”. Six of the seven PSTs evaluated videos as being “more suitable to convey language and culture concurrently” in a videoconferencing learning environment.

PSTs’ self-generated questions showed significant professional growth as attested by the following table of sequential examples across the four lessons.

**Table 1** Samples of PSTs’ self-generated questions across the four online lessons (translated from Italian by the authors)

Lesson	PSTs’ Self-Generated Questions
1	How are you planning to improve the activities that did not work as you expected?
2	To what extent did LLs react differently to the written input provided in the first Skype-mediated lesson and the video provided in the second videoconference?
2	Would you have enjoyed acting as a LL during the lesson you planned?
2	Could you have made the lesson more motivating?

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2	If you had the opportunity to teach this lesson again, what would you do differently?
3	Who is responsible for the negative feeling you get after a lesson (you or the LLs)?
3	What is the best strategy to correct LLs while they are engaged in conversation?
3	How much shall I tell my LLs about myself (i.e., personal information, interests, experiences, etc.) if I want them to perceive me as both friendly and authoritative?
4	To what extent have you improved as a teacher after the four online meetings?
4	Can one reuse the activities, which worked extremely well in a video-mediated environment, in face-to-face learning instruction?
4	What were your expectations before the project?
4	Were your expectations fulfilled?

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Overall, PSTs' responses to their own questions show that all seven PSTs felt increasingly satisfied with their digitally mediated lessons over the four lessons. The trend paralleled LLs' perceptions who, as indicated, felt progressively "more at ease" while interacting in Italian with their native-speaker instructors in the videoconferencing space.

### 5.3 Evaluation of the Recordings

The recordings of the audio portion of the online lessons provide further evidence for the positive impact of teaching and learning via telecollaboration. As described, PSTs audio recorded each session to use the audio recordings for self-evaluation and share evidence of the activity with the two project coordinators. The didactic implications that emerged, also based on the PSTs' reflections on the recordings followed by their coordinators' evaluations, are not meant to provide any general conclusions due to the limited number of participants in this case study. However, they offer an interesting pioneering case study.

#### 5.3.1 Pre-Service Teachers' Findings

Listening to the recordings of their lessons enabled PSTs to carry out a systematic analysis of their online-specific foreign language teaching practices. PSTs evaluated the degree of effectiveness of the various tasks provided, from role plays and problem solving to opinion exchange and decision making. They also examined to what extent the tasks they had designed triggered dialogical interaction, and proved conducive to knowledge construction and foreign language acquisition within a sociocultural framework (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf 2000; Lantolf, Thorne 2006), and negotiation of meaning fostering language learning (Long 1996).

Soon after the first lesson, three of the seven PSTs who noticed that role-play had not provided enough time for LLs to talk about the targeted topics opted instead for other kinds of tasks, such as problem solving and opinion exchange, in the following online sessions. Through reflective teaching, these PSTs thus gradually learned how to select and design more effective communicative activities designed to stimulate dialogue in the video-mediated learning environment. As a result, the three PSTs gradually developed online-specific foreign language materials design competences. The other four PSTs, who had provided students with either role playing or problem-solving tasks, did not report any challenges probably because the activities they had devised were more carefully designed and conducive to more student engagement than those created by their peers.

In terms of managing video-mediated dialogical interaction, after the first lesson, four of the seven PSTs were not satisfied with quantity of LL output, interaction, and negotiation of meaning. After adding more engaging discussions to the second lesson, the four PSTs were better satisfied with the quantity of oral interaction during the video call, describing the conversation as “really interesting”. One of the four PSTs also mentioned that the scaffolding<sup>7</sup> with which she had planned to provide the LL had not been necessary since, as she comments, “While I was ready to guide my student through the conversation, she was actually able to tackle the whole topic effectively on her own”. PSTs’ awareness of the importance of output and negotiation of meaning in foreign language learning thus emerged from the start; likewise, PSTs’ ability to design effective exchanges, i.e. “tasks which support the activities of collaborative inquiry and the construction of knowledge” (O’Dowd 2015, 68), increased consistently.

During the project, overall, teacher talking time (TTT) decreased as the analysis of the recordings shows. During the first lesson, five PSTs talked for about 40-60% and two PSTs for about 60-80%, while already during the third lesson, three PSTs talked for about 40-60%, three less than 40%, and only one – who had talked for about 40-60% of the time during the first Skype-mediated lesson – for 60-80% of the lesson with the overall result of some additional student talking time (STT).

The analysis of the recordings also generated reflection on time management, a key issue for all PSTs. One PST pointed out that, during the first online lesson, she had spent “too much time chatting informally at the beginning of the session” although she valued the phatic exchanges, which were instrumental in establishing a connection with her student. Similarly, another PST wrote that “time goes

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**7** Scaffolding is understood here as “the intervention of a tutor [...] that enables a [...] novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (Wood, Bruner, Ross 1976, 90).

by faster than expected” during the online lesson while still another noticed that “we were not able to carry out all the activities planned although we were online longer than the expected 30 minutes”. Working in an online video-mediated environment, where there are no overt signals delineating the beginning or end of class, led all PSTs to think that time management was a variable which, as Ernest et al. (2013) suggest, would need to be considered and organised carefully. Comments on time management issues faded as the project developed, which shows that the seven PSTs gradually learned how to manage time to their satisfaction.

Recordings also allowed PSTs to reflect more closely on their techniques for error correction with LLs. From the second lesson, PSTs paid more attention to error correction while engaged in conversation with their LLs. Listening critically to the previous lessons’ recordings enabled PSTs to adjust their teaching practice so that they could begin to correct LLs’ mistakes consistently, using strategies such as backchannels (for example repeating LLs’ utterances using the correct language structures), which would appear as a natural pragmatic conversational component. The recordings also showed that all LLs increasingly used self-correction starting from the second online lesson.

All PSTs also noted improved teaching competences in their interaction in Italian with LLs in the video-mediated learning environment. All seven PSTs gradually started to talk more slowly using a speech rate suitable to LLs’ competence in Italian and to use a clearer pronunciation. They learned how to make input comprehensible during oral interaction working especially on their speech rate and pronunciation; as a result, during Skype-mediated oral interactions, all seven PSTs used increasingly fewer repetitions as well as lexical and syntactical simplifications. In this respect, it is important to notice that all LLs were perceived as more and more relaxed during desktop videoconferencing and gradually able to understand the utterances produced by PSTs to a higher degree. For example, during the last video lesson focusing on the most difficult topic, namely migration, six LLs appeared to understand 80-100% of what the PSTs said while the rest of the LLs ranged between 60-80% (three LLs) and 40-60% (two LLs). On the other hand, during the first lesson focusing on a much easier topic, namely Italian towns, five LLs seemed to understand 80-100% of what the PSTs said while two LLs between 40-60% and one LL between 60-80%. Overall, it seems that PSTs learned how to scaffold dialogical interactions rather well through various conversational strategies, which suggests that they had begun to master the new interactional patterns that digital environments entail (Hampel, Stickler 2012). As a result, in terms of digital competences in telecollaborative learning environments, over the four lessons, all seven PSTs learned to a rather good degree how to “organise and structure real-time student interaction taking into account the par-

ticular affordances and technicalities of synchronous tools such as videoconferencing” (O’ Dowd 2015, 68).

Overall, through reflection on action, all seven PSTs’ perceptions of their solid improvement in lesson planning, classroom management style, and teaching competences in a digital space emerged. Their post-lesson self-evaluations showed that, over the four online lessons, all PSTs were increasingly more satisfied with the way they planned and carried out the lessons, changing from ratings “insufficient” (just one PST) “barely sufficient” (two PSTs) and “good” (four PSTs) for the first lesson, to “very good” (two PSTs) and “excellent” (five PSTs) for the fourth and final lesson.

### 5.3.2 Project Coordinators’ Findings

As previously mentioned, PSTs shared the recordings with the coordinators for a detailed analysis that was carried out using the following parameters: pauses, turn taking, initiative in speaking, use of English words, and classroom and discourse management skills. The recordings of 4 pairs of LLs and PSTs were taken as examples from which to draw conclusions. The following tables compare the first online lesson and the last of the 4 pairs of PSTs with their respective LLs and show the changes we observed in the LLs and in the PSTs in a symmetrical chart.

**Table 1** First online lesson

LLs	PSTs
Nervous laughs and long pauses	Start turns and ask questions
Less initiative. Wait for questions	Do not switch to English even when students do not understand
Use of English words	Allow long pauses to occur
Need to hear some questions again	Need to repeat various questions
Feel more comfortable towards the end	

**Table 2** Fourth and final online lesson

LLs	PSTs
Take initiative and ask questions	Let students start turns, talk more extensively, and ask more questions
Feel more comfortable and ask teachers personal questions	Rephrase sentences more quickly
Fewer pauses	Ask students personal questions and let/help them produce longer utterances
Do not use English, but rephrase and repeat words	Manage to make students feel more comfortable and thus less afraid and tentative while interacting in Italian
Do not feel intimidated by the corrections, despite higher difficulties of the tasks	

### 5.3.2.1 Comments on LLS' Improvements

As table 1 and table 2 show, LLS' participation improved [tabs 1-2]: there were fewer pauses and the conversation was carried out in a much more relaxed, familiar, and spontaneous environment. LLS were able to complete tasks more quickly and did not feel intimidated despite the higher difficulty of the grammar exercises and of the communicative tasks. Recordings of the interactions indicated that, with time, LLS felt increasingly more comfortable and that after the first two sessions, they were less reserved, prepared to take initiative in asking questions, and were able to establish a personal connection with their partner. The LLS observed increasingly refrained from using English words and attempted to rephrase their sentences in Italian when the message was not clear. This helped to develop a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, in which nervous laughter and longer pauses gradually disappeared, to give space to a positive and encouraging environment conducive to learning.

### 5.3.2.2 Comments on PSTs' Improvements

The analysis of the recordings showed significant improvement in terms of classroom and discourse management skills in the PSTs observed. As table 1 shows, during the first online lesson, PSTs consistently initiated conversations and asked questions; as a result, the pedagogical interaction was mainly teacher-controlled and highly asymmetrical (Diadori, Palermo, Troncarelli 2009). Moreover, long pauses and silences occurred during video-mediated dialogical interactions without PSTs repairing them effectively, which made LLS feel rather uncomfortable. Likewise, misunderstandings occurred on a few occasions during the first videoconferencing lesson; PSTs did not manage misunderstandings effectively since they did not repeat or rephrase utterances when necessary.

The comparison of the first and last online lesson [tabs 1-2] showed that the four PSTs had steadily learned how to manage the video-mediated conversations. They learned how to encourage LLS to initiate the interaction, maintain topics, keep the turn, and control the interactional exchange when appropriate; the four PSTs also learned how to shift topics, rephrase utterances, and repair communication breakdowns appropriately. As the project developed, the PSTs learned how to scaffold LLS' conversations better; as a result, LLS produced longer utterances and were less tentative while interacting in the target language. The audio recordings also showed that while talking with LLS, besides slowing down their rate of speech, PSTs also learned how to modify sentence structures to make their utterances more comprehensible to LLS. Overall, the PSTs learned how to scaffold

LLs' interaction, take turns, and negotiate meaning within a video-mediated learning environment gradually but rather effectively. This shows that PSTs developed, to various degrees, pivotal online-specific language teaching competences suitable to the fostering of effective interaction through desktop videoconferencing (Ernest et al. 2013; O'Dowd 2015).

Moreover, PSTs learned to wait for LLs' answers, demonstrating that they knew how to manage silence and pauses effectively. Providing LLs with the time they needed to produce output became a key objective for PSTs, which further proved the effectiveness of their *reflection on action*. It is of paramount importance for PSTs to be able to manage silence and pauses successfully since, as previously mentioned, video-mediated interactions come with many variables and challenges, such as managing silence and turn taking, that can disturb the overall outcome of the exchange (O'Malley et al. 1996).

In general, the PSTs observed increasingly fostered LLs' active participation in the learning process, guided learners through activities, and promoted engagement. While, as stated at the beginning of the section, the conclusions just drawn are related to four pairs of PSTs and LLs, these observations tentatively indicate that similar results had been achieved for other participants as well. Although our conclusions may not be generalisable, they provide a jumping-off-point for further empirical research.

## 6 Conclusions

LLs' and PSTs' responses to the final surveys are generally encouraging, suggesting that this telecollaboration gives participants in the United States and in Italy a new and motivating opportunity to learn, reflect, and engage with foreign language learning. Their positive feedback suggests that this project

ha[s] the potential to propel language learners beyond the confines of the institutional identity of 'students' by framing the boundaries separating language study from social life, student from player, and information consumer from knowledge contributor. (Sykes et al. 2008, cited in Thorne, Black, Sykes 2009 814-15)

Simultaneously, the feedback confirms that technology can present another space in which to engage in fruitful pedagogical practice and critical reflection on second and foreign language acquisition, offering an opportunity for collaborative practice of teaching and learning. For example, the better the PSTs knew their LLs, the more they were able to devise engaging tasks, fostering higher order thinking skills and the "ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explic-

it criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram 1997, 53). On par with their demonstrations of higher levels of intercultural communicative competence, LLs found that being engaged in various culture-specific practices in a technology-enhanced learning environment contributed to

develop[ing] learners as intercultural actors or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. (Byram, Gribkova, Starkey 2002, 9)

As pointed out early in this chapter, better intercultural communicative competence is a key outcome for LLs who want to communicate successfully.

In line with the current academic offerings which are increasingly more inclusive of technological tools for language learning and online teaching, projects like this one support the value of teacher training for the success of the digitally mediated exchange. Today's classroom realities reinforce the urgent need to offer instructors not only the latest and most advanced technological resources and tools, but also a solid practice to be adequately prepared for an online teaching environment. Significance of teacher training in this area especially resonates in O'Dowd's words, who suggests that "telecollaboration is to become a long-term integral part of foreign language education [...] rather than an extra or supplementary activity" (2011, 356). Meanwhile, as virtual spaces become more and more sophisticated, new research opportunities also emerge, allowing us to experiment in a variety of new and stimulating ways (for example, with more LLs and PSTs in the same room or in breakout rooms).

International telecollaborations can be a motivating experience, capable of simultaneously enriching the curriculum of all participants and of the coordinators through the building of an engaging and intellectually inspiring virtual space for authentic and significant linguistic, intercultural, and pedagogical exchanges.

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