

Challenges in a Chinese-Malaysian Telecollaboration Project to Develop Chinese EFL Students' Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

Numerous attempts have been made to elucidate the benefits of telecollaborative projects to develop students' intercultural competence. Literature in the area also reveals that the success of telecollaborative exchange projects cannot be guaranteed all the time. Therefore, it is significant to analyze the failed cases for more effective telecollaboration in future studies. Using a qualitative research method, this paper presents the results of a Chinese-Malaysian WeChat telecollaboration project, focusing on the challenges encountered by Chinese EFL participants in the process of developing their intercultural competence. Five challenging factors were identified through content analysis of Chinese participants' reflective journals and interviews, involving the sociocultural level, individual level and classroom level of challenges within O'Dowd and Ritter's (2006) inventory of reasons for failed communication in telecollaborative projects. The paper expects to provide suggestions for precaution measures for future telecollaboration studies in Chinese EFL teaching field and contribute to intercultural communication research in the Chinese context.

Keywords: Challenges, Telecollaboration, Intercultural Competence, Chinese EFL Students, Precaution Measures

Introduction

With the rapid development of globalization and the increasing popularity of immigration, the era has witnessed an increase in intercultural communication between people and institutions from different cultural backgrounds (Gao & Kennedy, 2019). This multicultural environment requires language learners to be equipped with not only language skills but also the ability to "communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations" (Deardorff, 2008, p. 33), i.e. intercultural competence (IC).

China has the largest population of English learners in the world. Following the global 'intercultural turn' in language teaching, the development of Chinese students' intercultural competence has become one of the major concerns in Chinese EFL teaching. The long-term exam-oriented system has an impact on EFL classrooms, where language proficiency remains the primary focus. There are insufficient possibilities for Chinese EFL students to enhance their intercultural competence.

Telecollaboration, which involves engaging learners of distant locations in interaction and collaboration, has been widely proven to be an effective way to develop language learners' intercultural competence (Warschauer, 1999; Chun, 2011; Mu & Yu, 2023). However, a growing number of studies have identified some factors that are likely to be the cause of communication failure in telecollaboration (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Therefore, it is significant to explore challenging factors in telecollaborative endeavors. As Vygotsky (1978) pointed out, one of the most effective ways to learn the development of a phenomenon is to analyze the failed cases. Against this backdrop, this paper discusses the challenges found in a Chinese-Malaysian intercultural telecollaboration project, aiming to provide a viable approach and precautions for Chinese EFL teachers to develop EFL students' intercultural competence.

Literature Review

The term intercultural competence appeared in the 1970s. However, there is still not a universally agreed precise definition of it so far. The most influential definition of intercultural competence is commonly agreed to be Byram's (1997) model, which encompasses five components: attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness. Attitude and knowledge were rated to be preconditions among all components.

Language learners are thought to be able to develop intercultural competence through intercultural contact or experience (Stickler & Emke, 2011; Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). There are now "many real opportunities to integrate intercultural learning into the language curriculum" (Helm, 2009, p. 91) because of the development of computer technology. Telecollaboration is "a scalable and durable way" (O'Dowd, 2016, p. 291) to provide students with first-hand intercultural experience. Telecollaboration, as one of the most well-known CALL subfields, has been applied and studied in the context of foreign languages teaching for more than 20 years.

Telecollaboration was proposed by Mark Warschauer (1996) and it has been defined as "the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work" (O'Dowd, 2012, p. 340). Many empirical studies have proved the benefits of telecollaboration for the development of language learners' intercultural competence from different perspectives. Participants in Wilden's (2007) study successfully raised their level of cultural awareness and comprehension. According to Hirotsu and Fujii's (2019) research, learners shift from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelativist cultural worldview.

Previous studies tend to only focus on the benefits brought by telecollaboration, ignoring the challenging factors in the telecollaboration process (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). However, due

to the complexity of telecollaboration, which involves organizational, psychological, social, and cultural issues, difficulties that could impair communication will always arise (Belz, 2003). After reviewing the body of research on telecollaborative projects, O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) created the Inventory of Reasons for Failed Communication in Telecollaborative Projects, a list of challenging factors that could result in poor communication in telecollaborative exchanges (See Figure 1).

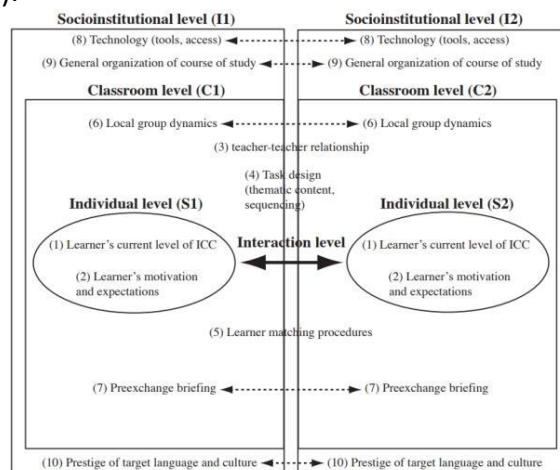


Figure 1 Inventory of reasons for failed communication in telecollaborative projects (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006)

The inventory is made up of ten components that are categorized into four levels: individual, classroom, socioinstitutional and interaction. O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) highlight two constructs that are very important to consider at the individual level. One is the learner's current level of intercultural competence, and the other is learner's motivation and expectations. The classroom level contains teacher-teacher relationship, task design and learner matching procedures, which are placed at the interface between the two classrooms, as these will usually have a direct impact on both classrooms. Socioinstitutional level has attracted the most attention from previous studies, including three crucial factors: technology, the general organization of the course of study, and the prestige of the target language and culture. The inventory's last level, which addresses interactions between two parties, places special emphasis on different communication styles that could lead to miscommunications between partners.

According to O'Dowd and Ritter (2006), the inventory was meant to be helpful for "educators...better prepared for the challenges which await them in their online projects" (p. 628). But they also admitted that the inventory "does not provide a definite number of reasons" (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006, p.628). The four-level structured inventory is a commonly used approach for examining difficulties in telecollaborative projects (Dunne, 2014; Hauck, 2007; Kelsen & Flowers, 2017; Luo & Gui, 2019; Martin, 2013). It has been proven to be "a valuable reflective tool" (Dunne, 2014, p.183) for analyzing telecollaborative projects' strengths and weaknesses.

Method

To investigate the challenges encountered by Chinese participants, the study undertook a qualitative research design, which is "an approach for exploring and understanding the

meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.32). An six-week telecollaborative project was organized where 30 Chinese EFL students and 27 Malaysian students majored in Graphic Design communicated via WeChat. C1, C2, C3, C30 were used to anonymize the Chinese students. The participants from Malaysia were made anonymous by the use of M1, M2, M3..M30. All of the Chinese students completed the College English Test Band 6 (CET 6) with scores ranging from 435 to 593, indicating average to proficient English proficiency. All Malaysian participants passed the English test in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM), a nationwide examination taken by all fifth-form secondary school students in Malaysia. Their scores fell between B1 and C1, indicating an intermediate to advanced level of proficiency in English. Consequently, it was expected that individuals on both ends could converse in English.

Participants were paired up into 24 one-on-one dyad and three two-on-one groups randomly. For six weeks, they communicated with each other in English via WeChat to discuss a different cultural issue each week. They were also free to discuss additional issues once they had finished the assigned ones. The topics were chosen based on participant interests gathered from a pre-project questionnaire (See Figure 2).

Phase	Time	Topic
Phase I	Week 1	Ice-breaking
	Week 2	College life
Phase II	Week 3	Typical food
	Week 4	Festival
	Week 5	Family relations
	Week 6	Religious beliefs

Figure 2 Weekly Cultural Topics

To explore the challenging factors Chinese participants faced in the telecollaboration process, they were required to write a 400-word journal every week to record the communication process and the difficulties and challenges in their perceptions. Chinese students’ journals were collected on a weekly basis every Sunday. Ultimately 180 journals were collected. To triangulate the data, a semi-structured, in-depth interview with each of the thirty Chinese students was conducted after the completion of the project to enable Chinese students “to talk openly” (Creswell, 2014, p. 46) about the challenges they encountered. The Chinese interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English.

Content analysis, a “systematic method to analyze qualitative data” (Lindgren, Lundman, & Graneheim, 2020, p. 4) was employed to analyze the data from journals and interviews. The study adheres to the content analysis process proposed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), which consists of three primary phases: preparation, organization, and reporting. At the preparation stage, the researcher was immersed in the data, noted down the initial ideas and obtained a sense of the whole. The organizing stage involves the coding process. A hybrid approach combining deductive coding strategy and inductive coding strategy was applied.

O’Dowd and Ritter’s (2006) Inventory of Reasons for Failed Communication in Telecollaborative Projects was employed as the initial coding scheme. However, the study was not limited to the predetermined categories, annotations were also made for texts that

suggested probable additions to existing categories as well as emerging themes. For the reporting stage, “models, conceptual systems, conceptual map or categories, and a storyline” are recommended as ways to report qualitative findings (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 402).

Results and Discussion

Four layers of challenging factors were outlined in the Inventory of Reasons for Failed Communication in Telecollaborative Projects by O'Dowd and Ritter (2006): individual, classroom, socioinstitutional, and interaction. Five subcategories under three of the four main categories were identified throughout the coding phase of the qualitative data used in this study. Chinese students face significant challenges at the socioinstitutional level, primarily related to their rigorous academic schedules. Prior to telecollaboration, their low degree of intercultural competence and poor English language also presented significant difficulty for them on an individual basis. At the classroom level, two subcategories arose as challenges for Chinese students. One involved their pressure from writing journals and the other was related to the restriction of assigned topics.

Table 1

Codebook for Challenges

Category	Subcategory
Socioinstitutional level	Tight academic schedules
Individual level	Weak English Proficiency
	Chinese Students' Limited Level of Intercultural Competence before Telecollaboration
Classroom level	Pressure from Writing Journals
	Restriction of Assigned Topics

● Tight Academic Schedules

Chinese students' biggest challenge was discovered to be their rigorous academic schedules. Many Chinese students expressed concern about how their partners' and their own hectic schedules for college have prevented them from participating successfully in telecollaboration, which has hampered the development of their intercultural competence. Ten Chinese students wrote about their hectic college schedules in their journals for the first week. A vivid case came from Qianqian's words, 'College life is very tiring and busy, and we have many tasks to complete. I will try to find time to communicate with my partner because I really hope for intercultural communication'. Over the next five weeks, Chinese students' journals frequently contained complaints about their demanding academic schedules, which made it difficult for them to effectively interact. C15 clarified how their hectic schedules affected communication

The barrier was that we were both busy this week. I was busy with my mid-term papers and quizzes, so I didn't have time to chat with my partner until Friday afternoon. He was also very busy this week because he had a lot of work that was to be due soon. He might have been busy all the time because he didn't reply to my message in time. It wasn't until 11 p.m. that we finished this week's topic.

Training courses, entrance examination for postgraduate study, and mid-term test were the most mentioned causes for their tight academic schedule. As a result, they delayed or failed to communicate with their partners because they could not find an appropriate time, which hampered their capacity to develop intercultural competence.

Chinese students' replies in the post-project interview, where 12 of them characterized the tight schedule as challenging, confirmed this conclusion about busy academic schedules. C7 explained in detail

Another challenge is that we didn't have time to chat. I'm preparing for the entrance examination for postgraduate study, so I need to study hard. The last two communications in June clashed with our preparation for the upcoming final exam. We were worn out. But we still need to remember to chat. It was so difficult for us. Can we just do the project at the beginning of the semester, not the end?

One possible explanation for Chinese students' frequent complaints about tight academic schedules might be associated with the flexible nature of mobile social media applications. The current telecollaboration initiative did not need students to exchange at a set time in a classroom, in contrast to previous telecollaborative efforts (Belz & Muller-Hartmann, 2003; O'Dowd, 2005; Ware, 2005). Due to the flexibility of mobile social media applications, WeChat enabled participants to communicate anywhere at any time. As a result, participants needed to negotiate a common time and communicate in their spare time separate from regular class hours. Therefore, the current study highlights how crucial it is to continue incorporating telecollaboration into classroom instruction. For example, the teacher may designate specific class time for concurrent communication among participants. By doing this, they would be under less pressure to arrange a suitable time to talk after class.

● Weak English Proficiency

At the individual level, many Chinese students stated that one of the biggest challenges to their intercultural competence development was their poor English. Some Chinese students found it challenging to grasp their partners' words, particularly when it came to identifying their accents. On the other hand, a lot of Chinese students mentioned how difficult it was to express themselves in English. Difficulties in understanding each other directly influenced cultural knowledge learning, thus impairing their intercultural competence development. C5 put it in detail

Another challenge is that we didn't have time to chat. I'm preparing for the entrance examination for postgraduate study, so I need to study hard. The last two communications in June clashed with our preparation for the upcoming final exam. We were worn out. But we still need to remember to chat. It was so difficult for us. Can we just do the project at the beginning of the semester, not the end?

The results of the post-project interview provided evidence that Chinese students faced severe challenges with language. Eleven of them cited poor English ability as one of the main obstacles to telecollaboration. In particular, some 'had trouble understanding what their partners were saying during voice conversations, video calls, and voice messages'. Others said it was 'difficult to say what I wanted to say in English'.

The current study confirms past findings that language presents difficulties for telecollaboration participants (Belz, 2002; Chen & Yang, 2016; Helm, 2015; Luo & Gao, 2022), underscoring the need to offer language instruction to students prior to telecollaboration. Nonetheless, the fact that this study did not include native speakers of the target language sets it apart from earlier studies. English was used as a lingua franca in the current telecollaboration. Chinese students had difficulty understanding the English accents of their partners during video conversations, voice calls, and voice messages. It highlights the significance of including accent training in a lingua franca context.

- Chinese Students' Limited Level of Intercultural Competence

Chinese students' limited intercultural competence level was found to be another challenging factor at the individual level that hindered their telecollaboration experience. The greatest indication of their poor intercultural competency was their lack of knowledge about both their own and Malaysian cultures. Many Chinese students discovered that their ability to understand each other's messages was hindered by a lack of cultural background. C17's journal from the second week provides a striking illustration:

The most embarrassing thing is that sometimes I [couldn't] answer her questions because I did not know the answers. Probably because I [was] not familiar with some problems in [my] country, such as the origins of festivals and the family planning policy, so I still need to look it up online. It [made] me realize that I know too little, or I should know more about [my] country's culture so that cross-cultural communication can be more successful.

Not knowing anything about traditional Chinese culture, C17 found it difficult to answer her partner's questions. To look up information online, she had to cut off communication. Communication across cultures became problematic as a result.

The post-project interview revealed the challenge posed by Chinese students' low intercultural competence. A third of Chinese students said that their grievances over the difficulties were caused by a lack of cultural knowledge. For instance, C3 thought her lack of knowledge of religion in Malaysia made her feel awkward, leading to her lousy impression of communication. She elaborated further

I think the challenge is that I [didn't] know much about his culture. For example, when we talked about religion, though my partner explained much to me, I still don't quite understand. But I could feel he was talkative, but I [couldn't] say anything. I feel a little bad about this conversation because I am very strange to this topic.

Knowledge is an important precondition in Byram's (1997) model of being an intercultural speaker. Some Chinese participants' inadequate cultural knowledge exerted a negative influence on the improvement of their intercultural competence. This result is frequently seen in the limited studies conducted in China on telecollaboration (Chen & Yang, 2016; Luo & Gui, 2019; Shen, 2021). This result supports the notion that cultural learning should be a part of Chinese EFL instruction, as was covered in earlier parts.

- Pressure from Writing Journals

Within the classroom level, two challenges were classified from qualitative data sources. First, Chinese students lamented the burden of keeping weekly journals, saying it reduced their enthusiasm in participating and left them with little time to contribute cultural knowledge input. As a result, the effectiveness of telecollaboration to improve their intercultural competence was diminished. For example, C7 expressed her grief over the pressure to complete the assigned writing assignments even though she valued the friendship with her partner and found their conversations to be enjoyable:

I highly expected communication every week. But what I feel pressured is the journal I have to write. I enjoyed my communication with Sasha. I feel relaxed. But I have to make a lot of efforts to think what to write in journals. It took me a long time every week. I don't like writing. Whenever I think of the journal, I will lose interest in communication.

C7's comments demonstrated that some students saw the significant time and effort required to write weekly journals as a challenge. They were less eager to participate in intercultural communication because of the load of journal writing. This was connected to the attitude domain in Byram's (1997) intercultural competency paradigm. It consequently impacted the effectiveness of the telecollaboration project in raising the intercultural competence of Chinese students.

- Restriction of Assigned Topics

The other challenge at the classroom level was the restriction of predetermined topics for the project. During the post-intervention interviews, nine Chinese students expressed that the given topics presented a challenge, even though the topics had been selected based on their stated interests in the pre-project questionnaire. Some students complained that assigned topics restricted communication in a formal and inflexible environment, which negatively impacted their attitudes toward participating in the project. C8 complained about the topics in the interview:

Sasha and I are both outgoing and like to chat with each other. We like pop music and have the same idol. We enjoyed talking about it. But every time, when we have to turn to the given topics, the conversation becomes quite embarrassing like we are forced to finish a task.

It is evident that some students failed to incorporate cultural subjects into their intercultural communication casually and fluidly, resulting in overly purposeful communication, even though the Chinese teacher had provided them with guidance during the pre-project briefing on how to make queries on cultural topics.

Some students questioned the appropriateness of the given topics, especially about religion. For instance, C11 noted in her sixth journal that she was reluctant to bring up topics that she considered 'private for foreigners', like religion and family. She therefore felt a little honored to discuss them. C15 went into great depth to clarify her confusion:

I think some topics are quite sensitive. For example, when he asked me why I didn't have a religion, I was tentative and awkward, not knowing how to respond. And when I started the COVID-19 issue in the end, I could obviously feel that he didn't want to talk about it. Can't we just talk more about hobbies?

One possible explanation for Chinese students' perceived difficulty in cultural topics could be related to students' poor ability to formulate meaningful inquiry questions (Chen & Yang, 2016) to connect cultural subjects to the conversation. This is particularly true for Chinese students, the majority of whom were given the chance to participate in intercultural communication for the first time. As a result, this study emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role in imparting instruction and direction on intercultural communicative abilities (O'Dowd, 2013).

Conclusion

In the current study, a qualitative research approach was used to investigate the challenging factors of a WeChat-based telecollaborative project involving Chinese EFL students and Malaysian college students with the goal of enhancing the intercultural competence of Chinese EFL students. Taking O'Dowd and Ritter's (2006) Inventory of Reasons for Failed Communication in Telecollaborative Projects as the framework, Chinese participants were found to have encountered five major challenges in the telecollaboration process, echoes the statement of O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) that "success in telecollaborative exchanges is far from guaranteed" (p. 624). Their tight academic schedule, pressure from writing journals and restriction of predetermined topics became challenging factors primarily because they impacted Chinese students' positive attitudes, an important precondition for developing intercultural competence (Byram, 1997). The other two factors at the individual level, namely their weak English proficiency and intercultural competence mainly impacted smooth cultural knowledge exchange, which is another significant precondition of intercultural competence development in Byram's (1997) model.

Based on the above findings, this study proposed the following three main suggestions for Chinese EFL researchers and teachers in developing students' intercultural competence

- Effective measures need to be taken for future intercultural telecollaboration practices using mobile social applications as the medium to balance regular class hours and after-class project hours. Teachers are suggested to allocate part of class hours to telecollaborative exchange or increase the grade portion measured by project participation.
- Before engaging in telecollaboration, it is advised that EFL teachers provide language training for EFL students, especially on related vocabulary and particular accents.
- Guidance and teaching are also needed regarding the seamless and informal integration of cultural subjects into their intercultural communication. It is advised that EFL students themselves acquire effective meaning construction techniques for when they are negotiating with foreign partners.

Continuous studies and efforts are needed from researchers, teachers, and students to take preventive measures to ensure better outcomes of telecollaboration practices.

The current study is of great significance. Theoretically, the present study contributes to enriching the existing inventory of risks in telecollaboration practices. As Müller-Hartmann (2000) correctly noted, research in this field tends to overlook the challenging parts of telecollaboration and concentrate solely on successful project outcomes. The implementation of telecollaboration in the study, especially the discussion on the challenging factors faced by Chinese participants enhances people's understanding of the difficulties inherent in telecollaborative exchanges on one hand. On the other hand, it enriches the existing literature on the challenges of telecollaboration.

Contextually, this study makes contribution to enriching telecollaborative studies in China. Few telecollaborative studies have been done in China and telecollaboration has scarcely been used in the Chinese context to develop Chinese EFL students' intercultural competence. However, an increasing number of researchers in the field has realized the important role of telecollaboration on enhancing language learners' intercultural competence. Therefore, in this sense, the implementation of the telecollaborative project in this study, especially the exploration of challenging factors, provides a reference for future telecollaborative endeavors to avoid potential risks of failure and ensure effective outcomes in China.

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