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Synchronous Telecollaboration for Novice Language Learners: Effects on Speaking Skills and Language Learning Interests

Télécollaboration pour des apprenants de langue novices – Effets sur les compétences en production orale et l’intérêt pour l’apprentissage des langues

Theresa Schenker

1. Introduction

Telecollaborative projects which allow language learners to collaborate online by communicating in the target language hold a myriad of benefits for language and culture learning. Collaborative dialogue with others is essential for language learning to take place. This collaborative dialogue can occur in computer-mediated communication which provides an exceptional venue for direct one-on-one or group-to-group interaction. In communication with native speakers or other learners of the language, students can engage in negotiation of meaning, which according to the interaction hypothesis supports language acquisition (Long, 1996). Likewise, communicating with others online can help students become aware of their own linguistic shortcomings, which may push them to modify their output in an attempt to more successfully convey a message. This, according to the pushed output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) can lead to processes important for second language acquisition. In collaborative dialogue with others, students have to learn how to make themselves understood by adjusting their output and trying out new structures (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers students opportunities to engage in collaborative dialogue and can therefore be beneficial for learning and is an important tool for foreign language education. The combined opportunities for input from native speakers, output from the language learner, and various types of feedback on this output through the online interaction between learners
make telecollaboration an ideal place for language learning. While most educators recommend and use telecollaboration primarily for the intermediate or advanced language level, there are potential benefits from CMC for novice language learners. The present article focuses on the suitability of incorporating telecollaborative projects in first-semester college language classes by outlining a cross-cultural project between beginning learners of German in the US and advanced learners of English in Germany.

2. Literature Review

Connecting non-native speakers (NNS) with native speakers (NS) of the target language is especially advantageous; it can enhance learning by giving students access to authentic communication contexts (O’Dowd, 2006; Thorne, 2006) which can lead to increased student motivation (Gläsmann, 2004; Jauregi et al., 2011) and higher levels of participation and interaction (O’Dowd, 2007). Communicating online with native speakers has been shown to support students’ development of intercultural competence (Belz, 2007; Van der Kroon, Jauregi & Jan, 2015) as well as their skill development in several language areas such as, for example, vocabulary knowledge (Dodd, 2001), reading comprehension (Taki & Ramazani, 2011), pragmatic competence (Rafieyan et al., 2014; Vyatkina, 2012), writing skills (Liaw, 1998; Ritchie & Black, 2012), oral proficiency (Satar & Özdener, 2008) and listening comprehension (Yanguas, 2012), to name a few.

Much research has been dedicated to exploring the unique affordances and differences of text-based and voice-based asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication. In text-based CMC projects, lack of oral or visual cues can hinder the flow of communication (Wang, 2004). Although technical problems can be reduced by using asynchronous tools (Murphy, Gazi & Cifuentes, 2009), synchronous voice-based CMC (SCMC) has the advantage of allowing students to see and hear their partner. The instantaneous nature of voice-chatting makes such an exchange more dynamic (Pellettieri, 2000) and the visual and oral components allow for a higher degree of interactivity (Wang, 2004). There may be more pressure in synchronous, especially in voice-based CMC projects (Rösler, 2007) and as a result, the responses might be less reflective and thoughtful (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010). Using humor in video-based communication can help students deal with these pressures and anxieties and can increase levels of engagement (Anthony, 2013). Further problems in SCMC include time management and possible feelings of discomfort (Mullen, Appel & Shanklin, 2009). Certainly, asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) has the strong advantage of allowing students time to think and construct their answers (Hauck & Lewis, 2007) and it easily enables communication across time zones (Ahern, 2008). The flexibility of asynchronous communication modes and the convenience of connecting learners with an authentic audience regardless of their physical location (Meskill & Anthony, 2010) are perhaps the strongest benefits of ACMC. On the other hand, SCMC is an excellent preparation of learners for communicating in real time with real people (Gläsmann, 2004).

Research has shown that SCMC can enhance student motivation (Nishihori, 2011) especially when using video-chat (Yamada, 2009), and that students do in fact negotiate for meaning in oral SCMC (Yanguas, 2010), making this a potential environment where language learning can take place. A meta-analysis of studies on SCMC published between 1990 and 2012 revealed that weekly communication between intermediate learners who work in pairs or groups may be especially beneficial for second language acquisition (Lin,
Huang & Liou, 2013). Videoconferencing studies have revealed increased levels of communication between students (Wang, 2006). Studies have suggested, that voice-chat projects might be most beneficial between non-native speakers and other non-native speakers who do not speak the same first language (Bueno Alastuey, 2013), especially to develop students' pronunciation skills (Bueno Alastuey, 2010). Tandems consisting of NS/NNS or NNS/NNS with the same L1 in SCMC can also lead to positive learning outcomes, including the development of different communication strategies (AbuSeileek & Qatawneh, 2013) and increases in speaking proficiency (Satar & Özdener, 2008). Oral proficiency improvements may in fact be higher after participating in SCMC projects than after regular face-to-face classroom communication (Bueno Alastuey, 2011). Studies investigating the effects of voice-chatting between native and advanced non-native speakers further showed that SCMC can help students develop their interactive and pragmatic skills (Barron & Black, 2015). The potential of SCMC tools for addressing pragmatic topics in the foreign language classroom has been underlined (Sykes, 2005). Even though the pressure of the immediate communication situation can result in unsuccessful task-completion and fewer instances of negotiation of meaning, when comparing NS/NNS communication in voice-chat and text-chat (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014), students generally react favorably to SCMC projects through video and/or audio communication (Yanguas, 2012) and perceive gains in language skills and intercultural competence (Tian & Wang, 2010).

Most research on SCMC has focused on intermediate and advanced language learners and studies have suggested that a certain proficiency level in the L2 might be necessary for students to fully benefit from SCMC projects. In fact, it has been said that SCMC projects may be unsuited for beginning language learners because of the pressures of real-time communication (Olaniran, 2009) and because a certain level of proficiency is required for students to be able to fix errors in communication (Lee, 2006). Lee's (2007) study of videoconferencing between L2 learners of Spanish and expert speakers of the language, for example, revealed the important role of L2 vocabulary knowledge for voice-chats. Even though the project was too short to notice any increases in speaking skills, it gave students access to different kinds of dialects which was seen as beneficial in preparing them for real-world communication. Lee (2007) underlines the importance of well-designed tasks, network training, and carefully selected partners for a videoconferencing project but also suggests that students with less advanced language skills may struggle to understand their partner. To minimize problems of understanding native speakers, Kinginger (1998) suggests using the videoconferencing recording of fifth-semester students in later lessons to discuss the elements of the spoken language that students encountered. Abram's (2003) study showed no difference in syntactic complexity in speaking for students who participated in ACMC, SCMC or no CMC tasks, although the SCMC outperformed the other groups in amount of language produced in face-to-face conversations.

Few studies have investigated the effects of SCMC on beginning language learners. A study by Chun (1994) focused on chat interaction of first- and second-semester learners of German. This study identified the students' ability to give and request feedback even at the novice language level. Ko (2012) analyzed the effects of SCMC on the oral skills of novice learners of French at a Taiwanese university. His study showed that some participants developed their speaking proficiency, but there did not seem to be a correlation to the communication mode (with or without video).
NNS/NNS study comparing the effects of voice- and text-chat on speaking skills of novice-mid to intermediate-mid learners of English in Turkey, all students showed increases in oral proficiency (Satar & Özdener, 2008). Videoconferencing has also been suggested as a useful tool for adult novice language learners who can use oral SCMC for practicing fluency and reinforcing course content outside of class (Correa, 2015). In spite of the lack of research on SCMC at novice language levels, the small amount of studies available show promising results. In fact, one study suggested that students are able to engage in negotiation of meaning and output modification in synchronous text-chat with native speakers even in first-semester college language courses (Schenker, 2015). According to the interaction hypothesis, negotiation of meaning between language learners supports second language acquisition (Long, 1996). The aforementioned finding thus implies that even beginning language learners can benefit from SCMC as they are able to negotiate for meaning thereby engaging in second language acquisition processes.

This article aims to fill a gap in research on the effects of synchronous voice-based telecollaboration for language learners at beginning language levels by presenting a research project investigating synchronous oral communication between novice learners and native speakers of German. A semester-long telecollaborative project is presented, that took place between first-semester college students learning German and high school students in Germany learning English. The overall aim of this project was to explore the effects of a semester-long synchronous exchange with native speakers on students' speaking skills, and to investigate if participation in telecollaboration with native speakers impacts students' interest in learning the target language.

3. Method

A telecollaborative project was conducted between a small private university in northeastern USA and a small rural high school in central Germany. Novice learners of German in the USA communicated online with advanced learners of English in Germany. Two sections of first-semester German participated in the telecollaboration, while the other three first-semester sections served as control groups. The experimental group consisted of 28 students (15 were male, 13 were female) and they were aged between 17 and 23 and had never taken a college level German class. Two students had taken less than three semesters of middle or high school German. The students came from different backgrounds, but the majority reported English as their native language. Three students spoke Italian, Czech, and Japanese as their native languages, and two students were bilingual in English and one other language. The partners at the high school in Germany were aged 16 to 18. All of the 32 (20 were male, 12 were female) partners reported German as their first language and all of them had been learning English since fifth grade, when they were between 10 and 11 years old.

For the semester-long synchronous exchange, each US student was assigned one German partner. Four American students agreed to communicate with two students due to the unequal number of participants on both sides. The telecollaboration consisted of synchronous voice- and text-chats. Each week students alternated between communicating through text-based chat and through voice-based chat. Altogether, students completed six text- and five voice-chats. Even though the semester had fourteen weeks, the project could not be started until week three due to the college system of giving students the first two weeks to decide on their courses for the term. The text-chats
were supposed to be a minimum of 20, the voice-chats a minimum of 15 minutes and students were told to split the time equally between speaking in English and German to allow both sides of the exchange to practice their target language. This means students were expected to voice-chat for a total of 75 minutes over the course of the semester, and text-chat for a total of 120 minutes. All chats took place outside of class and were considered homework for students. Students were also provided with discussion topics to use as prompts for the chats but they were allowed to talk about other topics as well. The topics included, for example, hobbies, the students' families, weekend and summer activities, movies, jobs, and housing. The text-chat transcripts were forwarded to the researcher. The voice-chats were not recorded, but students had to send a brief summary of what was discussed in the voice-chat to the researcher along with a time-stamp indicating the exact amount of minutes that the students spoke to each other. Students were allowed to select their preferred tool for chatting. The majority used Skype for the voice-based chats, and Facebook for the text-based chats.

At the beginning and end of the semester, the American students in the experimental and control sections completed a speaking task online to assess their oral proficiency in German. The speaking tasks were not graded but students received credit for completing them outside of class. Complete data for the speaking tasks was available for 18 students in the experimental and 18 students in the control group. Graduate students, and students who had not completed any part of the two speaking tasks were excluded from the analysis. The speaking tasks consisted of twelve short questions in the form of a simulated conversation: the researcher posed a question and the students had to respond immediately, then the next question from the researcher would start and the student had to respond until all twelve questions were answered. The first five questions were basic questions about name, age, home city, and other languages spoken, and the other questions dealt with hobbies, a typical day, past weekend activities, and why studying at this particular university is better than studying elsewhere, for example.

In addition to the speaking tasks, all students completed a short survey at the beginning and end of the semester to gather information on students' backgrounds, demographics, interest in learning German, and self-assessment of their speaking skills. Specifically, the surveys consisted of (1) ten open-ended questions, (2) 12 Likert-Scale can do-statements assessing students' language skills based on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Council of Europe, 2011) descriptors for A1 and A2, and (3) six additional questions on the post-survey to evaluate students' experience with the exchange and their perceived effects of the telecollaboration. On the Likert-Scale items students rated their agreements to the given statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Both the experimental group and the control group completed the pre- and post-surveys. Complete survey data was available for 22 students from the experimental and 27 students from the control group.

The research questions that guided this project were: (1) What are the effects of participation in a semester-long synchronous telecollaborative project between learners and native speakers of German on the L2 learners' speaking skills? (2) Does participation in a semester-long synchronous virtual exchange impact students' interest in learning the target language and studying abroad? To answer research question 1, the results from the pre-and post-speaking tasks of the students in the US were analyzed. The speaking tasks were rated by two native speaker German instructors at the US institution who were not teaching any of the first-semester German courses. The researcher trained both
instructors on how to rate, providing a detailed rating rubric developed by the researcher and two colleagues at a different institution consisting of seven criteria worth two points each. Students, thus, could score a maximum of 14 points on the speaking task. Where the two raters differed on their ratings by more than one point total, the researcher discussed the ratings with the two raters to reach a consensus together. For the data analysis, the average between the ratings of both raters was used for each student. Inter-rater reliability was high: the reliability coefficient Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .95. Graduate students who took the first-semester German class were excluded from the survey and speaking task analysis because they often do not take the courses for credit and do not participate fully in all aspects of the course. Students who did not complete at least half of the required chats were also excluded from the analysis. The speaking task from the beginning of the semester was not included in the final data analysis because students took this course with no prior knowledge of German. It was assumed that all students in this first-semester German class were starting at zero. To analyze the possible effects of participating in the telecollaborative voice-chat project on students’ German speaking skills, an independent-samples t-test was performed between the post-semester speaking scores of group 1 (telecollaborative group) and group 2 (control group). To answer research question 2, the pre- and post-surveys of all students taking the first-semester German classes in the US were analyzed and descriptive statistics were calculated.

4. Results

To compare the speaking proficiency of all students taking first-semester German at the US university during the semester in which the telecollaborative SCMC project was conducted, an independent-samples t-test was performed on the speaking proficiency ratings from the end of the semester. An examination of the data showed that homogeneity of variances was met (Levene’s test: $p = .892$) and that the data were normally distributed. The independent-samples t-test allowed a comparison of the speaking proficiency of the students who participated in the voice-based exchange with native speakers of German and those who had regular German instruction without the exchange. Because all students were expected to start this first-semester German class with zero background in German, the initial beginning of semester ratings were not used in the data analysis.

The results of the independent-samples t-test showed no statistically significant difference in the speaking scores of the group participating in the voice-chat project (mean = 11.56, sd = 1.34, N = 18) and the group that did not participate in the telecollaboration (mean = 10.8, sd = 1.32, N = 18) project; $t (34) = 1.69, p = .099$. Even though the difference in means was not statistically significant, there was a medium effect size ($d = .56$). All in all, the students who communicated online with native speakers achieved slightly higher results on the post-speaking assessment. Thus the answer to research question one—what are the effects of a synchronous voice-based exchange between novice learners of German and native speakers on the L2 learners’ speaking proficiency—suggests that there may not be a statistically significant difference in speaking proficiency after participating in a short SCMC project at the novice language level.

The open-ended questions on the pre- and post-surveys were analyzed and descriptive statistics were calculated in order to answer research question 2—what are the effects of participation in a telecollaborative project on students’ interest in learning German and
The results showed that 46% of the students who participated in the telecollaborative project reported to be more interested in learning German after the exchange, 36% were as interested as before, and 18% were unsure if their interest had changed. Optional comments here revealed that students found the exchange to be a motivating factor for them that also impacted their desire to go abroad. They expressed being more curious to experience the culture in Germany. Students indicated that the exchange had added an interesting dimension to the class, and they felt that learning what goes on in Germany made class more exciting. Moreover, they enjoyed now having people to talk to in German and found it overall intriguing to have native speakers with whom to communicate.

In line with this finding, the survey analysis also revealed an increased interest in study abroad after participating in the exchange. 67% of students had indicated an interest in studying abroad in Germany before the exchange, and 75% wanted to study in Germany at the end of the semester. Additionally, 33% of students reported that their interest in studying abroad in Germany had increased after participating in the telecollaborative exchange with German students. Optional comments revealed that their interest had become greater because learning German had become more personable and study abroad seemed less scary now that they had communicated with native speakers already.

The large majority (77%) of students who participated in the SCMC project indicated that they were interested in another telecollaborative exchange, while only a small percentage (18%) was not interested in another CMC project. Students who were in favor of another project explained that in spite of the scheduling difficulties, it was a very effective exchange and that they would enjoy continuing to communicate with native speakers. Additionally, students found it was a helpful exercise that gave them a lot of extra practice and a valuable learning experience. Some students indicated they would prefer to be matched with a partner of the same sex, because it might be easier to bond. Open-ended comments of the students who did not wish to have another virtual exchange revealed that they wished they had known more German for this exchange, that scheduling was too difficult due to the six-hour time difference, and that perhaps a different format (such as e-mail) would be better because of added flexibility. Also, one student’s primary goal was learning how to read scholarship in German and she felt that the exchange had not contributed to that goal. Overall, the responses about the exchange were overwhelmingly positive and encouraging with only a few students reporting frustrations connected to an inability to coordinate their schedules with that of their partners.

Students were also asked what they perceived to have learned from the virtual exchange and the most-mentioned learning outcome was conversational German. Many students enjoyed learning colloquial phrases and speaking German more naturally. Students also indicated having gained a deeper understanding of German culture, daily life of Germans their age, and the similarities between the two countries. Some students felt they had made improvements in grammar, written and spoken German. The post-survey also aimed at identifying which topics students preferred for their synchronous communications. The favorite topics for students to discuss with their partner in Germany were personal topics and topics about each other’s daily lives. Students enjoyed discussing favorite bands, films, hobbies, etc. and several students mentioned that they enjoyed going off-topic and discussing random, not-assigned matters.
Additionally, there was an increase in the number of semesters students were planning on studying German. Before the exchange, students intended to take an average of 4.2 semesters of German. At the end of the semester, students planned on taking an average of 4.5 semesters of the language. However, the control group who did not participate in the exchange also showed an increase in intended number of semesters to study German. At the beginning of the semester, the control group students intended to study an average of 3.9 semesters of German and at the end of the semester, it was an average of 4.3. Therefore, intending to study German for more semesters may not have been a direct result of participating in the virtual exchange but could have a variety of reasons such as enjoyment of the course and course materials.

There was no change in students' considerations to major in German. Both before and after the exchange, students already had a good idea of what they wanted to major in or had already selected their major. The majority of students were majoring in the natural sciences, especially in engineering. When asked why they did not consider a German major, reasons included: stronger interest in other areas, feeling not good enough in languages, not having enough time left at college, and finding it too specialized of a major. Reasons for considering a major in German included benefits for an intended career in music. Only one student considered a major before the exchange, and two students indicated that they were considering majoring in German after the exchange. The same can be said for the control group; there was no interest in pursuing a German major at the beginning or end of the semester with the exception of one student.

5. Discussion

The results of the study show that participating in a semester-long synchronous computer-mediated communication project consisting of five 15-minute voice-chats did not lead to L2 speaking proficiency that was higher than that of the control group in statistically significant ways. Students were expected to spend 75 minutes on voice-chatting across the five meetings during the semester; some students spoke for longer periods and some for less. The amount spent voice-chatting varied from a total of 65 to 264 minutes, but on average, students spent 114 minutes in voice-chatting with their partner all five chats combined. The results indicate that this may not be enough to produce any noticeable changes in students' L2 speaking proficiency. The non-significant language gains are in contrast to Bueno Alastuey's (2011) findings which revealed higher oral proficiency after participating in SCMC projects compared to regular face-to-face instruction. The present study's findings are more similar to the results of Abram's (2003) study which revealed no significant differences in syntactic complexity in speaking for students participating in ACMC, SCMC, or no computer-mediated communication.

There are several reasons that might have impacted this result. Firstly, five voice-chats may not be enough time to produce significant changes in students' speaking ability. Secondly, because the voice-chats were completed outside of class and were not recorded, the researcher relied on students' reports about the exact amount of time they communicated with their partners. It is possible, that these reports were not always accurate, and that some students spent less time voice-chatting than indicated. Similarly, it is not clear how much of the time students spent speaking English and how much they actually practiced speaking German. Since these factors could not be controlled, it is possible that students did not receive the full amount of speaking practice that was
intended to be possible through this project. Future SCMC projects should take this into consideration by better controlling the external factors. For example, students could be expected to record their voice-chat by using the software Zoom. It would also be beneficial to increase the amount of voice-chats from five to at least ten, perhaps in exchange for the text-chats. A semester-long project utilizing only oral SCMC may be needed to give students the necessary practice to show improvements in speaking proficiency. More time spent in audio communication with their native speaker partners would give students more occasions for interaction—which could allow students more opportunities for practicing the language, negotiating meaning and modifying their output and could thus lead to stronger second language learning gains, as explained by the interaction and output hypotheses (Long, 1981; Swain, 2005). While the synchronous voice-chat did not seem to have an immediately quantifiable effect on students' speaking proficiency, the text-chat component of this telecollaborative exchange did enable students to participate in negotiation of meaning and modification of output routines, thereby engaging in language learning processes. Details of this part of the exchange were summarized in a separate article (Schenker, 2015). It should be considered that text-chatting might be a more beneficial tool for novice language learners. Even though the video component has been said to make a telecollaborative exchange more personal and interactive (Wang, 2004), students have to worry about issues of loss of face in the voice-chatting environment, which might impact their engagement in negotiation of meaning routines (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014). This may be especially true for first-semester language learners as their skills are very limited and they might feel shyer and less confident.

The survey results showed increases in students' interest in studying German and study abroad in Germany as a result of participating in the telecollaborative exchange. The increased motivation due to participation in SCMC with native speakers confirms findings of previous studies that have suggested that cross-cultural videoconferences, for example, can enhance student motivation (Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Nishihori, 2011) thus increasing participation in CMC (O'Dowd, 2007). Other CMC projects, such as e-mail exchanges and chat conversations, have likewise been shown to be beneficial for increasing student motivation (Donaldson & Kötter, 1999; Jin & Erben, 2007; Mahfouz, 2010). The present study thus underlines the positive effects of telecollaboration on the affective dimension of language learning—even novice language learners can benefit from SCMC by feeling more motivated to learn the target language.

The SCMC project did not result in any changes in students' desire to major in German. This finding is not surprising, as the numbers of German majors across the US have decreased by over ten percent in the last decade, and this is in line with general drops in undergraduate enrollment in many languages as summarized in the most recent Modern Language Association (MLA) Report on Enrollments in Languages other than English (Goldberg, Looney & Lusin, 2015). The slight increase in the number of semesters students intended to take German is a promising outcome. Combined with the stronger interest in learning German and studying abroad, it suggests that telecollaboration at novice language levels may indeed have a positive impact on the students' learning experiences.

Even though the lack of statistically significant improvements in oral proficiency in comparison to the control group seems to indicate that SCMC may not be suitable for novice language learners, as indicated in some previous studies (Lee, 2006; Olaniran, 2009), the overall success of the project that can be seen in students' positive attitudes,
desired for further telecollaboration projects, and stronger interest in learning German, leads to the suggestion that SCMC should indeed be integrated in beginning language classes. Even though students might not improve their language skills more than students not involved in CMC projects, there are other benefits from participation in CMC that are equally important and that can—in the long run—enhance language learning. These benefits include students' increased interest in learning the target language, students' stronger contact with the target culture and perceived cultural knowledge gains, students' raised interest in study abroad, and higher motivation levels.

It must be noted that the problems with the SCMC project which students summarized on the post-surveys were rarely related to their novice language level. While a few students indicated that they wished they had known more German to engage in more in-depth conversations with their partners, the major problem that was mentioned was that of the time difference. Scheduling a weekly synchronous chat session was difficult for many students and led to frustrations for those who were unable to find a suitable time each week. The difficulty of arranging synchronous meetings across time zones has been revealed as one of the main problems of SCMC in much previous research as well (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; O'Rourke, 2005; Sadler, 2007). In future telecollaborative projects, instructors should try to minimize scheduling problems, for example by incorporating the SCMC during class time, if this is possible with the partner institution. The selection of the tandem partnerships could also take students' individual availability into consideration so that from the start students are paired up with someone who has a similar schedule (ie. weekend availability, work night availability, etc.). A second problem that was mentioned by the students was the unequal grading of the project for both sides of the exchange. In fact, since the German partners were not graded on the SCMC project, the students in the US often felt like they were only doing them a favor by communicating with them. Additionally, it meant that some of the German partners did not take the exchange as seriously and put less effort into arranging the weekly chat meetings. This issue of unequal requirements for the two sides of a telecollaborative project is not unusual and has been identified in other studies as well (Belz, 2001; Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2002). If two partners have different goals for a CMC project it does not have to mean it cannot be beneficial for both sides, as Bueno Alastuey and Kleban (2014) show in their study on English teacher trainees. Nonetheless, if the grading requirements differ vastly, as was the case in this project, it may prevent all students from participating conscientiously and thus can mean that not all students get the full learning benefits. In order to ensure all students can profit from telecollaborative CMC projects, similar requirements should be put in place for both sides of the exchange.

There are several limitations of this study, most importantly, a lack of generalizability due to the small sample size. Additionally, the fact that the voice-chats were completed outside of class makes it difficult to know for certain how long students spoke in German to their tandem partner and what topics they discussed. This problem was avoided with the text-chat component of the exchange, as students had to forward all transcripts to the instructor. Future research should focus on longer SCMC projects at novice language levels and include ways to monitor students' task completion, for example by recording the conversations. This would also result in richer data that would allow the researchers to investigate if and how students negotiate for meaning and are able to modify their output in spoken communication with native speakers. In spite of doubts about the suitability of telecollaboration at novice language levels, future research should not shy...
away from exploring this area further. This study has demonstrated the positive effects of telecollaboration on beginning learners of a foreign language, and ways to maximize these effects should be sought through further research. Longitudinal studies would help to develop a clearer picture of the effects of SCMC for beginning language students.

6. Conclusion

The telecollaborative semester-long project between novice learners of German in the US and learners of English in Germany revealed that students' interest in learning the target language and studying abroad is positively impacted by a virtual exchange. The findings emphasize the generally favorable reactions of students to synchronous telecollaboration that were also shown in previous studies (Yanguas, 2012). Even though a synchronous voice-based exchange including only five voice-chat sessions did not produce noticeable advancements in speaking proficiency as compared to the non-CMC control group, the SCMC project was perceived as beneficial by the participants. They appreciated the opportunities for getting to know real Germans, learning colloquialisms and conversational language, and enhancing their cultural knowledge. The overwhelmingly positive feedback on the exchange is encouraging and underlines the potential of telecollaboration to be a successful tool for learning even in beginning foreign language classes. Incorporating synchronous telecollaboration at novice language levels should not be dismissed due to potential scheduling or technical issues, nor due to the students' limited language abilities. On the contrary, more researchers and foreign language instructors should embrace the unique opportunities for connecting learners with native speakers which the globalized world is making ever easier. Interacting online with representatives of the target language should not be a privilege reserved for advanced language students but should be a tool to help all students find their love and motivation for learning more about another language and culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Telecollaboration brings together learners in different parts of the world for collaborative language learning and cultural exchange. Defined by Belz as the "application of global communication networks in foreign language education" (2002: 61), telecollaboration holds a plethora of benefits for language learners. Mostly utilized in intermediate and advanced language classes, this article argues for the incorporation of telecollaboration at all language levels. Even novice learners can benefit in different ways from the direct exchange with native speakers of the target language. This article summarizes one example of telecollaboration aimed at exploring the effects of participation in a semester-long synchronous virtual exchange on the speaking proficiency of L2 learners of German, as well as their interest in the study of German and potential study abroad. A telecollaborative project was conducted between novice learners of German at a college in the US and advanced learners of English at a high school in Germany. Students formed tandem partnerships and completed voice-chats and text-chats in alternation each week. The results showed that students' speaking proficiency was not stronger than that of the control group after the exchange, but that their interest in learning German and studying abroad had increased.
celle du groupe de contrôle après l’échange, mais que leur intérêt pour apprendre l’allemand et étudier à l’étranger avait augmenté. L’article suggère que la durée de la télécollaboration et la durée des échanges oraux bi-hebdomadaires peuvent ne pas avoir été suffisantes pour obtenir des différences notables dans l’expression orale de ces étudiants de premier semestre. Des échanges télécollaboratifs oraux plus longs peuvent être nécessaires pour que les compétences en communication augmentent de manière statistiquement significative. Néanmoins, les commentaires positifs des étudiants ainsi que leur intérêt accru pour poursuivre l’apprentissage de l’allemand et même étudier en Allemagne dans le futur suggèrent que la collaboration peut être efficace même avec des étudiants débutants.

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