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Chapter 7. Intercultural meetings in a Swedish – Kiwi e-mail exchange: Lessons Learnt

Introduction

During our four-year education of becoming primary teachers, at Malmö University we have come across various methods of teaching and learning. One of these has been through telecollaboration, a method which we took an interest in as a consequence of writing a research synthesis. After we analysed several studies on developing an intercultural understanding through telecollaboration we soon realised that most studies that have been carried out regarding this approach have been focused on older students. This inspired us to develop our own plan of conducting a telecollaborative study with young learners where an intercultural exchange would be our main focus.

As part of our teacher education programme, we take part in several teaching placements. This enabled us to find schools from Sweden who would be interested in taking part in our project. We are also able to conduct one month of teaching placement abroad, and this helped us set up a contact with an international school. Early on in our education we had already decided we were interested in carrying out our teaching placement in New Zealand our final year at the university –an event which took place at the same time we were writing our final dissertation for our degree paper. Knowing that we would be in New Zealand for a period of time and meeting all of the students opened up the possibility for a study where we could be involved in every part of the process of the telecollaboration. The process of setting up, planning and carrying out this project will be described in this chapter.

Context of the project

After some research, we were able to contact a rural school from New Zealand who was interested in taking part in our final project for our final dissertation paper required for finishing our degree. Inevitably, this required a long e-mail correspondence to set up and necessitated the intervention of staff and supervisors from Malmo University to back up our intentions and proposal. However, everything was finally established with a school in New Zealand that is located in the countryside of the South Island. We were invited to carry out our placement in a year 5 and 6 classroom.

However, after several e-mails we came to realize that the year 5 and 6 classroom held over 90 students! This required us to rethink our plan of one school in Sweden and one school in New Zealand –which is the typical configuration for telecollaborative projects (especially for newbies like ourselves). The number of students in New Zealand made it possible to involve more than one school in Sweden. Most classes in Sweden have about 25 students each so we realized that we would be able to involve four different classes. Also, the population in Sweden represents a vast variation of cultural backgrounds which we also wanted to be represented in the telecollaborative exchange with the students from New Zealand. Thus we decided upon two different city schools, with two classes in each school, who were interested in taking part in this project. They both matched our requirements of representing a vast variation of cultural backgrounds. We now had almost 200 students involved, all of whom were in the range of 9 to 13 years old.

In the end, from the time of beginning to write our research synthesis on telecollaboration, planning for our own project study and setting up our internship, making contacts and setting up timelines, almost a year had passed before we visited the first school to launch the telecollaborative project. But we were finally ready to begin! In the next section we will describe in more detail the planning phase of our project.

Planning

Conducting a telecollaborative project was not going to be easy and that was something we were prepared for when we set out to do this. The main concepts we had chosen for this project was culture. We were aware that 'culture' is a broad subject with a vast variation of different meanings. Culture describes more than just the origin of a person; culture includes accepted social norms concerning clothes, music, religion, food and much more.

So we first examined our groups of students individually, to be able to evaluate what their initial understanding of some of our concepts were. To achieve a desired prior understanding before our telecollaborative project a preparation lesson was created. It was based on creating a common understanding for culture and for the students to reflect on themselves and their surroundings. McKay (2002) claims that learning about culture is a social process and students need to gain an understanding of how their own culture influences their lives. In short, to be able to reflect on someone else's culture you need to know your own.

We chose to collect all the material on an accessible online platform that could be reached no matter where we were. Because we were not yet qualified teachers our options for platform had to be somewhere where you did not need an account connected to a school. We opted for Google Drive and from there we were able to create an array of different resources. Moreover, we were able to verify that all the schools involved were already using Chromebooks[1] in their daily teaching, so that made the choice of Google Drive that much more obvious. The students and teachers in the project were already used to the platform and had access to a full range of online tools through Google in their classrooms.

Due to the time difference of 12 hours between the countries we settled on an asynchronous approach (the use of emails), since the groups would not be able to meet at the same time. Also, this gives the students' a longer time to review and reply to the material (Dooly, 2008).

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1   Chromebook is a laptop that is Internet-dependent that functions with Google Chrome Internet browser while the rest of its working components are Web apps (email, photos, documents), or apps that run while connected to a network. Rather than working with internal storage, everything is saved on the Web, allowing access to the saved content from any other computer. (See also Bruun, this book).

For the project we planned a pre-lesson, the email project itself and a follow-up lesson. The pre-lesson consisted of a video clip [2]defining culture, we also planned some questions based on the video clip to make sure all students understood what the concept of culture was. To stimulate their curiosity and ensure interest from the students, the final stage of our planning was for the students to create a mind map based on thoughts, prior knowledge and presumptions they had regarding their exchange country. The students should also create a presentation about their schools since the project consisted of two very different types of schools and where they are located. We decided to give them some choice concerning the modality of the presentation; it could be a video or a google presentation, but had to consist of text and pictures where the students showed their school buildings, classrooms, lunch area, recreation area, and gave a description either in audio or in text of what was presented.

For scaffolding we planned for the students to create personal mind-maps about themselves, their family, life and culture. This information could then be used in writing an email letter. To help them understand the basic structure of this genre of writing, we decided to provide them with a few questions they could answer in order to stimulate their thinking but also to add information that the students could reflect on. For example, we asked them if they liked to be inside or outside and why that was the case. We planned on creating a pair of questions for each email response as well as to strongly encourage the students to ask questions based on their responses and the mind map that was created.

For additional language scaffolding, we created some sentence starters for the Swedish students who were struggling with how to initiate an email in English. Examples are:

- I live in…
- My family consists of…
- I like to…
- In my spare time I…
- My favourite…

We also planned to give the students feedback on all their emails to provide a formative assessment on how they can move forward in their writing and to develop their ability of an intercultural understanding.

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2   You can view the film clip here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o32l-_U6nGY

The follow-up lesson was planned as a way to tie up all the loose ends, and create closure and hopefully be able to answer the questions that was remaining. Also, for closure, we planned an activity where the students would be able to make changes on their mind-maps after their knowledge about the exchange country had grown. Finally, they would watch a presentation made by the students from the other side of the world and get a visual view of how it really looks.

The overall objective of the project was to help the students see the similarities and differences they might have with students on the other side of the world and hopefully with that knowledge and understanding be able to find similarities with people around them, even if they are from different parts of the globe and may have some cultural differences.

Implementation

Our first visits to the Swedish classrooms took place about a month prior to our departure for New Zealand. In every classroom we visited we had a conversation with the teacher first to adjust and modify our planning to be suited to the different settings in each classroom. Examples of some of the modifications included changing the mind-mapping from digital to paper, due to differences in digital knowledge with the students and furthermore for the time-limit we had in each classroom. Unfortunately, we did not have extra time to teach the students various digital learning tools so we had to accept these changes to our plans.

We also had to modify our initial plan of pairing up the learners in one-to-one partnerships because the teachers preferred that the younger students write in pairs due to their level of English as a second language. In the end, this proved to be the approach used for the New Zealand students as well; there were students who needed the extra support and were given the opportunity to write in pairs. Still, our main goal remained the same, that is to provide a connection to the word 'culture' and for the students to reflect upon themselves, their own culture as well as the country they would be in contact with.

During our preliminary discussions with the teachers involved we asked them to help prepare their students for email writing through lessons

on appropriate questions, chunks of words that may occur and how to start and end a letter. This was to optimize our visits to the schools and we could focus on starting the correspondence immediately. We also requested that the teachers be rather subtle in mentioning the country the students were going to correspond to since we wished to analyse any previous knowledge the students might have towards the other country in order to compare with their results following the correspondence.

Collecting their prior knowledge was done by placing the students in small groups and asking them to create mind-maps on anything they already knew about New Zealand and Sweden. As a means of scaffolding for this session we listed −with the students help− sub-subjects they might use in their mind-mapping. For example, the students created mind-maps that were centred around their school, nature, people, animals, transportation etc.
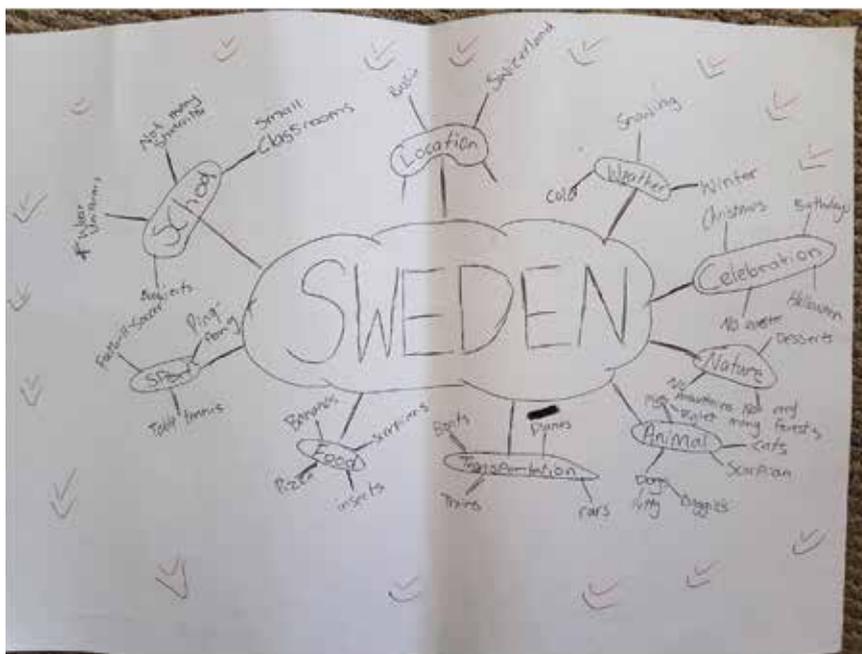

Figure 1. Students' mind-map before discussion

This session led to many questions about the different countries and the students were able to gather inspiration from each other's mind-maps to create questions to use in their emails.

After letting the students discuss and imagine how the countries would look like we moved on to the students' cultural understanding. To create an interest and an understanding of what the term 'culture' means we shared our YouTube clip and followed the viewing with group discussion, followed by whole class discussions to encourage the students to explore what culture means to them and what they would like to share about their own culture. Following the group and full classroom discussions, the students were asked to create individual mind-maps. As it will be recalled, they had already created mind-maps in groups earlier on; they were now able to create them on their own. Key to this second step, the new mind-maps had a personal focus as they included individual features such as family, interests, food, living space.

Figure 2. Mind-map following the discussion

As they finished their individual mind-maps, with the help of the teachers we connected the students, one by one, to different Google Documents. These documents served as the 'home platform' for each correspondence. During this activity we provided the students who needed help with the sentence starters mentioned earlier. Additionally, we quickly found that some of the

students required almost complete emails with only a few gaps to fill in so we had to swiftly improvise this extra scaffolding during the lesson.

Due to our time limitations, the students were only given the opportunity to write two emails each. For the first one the students were given instructions to share information about themselves, their families and how they live. For the following email the students were given instructions to share information about their upcoming winter/summer -holidays and to share some basic phrases in Swedish/Te Reo Maori. Of course, ideally the exchange would have been longer in order for there to be a more substantial progression in their learning.

After the start-up in Sweden we headed to New Zealand and implemented the same process in the classroom there. Interestingly, the first email response written by the students in New Zealand contained a lot of similar spelling and grammatical mistakes as the ones from Sweden. This experience highlighted for us the importance of feedback throughout the writing process. For instance, it was quite beneficial for all the students involved in New Zealand that we were present in the classroom to help with translations and cultural understandings because some of the Swedish students had incorporated a lot of Swedish words into their writing.

Finally, to sum up the students' experiences from the exchange, we once again put them in smaller groups to write a new mind-map of Sweden and New Zealand where they would add things they now knew about the country and their new peers. Despite the fact that it was a very short exchange of merely two emails and two responses to them, most students added things that had caught their interest. To follow up on the students' thoughts we used a full class discussion to highlight some of the ideas mentioned in the mind-maps. During this discussion the students were able to ask further questions and collaboratively – between their classmates, their teachers and ourselves- they could complete their train of thought about cultural differences and similarities.

Challenges

We acknowledge that in this telecollaborative exchange we had a privilege that is, unfortunately, very rare. We had the possibility of meeting every single student and teacher involved in the project. These meetings enabled

us to face the challenges head on and to deepen our own cultural understanding of different classroom organisations and teaching styles.

One of the first challenges we met early on in our planning was the number of students in each classroom. At the beginning, based on our understanding of classroom size in Sweden, we had planned for a one-on-one correspondence between classrooms, each with approximately 25 students in each class. After some correspondence back and forth we suddenly realised that the New Zealand school had over 90 students in the same classroom. Our first reaction was that this number of students was too much for our time limits, however, after some reflection we came to see it as a positive challenge. It allowed us to widen our range of students in Sweden and to represent the vast variation of population regarding cultural backgrounds.

This also helped us to realize that it can be a challenge to make oneself clear in email conversations, especially internationally (this is not just a problem for the young students!). This, in turn, led us to understand that opening up to the possibility of these misconceptions, which may appear on both sides of the conversations, implies that one is usually more willing to put an extra effort into understanding each other and making themselves understood. In retrospect we have come to believe that a lot of correspondence could have been reduced by using Skype as a mediating tool instead of email. This would have allowed us to discuss in more depth the decisions and explain why they had been made. This is important when setting up a telecollaborative project the opportunity of meeting all teachers face to face rarely occurs.

We knew that language use would be a challenge since we were planning telecollaboration between two classes, with one of them made up of native English speaking students. To make the difference seem as minimal as we could, we provided extra scaffolding for the Swedish students. However, despite our scaffolding we noticed with the language gap was a key element for misunderstanding whenever it occurred. The Swedish students had trouble understanding slang words and words that were specific to the country. For example, Kiwi is used to refer to the people from New Zealand and of course, the Swedish students associated it with a fruit! The students were asked to explain words such as activities and food as much as possible and they were encouraged to see how these words were often specific to their own context. This helped the students see that the problems were not because one class 'knew more language' than the other.

For instance, a New Zealand student might have as much difficulty understanding what the dish 'dolma' is as much as a Swedish student might struggle with the definition of the sport 'netball'.

Of course, some the challenges the students had were context-specific. Some Swedish students had difficulties reading the email in general and needed some assistance either from a peer or from a teacher. And some of the New Zealand students encountered problems due to the grammatical errors of some of the Swedish students' writing. After the first emails were sent we tried to prevent these misunderstandings in the second one because we had noticed that the students seemed to have used Google translate to get their message across, which often resulted in the sentence stating something completely different than what was intended. However, in general, we were able to overcome the language challenge with the help of the teachers and other students, in particular when reading and interpreting the emails.

Another challenge encountered throughout the project was related to the prior knowledge of students. Although we had the benefit of meeting all of the students involved during the project we had not met these students before we began our planning so we did not have an insight about their previous knowledge or individual needs. To anticipate problems with language, then, we provided sentence starters and during the implementation phase we changed the group formations to encourage peer collaboration.

A smaller problem –which is a mainstay of any teaching actually- was the writing of emails when some of the students were not able to write them due to illness or other obligations. This meant we had to add an extra correspondence to fast-finishing students who already had completed his or her email.

However, one of the more perplexing incidents we met was the actual writing of the emails and coordinating responses from the different classrooms. We had not set up different deadlines in our planning because we had assumed that there would be time to answer the emails as soon as one came in. We soon found out that this was not possible and therefore only two full correspondences (two emails per country partner) were completed before the end of term. We realize now that we should have been clearer in our planning and set up an instructive timeline that included deadlines. This would have been more efficient (although the collected correspondences were still sufficient to complete our dissertation study). Still, for next time we would not recommend placing the telecollaboration at end of term!

As we described above, the platform we used for our project was Google Drive. This proved to be the best option we had for our project because all the students and teachers had access and it did not require us to have access to a school account. Moreover, although the students were linked into different Google documents, the teachers could oversee all the conversations but the students could only access their own. The drawback with Google documents was that the document could be edited while the other student was still in the process of composing and editing the email. Thus, it is important for the teachers to give the students sufficient time to finish their letter and to revise it with them so they feel secure and content with it before it is sent. During our first trial with this exchange, several letters were accessed and read before the writer could make any editing changes based on given feedback. This was resolved by some of the students who they simply wrote and edited their email in a blank document before posting it. For our next telecollaborative project we have decided we will research and try more appropriate platforms for telecollaboration.

Outcomes

Both exchange countries had very limited knowledge regarding each other, and with creating a pre and post mind-map both the students and we, the teachers, got a visual example of the things they knew beforehand as well as what they learned from the exchange. From the mind-maps we have seen that the New Zealand students developed an understanding about the more common animals that can be found Sweden, from lions, pandas and turkeys to moose, reindeer and horse. And the Swedish students learned that although New Zealand is close to Australia they do not share much of their flora and fauna. Through the mind-map the students also got an opportunity to explore each other's school systems with their exchange partner. For instance, they found out that one school had school uniforms and a very modern learning environment while the other had free choice of clothes and a more traditional classroom setting. Finally, discussions regarding the geographical aspects of the countries, how they look, where they are located on the map also showed evidence that the students had learnt facts about their partner country.

As regards language gains, upon reading the emails we saw improvement in the language, both on the Swedish side as well as from the New Zealand partners. We even noticed that despite the Native-Speaker, Non-Native Speaker set-up there were some language errors that were similar between the two countries, such as punctuation and the use of capital letters. Still, it must be acknowledged that as far as gains in the target language, the Swedish students were perhaps able to improve their language use more due to the higher command of English that the New Zealand students had. Nonetheless, the New Zealand students also went through a language learning process while analysing sentences that were not always grammatically correct, as well as using a different language then normal to ensure they made themselves understood with their exchange peers. Some students even commented on this, indicating that they wrote differently to their exchange partner than when they wrote to another native speaker. This demonstrates that for the Native Speakers a process of linguistic meta-reflection was promoted through the telecollaboration (see also the chapter by Bonet).

From an academic perspective it can be argued that the students developed through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978) because they were learning from each other through their social interaction. Dialogue and actions became the resources that helped develop their thinking and problem solving skills. This occurred not only during the email writing and exchange but also through the conversations between students and teachers as well as between peers.

Additionally, we witnessed an increase in the students' self-awareness and social awareness. The two exchange countries were quite far from each other geographically but also quite diverse in population. Also their school profiles were quite distinct. One group belonged a quite homogenous rural school in New Zealand and another was a very heterogeneous inner city school in a big city. However, the discussion with the students and the content of the emails indicate that similarities, rather than differences, were more often highlighted by the students. For instance, two students found a point in common and discussed this in-depth – both of them helped out their dads after school. Students also found (and marvelled) over the connection that both countries had McDonalds and that pizza was a highly loved dinner option.

Both exchange countries reflected on how their neighbourhood looked and why things were done differently on each side of the world. Students discussed the idea of only living in flats versus living on farms. At one point this led to a heated discussion in New Zealand when one of the students

found out that her exchange partner did not like animals. After some analysis with her classmate she came to the conclusion that this might be because students who live in a small flat in the middle of a big city are not used to having animals around them whereas in their country this is quite common and they are more than used to having animals near them, from pets to barnyard animals.

As student- teachers it was interesting to see the development of the students, not just in their knowledge or intercultural understanding but also in their attitude towards the project. Before beginning the project (in the exercise aimed to solicit previous knowledge) some of the students had expressed some fears that their partners might not be 'a nice person' or some even that worried that they might be racist. The exchange helped eradicate these notions and enabled students to be more open minded about meeting people from other cultural backgrounds than themselves.

At the end of the project the feedback we received from the students indicated that many of the worries they had before the exchange had been proven wrong. The majority of the students indicated that the project was a success; that they had learned a lot of new things both regarding their exchange partner as well as aspects of the country where they were from. They also expressed that initial negative thoughts they had harboured at the start of the project had changed to more positive ones, that the exchange had been fun and interesting and that they were happy to have been able to participate in it. Their only regret was that project had been too short and that they wished there had been more and quicker responses.

Tips and recommendations

Arguably, a telecollaboration project must be seen as more than a 'getting to know each other' activity or a language exchange. It is an approach that has huge potential for learning and which can be applied across different subjects. We could have made this project wide by taking into consideration other content knowledge, such as the environment. The students could have discussed how different schools recycle or have a compost, or the exchange could have focused more on the geographical aspects of the exchange countries, for instance, what is similar and different in the flora and fauna.

We also found that it is essential to add in extra time for the project when planning. It will take longer than you as the teacher first anticipated. And as far as timing, if the teachers have a specific goal for the project, it is best to make a detailed lesson plan for both yourself and for the exchange school, including rough dates of when the emails should be sent out or other key events. All schools run on tight schedules and things change so if both schools have an approximate timeline to follow for these key events, the project will not slow down excessively due to sickness, field trips or other common school events if these have been anticipated to some degree beforehand.

When setting up a correspondence of this type, it is a good idea to have some questions that the students should ask or answer when they send the emails. Bear in mind, too, that sometimes the emails can get stuck in the 'getting to know each other' phase. Providing the student with some more in depth questions can help them progress from what their siblings are called to deeper, thought-provoking discussions. For example, the questions might be if they prefer to be indoors or outdoors and why; what is the best book they have ever read, what is their favourite season? Questions where the students have to not only express and opinion but to give an explanation for it can create good reflection for the exchange partner as well as for themselves. Why do the students answer the way they do? As we've seen in the small example about animals, the reason may be due to the country they live in or other aspects of their lives.

It is also important to take care when choosing the digital tools and platforms for the exchange. Pick a platform that you as a teacher are familiar with and which is not too advanced for the students to use. Ideally, use a platform where the students can work on their own and where they can edit their work without them having to worry who (other than the teacher) might read the content before they deem it to be finished. You might also consider using a platform with a chat function so they can talk with their partners in real time, if the opportunity arises. However, this might be a bit harder for the teacher to monitor if the chat is the base of the whole exchange project.

Finally, we suggest choosing a country where the students' linguistic levels match. A telecollaborative project between two English as a Second Language (ESL) versus two classes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and a ESL will inevitably have different outcomes. We chose to have one non-native and one native English speaking class because they

were still quite similar in their language proficiency. The gap would probably have seemed greater if the classes were a year 8 native English collaborating with a year 8 non-native class. Arguably, those differences can occur just as well between two non-native classes.

This was our first attempt of a telecollaborative project, however, it will certainly not be our last. Experience within telecollaboration comes with practice and being able to modify and adapt to various situations. We encourage everyone to try this method of developing language skills and intercultural competence. Every teaching method used comes with challenges at first but also a lot of possibilities and telecollaboration promises a lot of learning opportunities that make it well worth the effort.

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