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### **EFL learners' oral communication strategies: Insights from a Taiwan and Poland exchange project**

#### **Bio data**



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#### **Abstract**

Recent studies have confirmed the benefits of virtual exchanges for enhancing EFL learners' language skills, digital literacy and intercultural competence (O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019). This study examined oral communication strategies to determine which proved most effective for EFL learners attempting to communicate with global peers. Participants were 32 non-English majors from a national university in northern Taiwan and 38 education majors from a public university in Poland. During the 12-week exchange project, students engaged in three types of interactions: information exchange tasks to share their understanding of given cultural topics, comparison and analysis tasks to foster critical thinking about the topics, and product creation tasks, making use of technological tools to create videos showing students' interpretations of cultural issues. Data from an oral communication survey revealed that students relied on various strategies to cope with speaking and listening problems. To deal with speaking problems, students gave examples if a listener did not understand. They also used gestures and facial expressions to facilitate communication. With regard to listening problems, students often guessed a speaker's intention based on identification of familiar words and asking for repetition. Students appreciated the chance to have authentic encounters with global peers with whom they could use language for communication purposes. They learned about foreign cultures and gained greater respect for cultural differences. This study's findings on students' use of oral communication strategies and degrees of enhancement in intercultural competence will help future teachers determine how to best engage students in telecollaborative projects.

### Introduction

Telecollaboration, also known as virtual exchange or online international exchange, involves “internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence through structured tasks” (Guth & Helm, 2010, p. 14). As a result of globalization and the rise of digital technologies, telecollaboration has gained popularity with teachers and researchers as an effective and powerful means to enhance second language acquisition and foster intercultural communication competence (Cunningham, 2019; Dooley & O’Dowd, 2018; Goodwin-Jones, 2019; O’Dowd, 2018; O’Dowd & O’Rourke, 2019).

The use of videoconferencing to foster authentic interactions among global peers is helpful in improving learners’ command of target languages (Bruun, 2018; Kato, Spring, & Mori, 2016), enhancing their use of semiotic modes in meaning-making (Dooley & Hauck, 2012), assisting them negotiate identities (Yang & Yi, 2017), and fostering critical thinking (Semercu & Aydin, 2018). To achieve the benefits of synchronous interactive learning environments, educators nowadays need to combine authentic tasks and digital communication tools in their classrooms. Teachers should motivate their students to use multimodal resources available in digital communication environments as ways to help students develop effective communication strategies (Dooley & Hauck, 2012; Dzekoe, 2017).

Given increasing opportunities for global peers to collaborate, and the easy availability of video conferencing, this study aimed to investigate how global peers work through telecollaborative tasks in a synchronous context. Specifically, the study explored EFL learners’ oral communication strategies when working with global peers. Illuminating learners’ speaking and listening problems and their strategies to address these problems may help educators design communicative tasks with a clear impact on performance. The research question is set as follows: What are students’ oral communication strategies in interacting with global peers, and how do students improve these strategies?

### Methodology

This project aimed to uncover oral communication strategies among EFL telecollaborators. The researcher designed a language curriculum with culturally informed activities to immerse students in real communication with global peers. Thirty-two non-English majors from the researcher’s freshman English class at a national university in Taiwan were paired with thirty-eight education majors from the University of Bielsko-Biala, Poland. The students from Taiwan had been studying English for at least six years and had an intermediate level of proficiency, while the Polish students were proficient second language users. As the total number of participants from Poland was six more than that from Taiwan, thirty-two pairs of Taiwan-Polish students worked one-on-one and six Taiwanese students worked with two Polish students in a group. The collaboration project between Polish and Taiwanese students provided a chance for both groups to broaden their international experience and enhance their cultural awareness.

### The Language Exchange Task

This study utilized O’Dowd and Ware’s (2009), and Guth and Helm’s (2010) ideas on integrating online literacy skills into the design of CMC-based intercultural tasks, defined as information exchange, comparison and analysis, collaboration, and product creation. During the 12-week exchange project, students engaged in three types of interactions: information exchange tasks to share their understanding of given cultural topics,

comparison and analysis tasks to foster discussion and critical thinking about topics; and product creation tasks to make use of technological production tools to create videos showing students' interpretations of cultural issues. In the first information exchange stage, students got to know one another through cultural exploration. Topics for exchange consisted of (1) general facts about the partner nation, (2) food and culture, (3) impact of COVID-19, and (4) tourist attractions. Exploration of each topic lasted for two weeks. The researcher, in her role as teacher, prepared authentic materials such as online readings or videos for students to review before involving partners in actual communication. Students exchanged cultural topics through synchronous communication in pairs via Zoom.

In the second stage, involving comparison and analysis, students compared similarities and differences about the topics discussed in the previous stage. The researcher prepared prompt questions to facilitate dialogue. In the final stage of product-creation, both Taiwan and Polish students synthesized information to create films or Powerpoints in pairs. Students worked in pairs to prepare one video per pair, with content consisting of perspectives from Taiwan, perspectives from Poland, similarities between Taiwan and Poland, and differences between Taiwan and Poland.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

To reveal students' oral communication strategies, a questionnaire adapted from Nakatani's (2006, p.163-164) oral communication inventory was used at the end of the project. This inventory was designed to explore EFL students' speaking and listening strategies, with eight categories dealing with speaking problems and seven categories describing listening problems during communication. The instrument relies on a Likert-type scale with 32 items classified into eight dimensions for speaking: social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiating for meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, message reduction and alteration, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment, and attempts to think in English. Strategies for coping while listening included 26 items classified into seven dimensions: negotiating for meaning while listening, fluency-maintaining, scanning, getting the gist, nonverbal strategies while listening, less active listener, and word-oriented. Students also attended semi-structured interviews at the end of the project to elicit their feedback on oral communication tactics. The oral communication survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were coded based on Tesch's (1990) qualitative research.

### **Results**

Overall, students showed competence in using various strategies to cope with speaking and listening problems ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), with more use of listening strategies ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) than speaking ones ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) (see Table 1). To deal with speaking problems, students used the strategy of giving examples if a listener did not understand ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ); they also used gestures and facial expressions if they believed they had failed to communicate well ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). They applied strategies such as paying attention to a listener's reaction ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) and taking their time to express themselves ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ). When they felt incapable of expressing their original idea, they tried to replace the original message with another one ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) and used simple expressions ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Other strategies included using fillers ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), making eye contact ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ), and asking for help ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) when communication broke down.

With regard to listening problems, students often guessed a speaker's intention by picking up familiar words ( $M = 4.131$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) and asking for repetition when they

could not understand what the speaker said ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ). They also tried to catch the speaker's point and focus on every word that the speaker used ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ). Students paid attention to words that the speaker pronounced slowly or emphasized ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ). They paid attention to the first part of a sentence and guessed the speaker's intention ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ). They asked the speaker to use easy words when they had difficulties in comprehension ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) and translated into native language to build a gradual understanding of what the speaker had said ( $M=3.88, SD=0.99$ ).

**Table 1.** Results of Oral Communication Strategy Use

| Rank   | Question  | Mean        | SD          |
|--|---|-------------|-------------|
| <b>(I) Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problem</b> |   | <b>3.83</b> | <b>0.89</b> |
| 1  | 20. I give examples if the listener doesn't understand what I am saying.  | 4.31        | 0.77        |
| 2  | 25. I try to give a good impression to the listener.  | 4.22        | 0.74        |
| 3  | 16. I use gestures and facial expressions if I can't express myself clearly with words.                                 | 4.19        | 0.77        |
| 4  | 19. While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech.  | 4.19        | 0.77        |
| 5  | 3. I use words that are familiar to me.   | 4.16        | 0.67        |
| 6  | 10. I take my time to express what I want to say.   | 4.16        | 0.75        |
| 7  | 5. I replace the original message with another message when I believe I have failed to communicate well the first time. | 4.09        | 0.72        |
| 8  | 4. I reduce the message and use simple expressions.   | 4.03        | 0.77        |
| 9  | 17. I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.  | 4.00        | 0.79        |
| 10   | 22. I make comprehension checks to ensure that the listener understands what I want to say.                             | 4.00        | 0.83        |
| 11   | 29. I actively encourage myself to express what I want to say.  | 3.97        | 0.68        |
| 12   | 2. I think first of a sentence I already know in English and then try to change it to fit the situation.                | 3.91        | 0.68        |
| 13   | 23. I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say.  | 3.91        | 0.80        |
| 14   | 26. I don't mind taking risks even though I might make mistakes.  | 3.91        | 0.84        |
| 15   | 31. I ask other people to help when I can't communicate well.   | 3.91        | 0.88        |
| 16   | 15. I try to make eye-contact when I am talking.  | 3.88        | 0.82        |
| 17   | 1. I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence.                   | 3.78        | 0.89        |
| 18   | 11. I pay attention to my pronunciation.  | 3.78        | 0.82        |
| 19   | 14. I pay attention to the conversation flow.   | 3.78        | 0.82        |
| 20   | 27. I try to enjoy the conversation.  | 3.78        | 0.93        |
| 21   | 12. I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard.   | 3.75        | 0.75        |
| 22   | 13. I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation.  | 3.75        | 0.79        |
| 23   | 30. I try to talk like a native speaker.  | 3.75        | 0.97        |
| 24   | 18. I notice myself using an expression that fits a rule I have learned.  | 3.66        | 0.73        |
| 25   | 9. I change my way of saying things according to the context.   | 3.59        | 0.82        |
| 26   | 21. I repeat what I want to say until the listener understands.   | 3.59        | 0.86        |
| 27   | 28. I try to relax when I feel anxious.   | 3.59        | 1.00        |
| 28   | 8. I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence.   | 3.56        | 0.97        |
| 29   | 6. I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I don't know what to say.                      | 3.53        | 0.97        |
| 30   | 24. I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty.   | 3.50        | 1.03        |
| 31   | 7. I pay attention to grammar and word order during conversation.   | 3.41        | 0.86        |
| 32   | 32. I give up when I can't make myself understood.  | 2.78        | 1.05        |

|   |  |             |             |
|---|--|-------------|-------------|
| <b>(II) Strategies for Coping with Listening Problems</b> |  | <b>3.93</b> | <b>0.84</b> |
| 1   | 3. I guess the speaker's intention by picking up familiar words.   | 4.31        | 0.68        |
| 2   | 22. I ask for repetition when I can't understand what the speaker has said.                                  | 4.28        | 0.76        |
| 3   | 12. I try to catch the speaker's main point.   | 4.19        | 0.77        |
| 4   | 2. I try to catch every word that the speaker uses.  | 4.09        | 0.72        |
| 5   | 6. I try to respond to the speaker even when I don't understand him/her perfectly.                           | 4.09        | 0.84        |
| 6   | 7. I guess the speaker's intention based on what he/she has said so far.                                     | 4.09        | 0.76        |
| 7   | 4. I pay attention to the words that the speaker pronounces slowly or emphasizes.                            | 4.06        | 0.75        |
| 8   | 18. I pay attention to the speaker's eye contact, facial expression and gestures.                            | 4.06        | 0.75        |
| 9   | 1. I pay attention to the first word to judge whether it is an interrogative sentence or not.                | 4.03        | 0.77        |
| 10  | 5. I pay attention to the first part of the sentence and guess the speaker's intention.                      | 4.00        | 0.75        |
| 11  | 15. I use circumlocution to react to the speaker's utterance when I don't understand his/her intention well. | 4.00        | 0.79        |
| 12  | 9. I anticipate what the speaker is going to say based on the context.                                       | 3.97        | 0.73        |
| 13  | 14. I send continuation signals to show my understanding in order to avoid communication gaps.               | 3.94        | 0.75        |
| 14  | 21. I make a clarification request when I am not sure what the speaker has said.                             | 3.94        | 0.86        |
| 15  | 25. I especially pay attention to the interrogative when I listen to WH-questions.                           | 3.94        | 0.90        |
| 16  | 20. I ask the speaker to use easy words when I have difficulties in comprehension.                           | 3.91        | 0.84        |
| 17  | 11. I try to translate into native language little by little to understand what the speaker has said.        | 3.88        | 0.99        |
| 18  | 16. I pay attention to the speaker's pronunciation.  | 3.88        | 0.74        |
| 19  | 13. I pay attention to the speaker's rhythm and intonation.  | 3.84        | 0.75        |
| 20  | 17. I use gestures when I have difficulties in understanding.  | 3.84        | 0.87        |
| 21  | 10. I ask the speaker to give an example when I am not sure what he/she said.                                | 3.81        | 0.88        |
| 22  | 26. I pay attention to the subject and verb of the sentence when I listen.                                   | 3.72        | 0.84        |
| 23  | 19. I ask the speaker to slow down when I can't understand what the speaker has said.                        | 3.66        | 0.96        |
| 24  | 23. I make clear to the speaker what I haven't been able to understand.                                      | 3.66        | 0.81        |
| 25  | 8. I don't mind if I can't understand every single detail.   | 3.59        | 1.03        |
| 26  | 24. I only focus on familiar expressions.  | 3.44        | 0.79        |
| <b>Total</b>  |  | <b>3.87</b> | <b>0.87</b> |

Note: This questionnaire was adapted from Nakatani's (2006 pp. 163-164) oral communication inventory.

Semi-structured interview results supplemented findings from the oral communication survey. When students were asked about their listening problems in Zoom sessions, they indicated that they were overwhelmed by the fast speed of their Polish peers' speaking and their accents. Students commented:

*It was sometimes difficult when she was speaking too fast or using too complicated words, which prevented me from understanding my partner.  
(Student #10)*

*This was my first time to communicate with a European, so I had a hard time understanding what he said because of the accent. (Student #20)*

When asked about the strategies they used to cope with challenges, students reported that they asked their peers to repeat, or asked them to send text messages when needed. Other strategies included asking for help from a friend, or using Internet resources to illustrate what they wanted to say. As students worked with the same partner, some chose to listen to the recorded meeting again, trying to guess meanings they had initially missed based on the context and noting down the words and phrases that the partner used so that they could better understand in the next meeting. Students also used strategies such as finding synonyms for difficult words, changing the topic, and using body language to keep the conversation going. Students commented:

*When needed, both sides could ask the other to repeat what was said, without any awkwardness involved. (Student #3)*

*So, I listened to the recording to let myself become familiar with the accent and speaking speed of my peer. Now I can understand more easily what she says. (Student #8)*

*We looked for synonyms of the words we meant or tried to break sentences down to much simpler English. (Student #11)*

With regards to speaking problems, students made clear that their lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge lowered their confidence in speaking. Students commented:

*Sometimes we had speaking problems. I couldn't express my ideas with the right words, so I tried to get meaning across by using body language or sharing a photo with my partner so she could more easily understand a word or sentence. (Student #15)*

*It was hard for me to organize my sentences in a short period of time. Also, I was not always sure whether the word I used was correct or not. Fortunately, my partner was good at guessing what I said even though I didn't always know what I was talking about. (Student #22)*

When asked about strategies for coping with speaking problems, students said that they used realia at hand when doing video conferencing, such as showing pictures of a word they wanted to say. Alternatively, students used body language or texted their peers in the chatroom if they could not pronounce a word understandably.

*When difficulties arose, I would try to use another method to replace "talking". For example, I would show pictures or videos online that could put meaning across successfully. (Student #2)*

*Besides communicating by talking to each other, sometimes when I didn't know how to explain an idea, I would use body language to let my partner know what I meant. (Student #21)*

When asked what they had learned from communicating with global peers, they indicated that they had learned strategies to boost their confidence when speaking to foreigners. They also learned to respect cultural differences. From the actual final collaborative project, they learned teamwork and how to work with foreign peers in a more efficient way.

*I think I learned many things after interacting with Polish students. I was very nervous at first. Now we can chat easily and finish the final project together. I*

*learned many things about Poland and its food, culture, architecture, transportation and so on. (Student #25)*

## Discussion and Conclusion

This project aimed to engage EFL students in authentic language learning experiences through telecollaborating with global peers to complete tasks. During synchronous Zoom interactions, students succeeded in enhancing oral communication strategies (Dezkoe, 2017; Dooly & Hauck, 2012). With the interactive features of video conferencing, students received instant verbal and non-verbal feedback from interlocutors (Kato et al., 2016). When encountering difficulties in expressing themselves, they used a wide range of communicative resources, such as simplifying expressions and attempting to think in English (Nakatani, 2006). Students also applied non-verbal strategies (gestures and facial expressions) to convey meaning (Austin et al., 2017). The use of multimodal aids like videos and pictures supplemented their efforts to deliver key concepts to global peers. The use of realia lowered students' emotional barriers while they were speaking and listening to foreign counterparts (Sanchez & Manrique, 2018). This telecollaborative project enabled students to become aware of their own use of oral communication strategies and critically reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in terms of linguistic resources during synchronous chats. The end result was a more sophisticated meaning exchange.

In an increasingly interconnected world, this study shed light on how EFL students can benefit from telecollaborative projects via structured virtual exchange tasks. Findings on students' dyadic interactions in video conferencing and on effective oral strategies may improve future telecollaborative projects and allow teachers and researchers to develop more efficient methods of imparting competence. Communication capabilities are essential for those who must collaborate and negotiate meaning during online interactions with global peers in the digital age.

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