

## Chapter 6

# Cultural Diversity and Critical Cultural Awareness: A Case Study of Telecollaboration on Dutch and Turkish Teachers' Pedagogical Perspectives

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This case study investigated Dutch and Turkish pre-service teachers' pedagogical insights on cultural diversity and critical cultural awareness in a telecollaboration project integrated into practicum. The intercultural communicative competence framework and the positioning theory were the theoretical frameworks. Participants engaged in asynchronous video communication on cultural and critical issues. The data were collected via expectation papers, a reflective project evaluation journal, videotaped interactions, and semi-structured interviews. They were analyzed via content analysis. The findings revealed the favorable impact of participants' project engagement on their perceptions, cultural, diversity and critical cultural awareness. Despite the pre-service teachers' enhanced cultural diversity and critical cultural awareness, the limited duration of the study and the lack of synchronous interaction did not allow for an in-depth exploration of their diverse critical cultural perspectives. The study has implications for teacher educators conducting telecollaboration projects.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 21st century's ever-growing culturally and socially diverse educational landscape has witnessed the emergence of technology-mediated pedagogical approaches that promote intercultural and collaborative learning, critical cultural awareness, communicative, pragmatic, and digital competence in the foreign language learning/teaching (FL) contexts (O'Dowd, 2011; Pegrum et al., 2018). One such approach is telecollaboration or virtual exchange which has become popular in higher education for two decades

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(Chun, 2015). It emerged as “one of the main pillars of the intercultural turn in foreign language education” (Thorne, as cited in Luo & Gui, 2021, p.610). Becoming an “intercultural speaker” with “insights into their own and the other cultures” is adopted as the primary goal of the second language (L2) / FL learning and teaching environments (Avgousti, 2018). With the advances in computer-mediated communication, a shift has been observed from text chat to multimodality (Panichi & Deutschmann, 2012). Hence, contemporary L2 and FL learning/teaching environments have recently started to emphasize the role of multimodality in successful online intercultural exchanges (Hauck, 2007). Throughout the chapter, the concepts *telecollaboration*, *telecollaborative study*, *virtual exchange* or *intercultural learning exchange*, are used interchangeably. In this chapter, telecollaboration is defined as “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 (as defined by Byram, 1997) through structured tasks“ (Guth & Helm, 2010, p. 14). It was not until very recently that the scope of telecollaboration was extended to the pre-service and in-service teachers, or English language teaching professionals (See Dooly, 2011; Guth & Helm, 2010).

Diverse pedagogical approaches and perspectives have been considered regarding the integration of virtual exchange projects into different disciplines and contexts in the tertiary context (O’Dowd, 2017). Virtual exchange projects have been increasingly integrated into pre-service teacher education contexts to provide a road map for pre-service teachers regarding how to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students (Dooly, 2011; Tanghe & Park, 2016). It is of crucial importance for those involved in virtual exchange projects to be aware of the “contextually-bound” and “viable” nature of cultural values, beliefs and practices and to regulate their own responses or attitudes towards their partners (Üzüm et al., 2019, p. 84).

In tertiary education contexts of the 21st century, the focus is on raising global citizens actively involved in an increasingly digital, global and multicultural world (O’Dowd, 2017). International mobility programs have long been considered a promising channel to raise such a robust, action-oriented learner profile with multiple perspectives, a high level of agency as well as well-developed critical thinking and problem solving skills (Leask, 2015). However, due to a relatively small student population, limited funding opportunities and the short duration of the program (Kinging, 2009) as well as pandemic-related challenges such as COVID-19, educational institutions have turned to virtual exchange programs and projects and focus on “internalisation at home” (Beelen, & Jones, 2015, p. 59). Such programs also enable the internationalization of curriculum and involve learners in new intercultural experiences (O’Dowd, 2016).

In spite of its popularity and extended realm of implementation, the majority of the virtual exchange projects do not tend to go beyond superficial intercultural exchanges, mostly composed of “trivial exchanges” in O’Dowd’s (2016, p. 297) terms. Virtual exchange projects are likely to be criticized for not addressing “the transformative goal of promoting critical conversations addressing social, political and historical issues... in participants’ contexts” (Üzüm, et al., 2019). They might also pose individual, socio-institutional, and interactional challenges for teachers and teacher educators (Hauck, 2007; O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Üzüm et al., 2020). Furthermore, a lack of participant engagement in controversial, challenging and discomfiting topics such as racism, gender equality, religion and politics was reported in some virtual exchange projects (Helm, 2013; Kramsch, 2014a, 2014b; O’Dowd, 2016). Hence, the current study aimed to investigate the Dutch and Turkish pre-service teachers’ perspectives on cultural diversity and critical cultural awareness from pedagogical perspectives that they developed via their engagement in a virtual exchange project integrated into practicum classes in the fall semester of the

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