

Developing an Effective Chinese-American Telecollaborative Learning Program

Han Luo

Lafayette College

1. Purpose of the Study

In the past twenty years, the practice of telecollaboration has been gaining in popularity and is especially widespread in higher education (Chun, 2014, 2015). Telecollaboration has become an emerging separate sub-field of foreign language learning (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012; Guth & Helm, 2010) and various types of beneficial outcomes of telecollaboration have been documented (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). However, the vast majority of online exchanges are still between Western classrooms based in North America and Europe, with the number of partnerships involving Asia or one of the less commonly taught languages being rather small (Belz, 2003; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). In particular, research on telecollaborative partnerships involving Chinese as the target language has been scarce (Belz, 2003; Ryder & Yamagata-Lynch, 2014; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). On the practice level, Chinese-American telecollaboration is still fairly nascent. Many very well-acknowledged findings and practices established in the general literature of telecollaboration have not been incorporated into CFL education. In other words, scholars in the field of Chinese language education have yet not established successful exchange models and created related materials for beginner telecollaborators to draw on.

To bridge the practice and research gaps, this study will first present a carefully designed Chinese-American telecollaborative learning program incorporating the findings of the existing literature and then examine the effectiveness and areas of improvement of this learning program through various types of data (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, reflection journals, Skype conversations transcripts, online WeChat discussions) adopting the action research approach. The goal of this study is to provide practical implications for establishing effective telecollaborative exchanges for Chinese language learners. Specifically, this study will explore the following three questions:

1. How do CFL learners perceive the Chinese-American telecollaborative learning program in general?
2. What are the pedagogical benefits of this program?
3. What are the challenges of this program and what improvements can be made?

2. Description of the Chinese-American Telecollaborative Learning Program

The Chinese-American telecollaborative learning program will be a 15-week exchange project to be established in the Spring semester of 2018, involving two natural Chinese language classes, CHN102 (i.e., second-semester first-year Chinese) and CHN112 (i.e., second-semester second-year Chinese) at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. and a group of English majors who are also members of the English debate team at the East China University of Science and Technology in Shanghai which enjoy a national recognition in China. The researcher will be the instructor of CHN102 and CHN112 at the American College. A former Fulbright TA of the researcher is currently an English language instructor and the academic advisor of the English debate team at the East China University of Science and Technology. The former Fulbright TA will be responsible for convening and organizing the Chinese group while the researcher will be in charge of the American group.

In the first week of the semester, participants from both sides will be required to provide a brief biography highlighting interests, hobbies, personalities, and learning expectations. All the biographies will then be made accessible to the participants who are instructed to choose their partners based on the information. As a result, each student from the American group will be paired up with one from the Chinese group. The researcher will also create two WeChat groups for the CHN102 and CHN112 classes including participants from both sides to socialize and discuss cultural topics with their partners. The two WeChat groups will remain separate throughout the semester. More specifically, the Chinese-American learning program will have the following four components:

One-on-one Skype conversation: the CFL students from the American side are required to spend at least half an hour talking to their Chinese partners over Skype on one of the department lab computers, half in Chinese and half in English on a weekly basis except for the first week, the Spring break week, and the final week. Thus, each student is supposed to schedule 12 Skype conversations. For the part in Chinese, the researcher will provide a list of questions/topics in Chinese involving the vocabulary the students are familiar with or have just learned. For the part in English, the researcher will provide a list of cultural topics concurrent with the cultural themes covered in their Chinese textbooks, but students are welcome to switch to any other topics they find more interesting. At the beginning of the semester, the director of the department language lab will conduct a half-an-hour orientation workshop for students in CHN102 and CHN112. Students will be instructed to record their Skype conversations as video files and save them under appropriate folders on the lab computers. The researcher will view each Skype conversation videos as soon as they are available and make notes while going through them.

WeChat group cultural discussion: A WeChat group will be created for each class, CHN102 and CHN112, including students from both sides of the Chinese-American partnership. The two WeChat groups will serve as cross-cultural discussion forums for both classes and their respective Chinese partners. The main language for WeChat group cultural discussions will be English. For eight weeks in the semester (i.e., weeks 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12), one pair or two will post a cultural topic agreed among themselves on the class WeChat group to invite their classmates and Chinese partners' thoughts and opinions. In particular, the students are encouraged to compare aspects of Chinese and American cultures. The researcher and the former Fulbright TA will participate in the WeChat group cultural discussions mainly as observers and occasionally as facilitators when student participation is low. The researcher will constantly take notes and mark down questions during each WeChat group discussion.

One-on-one WeChat conversation: Partners are expected to connect individually through WeChat on a daily basis. They are encouraged to discuss anything they are interested in, ranging from Chinese language study to their daily life experiences to any cultural aspects. They can type texts or send voice messages in English or Chinese for the daily WeChat conversations. To facilitate the completion of this component, the researcher will regularly assign homework requiring WeChat communication. For example, the Chinese language students in the U.S. may need to write a short letter to their Chinese partners through WeChat, ask questions about their partner's daily life by incorporating the new vocabulary covered in a new lesson, send a voice message to their partner commenting on the day's news, or seek help in understanding a Chinese joke or idiom. Five minutes of each class meeting in CHN102 and CHN112 will be reserved for students to share the most interesting things they have learned from their Chinese partners through this component.

Reflective Journal: Almost every week, each student from the American side will be required to write a one-page reflective journal on his/her experiences with the Chinese-American learning program. They can reflect on how they like the program and its components, what they have learned, the challenges they have encountered, and/ or recommendations for improving the program. The goals and expectations of reflective journals will be openly discussed in class at the beginning of the semester and a document titled "Guidance for Writing Reflective Journals" will be handed out to the students and posted on the class websites on Moodle. The researcher would read the students' reflective journals as soon as they are submitted, take notes, and schedule informal follow-up interviews with the students to clarify points and elicit further insights.

The American group is required to take part in this program as it will be incorporated into the syllabi of CHN102 and CHN112 and their performances in this program will account for 20% of their final grades. In contrast, the Chinese group will be selected on a volunteer basis and their participation and performances in this program will not be related to their final grades in any course.

As described above, this Chinese-American telecollaborative learning program is designed to combine the e-tandem model and the intercultural model of telecollaboration (O'Dowd, 2016). The weekly one-on-one Skype conversation conducted half in Chinese and half in English is largely based on the rules of the e-tandem model with emphasis on learning each other's target language although culture learning is

the goal of the English half. Guided by the principles of the intercultural model, the WeChat group cultural discussion focuses on learner-selected cultural topics and helps develop learners' intercultural knowledge and competence through cross-cultural comparisons and discussions.

This program also integrates different task types. The one-on-one WeChat daily conversation mainly involves information exchange tasks where partners are encouraged to ask whatever questions of mutual interests and establish a close personal relationship. During the weekly Skype conversation, partners will have the opportunity to share cross-cultural information and analyze a designated or self-selected cultural phenomenon together "face to face", which is a combination of information exchange tasks and comparison-analysis tasks. The WeChat group cultural discussion, mainly utilizing comparison-analysis tasks, explicitly elicits both sides' opinions and insights on Chinese-American cultural differences revolving around a number of student-generated topics. Through the weekly reflective journal, learners constantly reflect on their own telecollaborative experiences and receive feedback from the instructor. Such reflective tasks, although not included in O'Dowd & Ware's (2009) telecollaboration task inventory, help learners and instructors identify potential difficulties, clear out issues, and seek solutions in the process of the exchange so that the learners can remain on the right track and make the best use of the exchange project. Considering the fact that the CFL learners from the American side are at the elementary or intermediate-low level, collaborative tasks will not be employed for the learning program under discussion.

In order to alleviate the issue of target language proficiency gap, the researcher will provide the students with scaffolding and support whenever necessary and break the rule of equal L1 and L2 usage. For example, in the weekly Skype conversation where half Chinese and half English are expected, the researcher will spell out a list of questions in Chinese within the learners' vocabulary range and cultural topics in English relevant to the themes covered in their textbooks. Meanwhile, English will be the main language for the WeChat group cultural discussion and the one-on-one daily WeChat conversation although the use of Chinese from the American group is encouraged, which allows flexibility for the participation of learners of different Chinese proficiency levels and accommodates students' discrepant expectations towards language study and culture learning. The fact that students will have the opportunity to choose the use of language and their own topics is deliberately incorporated in order to enhance learners' motivation in participating in the exchange, which has been reported to be a very important success factor of telecollaboration (Helm, 2015; Park, 2014; Ware, 2005)

Following the advice of a number of very established scholars in telecollaboration (e.g., Dooly, 2007; O'Dowd, 2007, 2012), this program combines the use of different technological tools including Skype and WeChat to make the best use of the advantages of each communication tool (O'Dowd, 2007; Hauck & Youngs, 2008). The synchronous Skype conferencing allows partners to talk face to face in real time, solve problems on the spot, and build more personal relationships. WeChat, an extremely popular social media phone app in China, is very familiar to students from the China side. As WeChat is integrated into the various aspects of Chinese people daily life today, learning to use WeChat itself is part of learning the contemporary Chinese culture. In addition, WeChat is an all-in-one communication app for free text and voice messages, voice and video calls, moments (known as "Friends' Circle" among Chinese users), photo sharing, games, and online payment, incorporating the features of Facebook, Instagram, Skype, and Twitter. Skype, instead of the built-in video call function of WeChat, will be adopted for weekly synchronous conferencing because the researcher wants to save all the conversation videos on the department lab computers. The WeChat group function allows asynchronous text-based forum discussion whereas partners can use built-in synchronous (voice and video calls) or asynchronous tools (text and voice messages) to conduct daily one-on-one WeChat conversations. Moreover, students from the American side are encouraged to explore the other functions of WeChat such as Friends' Circle on their own, which might provide them with more exposure to various aspects of authentic Chinese language and culture.

3. Methodology

The goal of this study matches very well with that of action research, which has been enthusiastically

advocated for researching the process of designing, developing and using telecollaboration by many scholars (Chun, 2015; Dooly & Hauck, 2012; Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Müller-Hartmann, 2012; O’Dowd, 2003). Action research involves “collecting data on ... everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to some decisions about what ... future practice should be” (Wallace, 1998, p. 4). In other words, self-reflective teachers usually engage in action research as part of a process of reflection on their own practices in order to gain in-depth understanding of the learning process and improve the effectiveness of teaching.

Scholars have proposed a number of models for conducting action research, which may differ in the details of definitions or specific procedures, but most of them advocate iterative cycles of planning, observing, acting, and reflecting (e.g. Coghland & Brannick, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mills, 2010; Nunan, 1992). The present study adopts a cyclical model of action research and reports on findings in the first cycle, i.e., a semester-long telecollaborative exchange, with an aim to look for best practices for Chinese-American intercultural exchange through repeated implementation of this program in future cycles.

The researcher will collect a variety of data for analysis, including naturally occurring interaction data (i.e., Skype conversations, WeChat group discussion transcripts), students’ weekly reflection journals, informal interviews with the students along the semester, an end-of-semester questionnaire, end-of-semester interviews, and the teacher-researcher reflective journal.

In order to answer research question 1 (i.e., students’ general perception of the project), the results of end-of-semester questionnaires will be examined. In order to investigate the learning outcomes (i.e., research question 2), as well as the challenges and improvements (i.e., research question 3), the researcher will analyze the various types of qualitative data mentioned above. I will follow the constant comparative method with a three-stage coding strategy, i.e., open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for qualitative data analysis.

As I myself will be the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in this study, I will employ several procedures and techniques to ensure trustworthiness: the teacher-researcher reflective journal, triangulation, member checks, and peer-debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). I will keep a teacher/researcher journal throughout the semester to minimize the effect of researcher biases. For the triangulation of data, I will continuously compare and cross-check emerging themes across multiple data sets to look for confirming or refuting evidence. For member checks, I will constantly conduct informal interviews with the students throughout the semester to check my understanding and interpretation of their reflection journals and online interaction. For peer-debriefing, I will communicate with the former Fulbright TA and discuss my findings with her over Skype on a weekly basis to gain different perspectives. A former colleague of mine who has extensive experience in teaching Chinese in the U.S. will also provide her valuable insights as an outsider.

4. Timeline (In the spring semester of 2018)

Week 1: preparation, orientation, and partner matching

Weeks 2-3: Skype conversations, daily WeChat conversations, and reflection journals

Weeks 4-7: WeChat group cultural discussions, Skype, daily WeChat conversations, and reflection journals

Week 8: Spring break

Weeks 9-12: WeChat group cultural discussions, Skype, daily WeChat conversations and reflection journals

Weeks 13-14: Skype conversations, daily WeChat conversations and reflection journals

Week 15: end-of-semester questionnaires and interviews

5. Estimated Budget

- Compensations for the instructor in China: \$ 200
- Compensations for the Chinese students: 10 (number of participants) * \$ 25 = \$ 250
- Services required for photocopying related materials and evaluation forms: \$ 50

6. References (Omitted)