

The Overcoming of an Intercultural Misunderstanding in Teletandem

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Abstract:

Telecollaboration involves the use of online technologies in the context of language teaching and learning (BELZ, 2007; O'DOWD, 2013). When different cultures come into contact, intercultural misunderstandings (BELZ, 2002, 2007; AGAR, 2006; O'DOWD, 2012; SOUZA, 2016) can emerge. This study aimed at discussing how the overcoming of an intercultural misunderstanding occurred in a Teletandem (TELLES, 2015a, 2015b) partnership, the specific telecollaborative context in this study, between a learner of English and a learner of Portuguese. For the analysis, data from telecollaborative sessions, a mediation session, experience reports, interviews, private messages on Facebook and reflective diaries were included. Data analysis showed that the dialogue with the "other" (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2005; HELM, 2016), – that is, between one of the participants and the teacher-mediator – favored the overcoming of the intercultural misunderstanding, which indicates that there is the need for the teacher-mediator to provide moments of reflection in cases of possible intercultural misunderstandings in telecollaborative contexts.

Keywords:

Teletandem. Telecollaboration. Intercultural misunderstanding.

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INTRODUCTION

The internet has generated general changes in education and particularly in the area of foreign language, as it has expanded the opportunities to practice and learn languages (SCHAEFER; LUNA, 2018). In this sense, O'Dowd (2013, p. 123) underscores that “one of the major contributions of the internet to foreign language (FL) education has been its potential to bring language learners into virtual contact with members of other cultures and speakers of other languages”. Similarly, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013, p. 119) claim that digital technologies “have the potential to place learners in situation of intercultural communication where they can explore the language and culture they are learning in real world interactions”.

Telecollaborative exchanges have emerged due to the possibilities given by digital technologies. For O'Dowd (2013, p. 123), telecollaboration refers to “the application of online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills and intercultural competence through collaborative tasks and project work”. Three examples of telecollaborative projects are (1) *The Cultnet Intercultural Citizenship*, which aims at including citizenship education in the teaching and learning of languages through subprojects (BYRAM, 2016); (2) *The Cultura Exchange Programme*, whose objective is to enable the intercultural contact between students from different countries (FURSTENBERG, 2016); and (3) *Teletandem Brasil: foreign languages for all* (henceforward TTB¹) (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006; TELLES, 2011, 2015a, 2015b) – the specific telecollaborative context in my study –, which allows college students from Brazil to interact with college students from other countries. Created in 2006 (TELLES; VASSALLO), TTB is developed by a state university in São Paulo's countryside and the online sessions can take place through tools such as *Skype*² or *Zoom*.³

When different cultures come into contact in varied contexts, for instance, in the classroom and in telecollaborative spaces, intercultural misunderstandings (BELZ, 2002, 2007; AGAR, 2006; O'DOWD, 2012; SOUZA, 2016) may arise. In this regard,

¹ See <http://www.teletandembrasil.org/> for further information on TTB.

² Skype is a software that provides voice and video communications via the Internet.

³ Zoom combines online meeting, videoconferencing and mobile collaboration. It also provides cloud-based video communication.

O'Dowd (2012, p. 352) explains that intercultural encounters are “often characterized by misunderstandings and the need to deal with different behaviour and beliefs”.

The objective of this study is to discuss the way in which the overcoming of an intercultural misunderstanding occurred in a Teletandem partnership between a learner of English and a learner of Portuguese. To achieve this objective, I outlined the following research question: how did the overcoming of an intercultural misunderstanding occur in a Teletandem partnership?

Expectations of this study in contributing to TTB rely on the fact that literature points to the need to look at cultural aspects in this project (TELLES, 2011, 2015b). Furthermore, Souza (2016) emphasizes a lack of research on intercultural misunderstandings through meaning negotiation in mediation sessions.⁴ Indeed, I focused on how a case of intercultural misunderstanding was negotiated not only in a mediation session, but also in other instances, as will be explained.

This text⁵ is divided into five sections. This first section focused on the purpose of this investigation and, in addition, presented a brief contextualization of the object of study. The second section deals with the relevant literature to ground this study, while in the third I address the method used. In the fourth section, I present the data analysis and discussion. The final section presents considerations and offers suggestions for further research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For Belz (2007), telecollaboration can be characterized as ethnographic, dialogic and critical. Ethnographic since learners can observe, analyze and interpret the behavior of their online partners. Dialogic because learners' utterances arise out of interaction with others. Finally, critical in the sense that “learners are not passive receptacles of received knowledge [...] but rather active participants in a dynamic process of knowledge construction” (p. 138).

Telecollaboration is regarded by other researchers as an opportunity for the intercultural dialogue. By way of example, Helm (2016, p. 153) argues that through dialogue and by working collaboratively “participants explore identities and difference, personal experience and emotions, which contribute to awareness of self and others”. O'Dowd (2003, p. 133), on his turn, feels that “on-line discussions allow learners to express their ideas and then to clarify and redefine them through feedback and through the other perspectives to which they are exposed”. Converging with O'Dowd (2003), Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen (1998, p. 14) state that the intercultural dialogue through telecollaborative activities allows for “interaction between self and other and the

⁴ For Leone and Telles (2016, p. 244), mediation sessions are related to “moments that follow interactions in teletandem sessions”. I will address “mediation sessions” in the Review of Literature section.

⁵ This article is from my PhD dissertation (SCHAEFER, 2019).

incorporation of the latter's conceptual horizon to one's own perspective". Lastly, Veloso and Almeida (2009) contend that dialogue in Teletandem, the specific "mode of telecollaboration" (TELLES, 2015a, p. 604) in my study, leads language learners to take a major control over their learning process.

Teletandem has resources such as voice, image and writing, and can be defined as video conferencing between two interactants⁶ who are learning each other's language (VASSALLO, 2009; TELLES, 2015a). The three guiding principles of Teletandem are the following: reciprocity, autonomy and separate use of languages (TELLES, 2009). Reciprocity, according to Telles (2015a, 2015b), refers to the mutual support and interdependence between the two interactants, whereas autonomy is related to the commitment of both learning regarding their learning process. Separate use of languages, in turn, means that the two languages cannot be mixed (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006; TELLES, 2015b).

In most telecollaborative projects reported in research "teachers organize the communication and tasks, motivate students, monitor activities and provide feedback and support for learners, but the communication between learners is not usually moderated" (HELM, 2016, p. 151). Concerning the Teletandem context specifically, the online sessions themselves are not moderated by a teacher-mediator either. However, mediation sessions (ROCHA; LIMA, 2009; SALOMÃO, 2012; ANDREU-FUNO, 2015; LEONE; TELLES, 2016; LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016), that is, moments that happen after the online sessions (LEONE; TELLES, 2016), are essential for facilitating, according to Lopes and Freschi (2016), instances of further reflection. Salomão (2012) adds that mediation sessions are an opportunity for the narration of experiences by those who experienced them, that is, the participants themselves.

Rocha and Lima (2009, p. 240) argue that the teacher-mediator's role in the Teletandem context is, in addition to "trimming the edges and preventing disinterest, misunderstandings and cultural clashes from happening between the interactants",^{7,8} to mediate the contact between Brazilians and foreigners. The authors highlight that it is necessary to stress to learners the importance of respecting their online partner's individuality as well as the need to pay attention to cultural differences, for the sake of not negatively affecting the learning process, which can cause possible constraints or the eventual partnership breakdown.

Many scholars, among them Kramsch (1993, 2005, 2011, 2014), Byram (1997), Crozet and Liddicoat (1999), Bredella (2002), Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), Rosa Filho and Gil (2016) and Sequeira (2018), have proposed the adoption of an intercultural

⁶ "Interactant" is the name given to the two partners who are learning each other's language in teletandem sessions.

⁷ All translations are mine.

⁸ Original quote: "aparar as arestas e evitar que ocorra desinteresse, mal-entendidos e choques culturais entre os interagentes".

approach to foreign language teaching and learning. Regarding the encounters between people from different cultures, the authors underline that knowledge of other people's values and behaviors, respect for other cultures, adaptation to different contexts, openness to other viewpoints and personal desire to know other cultures are relevant aspects when it comes to the construction of interculturality, which is named "intercultural communicative competence" by Byram (1997). For the latter, this term is related to the ability to use language in interactions with people from other cultures, and adds that for the development of such a competence it is paramount that language learners "elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents and events" (p. 53).

Byram (1997) suggests the following components (which he names *savoirs*) for the development of intercultural communicative competence: (1) attitudes, which are related to a "willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviors, and to analyze them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging" (p. 34); (2) knowledge, referring to knowledge of other cultures and the self in social interactions; (3) skills of interpreting and relating, that is, "the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (p. 61); (4) skills of discovering and interacting, which are linked to the need to know how to interpret documents or events of other cultures and relate them to her/his own cultural horizons; and (5) critical cultural awareness, which stands for the examination and interpretation of cultural differences in a critical way.

Kramersch (1993) makes clear that meaning-makings are an interpersonal process, since they emerge through interaction with "the other". This way, the reflection between "the self" and "the other" in intercultural interaction presupposes the deconstruction of fixed cultural representations as well as of the world itself. Kramersch (2005, p. 553) claims that such a reflection can lead to the construction of interculturality, which is related to "an awareness and a respect of [sic] difference, as well as the socio-affective capacity to see oneself through the eyes of others". In the same vein, Bredella (2002, p. 39) states that interculturality is the ability to "reconstruct the context of the foreign, take the others' perspective and see things through their eyes. This implies that we are able to distance ourselves from our own categories, values and interests", while Liddicoat and Scarino (2013, p. 42) maintain that the construction of interculturality can lead to the "transformational engagement of the learner".

As mentioned in the introduction, intercultural misunderstandings may emerge when different cultures meet in varied contexts, for example, in the classroom and in telecollaborative spaces. For Belz (2007, p. 145), intercultural conflicts "indicate that two *languacultures*⁹ or conceptual systems have come into contact". Agar (2006, p. 2), who

⁹ "Languaculture", or "language plus culture", is regarded by Agar (1994) as the intrinsic relationship between language and culture. Thorne (2006, p. 6) considers that "langua" "extends beyond words and sentences to discourse".

coined the term *rich points* to refer to intercultural misunderstandings, makes clear that they are related to “those surprises, those departures from an outsider’s expectations that signal a difference between LC1 and LC2”.¹⁰ Despite the discomfort that intercultural misunderstandings can cause, Belz (2002, p. 76) feels that they “should not be smoothed over or avoided [...] indeed, they should be encouraged”, whereas O’Dowd (2012, p. 352), in the same vein, points out that such misunderstandings “should be exploited” by the teacher.

For Kramsch (1993, p. 228), teachers can help language learners understand what can lead to intercultural conflicts, but they cannot directly teach how to solve them, since “what we should seek in cross-cultural education are less bridges than a deep understanding of the boundaries. We can teach the boundary, we cannot teach the bridge”. In this connection, Helm (2016, p. 152) claims that intercultural misunderstandings “ought to be recognized as an inevitable part of intercultural dialogue”, and they should be viewed as “transformative agents” (p. 152). Furthermore, Crozet and Liddicoat (1999) make clear that discussing the boundaries between the “self” and “the other” can favor the construction of interculturality.

For Van Lier (2004), problems related to human interaction, in line with an ecological perspective¹¹ (VAN LIER, 2004; KRAMSCH; STEFFENSEN, 2008), can be approached in two ways: shallow or deep. On one hand, the shallow way focuses on solving these problems, but without seeking to understand more deeply what could have caused them. On the other hand, the deep way aims at understanding, in a critical and deeper manner, the causes underlying these problems. Hence, it can be stated that the deep way may help teachers, practitioners and researchers in dealing with possible intercultural misunderstandings in telecollaborative environments.

Souza’s (2016) study, which focused on intercultural misunderstandings in the Teletandem context, investigated the process of meaning negotiation and the emergence of misunderstandings during exchanges between learners of Portuguese and learners of English. Transcripts of a total of nine Teletandem sessions, written profiles of two focal partnerships and narratives about the misunderstanding experience of thirteen Brazilians were part of the *corpus*. The study outcomes showed that intercultural misunderstandings were little or superficially negotiated by the participants, and were linked to concepts such as culture, ideological divergences (or conflicts and shocks), failed communication, language proficiency, and so forth. For instance, with respect to “ideological divergences”, Souza points out that one of the participants related situations of misunderstandings with “conflicts and shocks triggered by ideological divergences”¹² (p. 129). Regarding

¹⁰ LC1 = language and culture 1; LC2 = language and culture 2.

¹¹ For Van Lier (2004), the ecological perspective concentrates on the relationships that language learners establish with the environment, as the latter has symbolic, physical and social characteristics that can exert influence on their interaction.

¹² Original quote: “conflitos e choques desencadeados por divergências ideológicas”.

“level of proficiency”¹³ (p. 123), the author explains, on the basis of what one of the participants had underlined, that misunderstandings also arise “in the linguistic level of understanding of the intended meanings due to the partner’s difficulties, seemingly, of oral comprehension”¹⁴ (p. 123).

Souza (2016) did not draw on the theoretical background of the intercultural approach (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2005, 2011, 2014; BYRAM, 1997; CROZET; LIDDICOAT, 1999; BREDELLA, 2002; LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013; ROSA FILHO; GIL, 2016; SEQUEIRA, 2018) – which was the principal basis for me to understand how the intercultural misunderstanding unfolded in my study – but rather Critical Discourse Analysis was used. While the author’s study involved data from mediation sessions, she analyzed narratives of the participants rather than their actual interaction in these sessions. Souza (2016) stresses the need for future research to strive to understand the way in which intercultural misunderstandings are negotiated in mediation sessions. This study intends to fill the gap pointed out by Souza (2016), in the sense that I concentrated on an intercultural misunderstanding that emerged through interaction and how it was addressed both in a mediation session and in other instances.¹⁵

In short, as Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen (1998), O’Dowd (2003) and Helm (2016) stressed, telecollaborative spaces facilitate the dialogue between people from different cultures. As a result, dialogue, as it is in nature intercultural (SEQUEIRA, 2018), may, through reflection between “the self” and “the other”, play a part in the process of overcoming possible intercultural misunderstandings. In effect, Phipps and Gonzales (2004, p. 3, my emphasis) claim that, since teaching and learning occurs socially through dialogue, the latter allows “to enter the *linguaging*¹⁶ of others”, which makes it possible “to understand the complexity of the experience of others to enrich their own” (p. 3).

METHOD

Data used in this study¹⁷ were collected in TTB, referred to in the introduction, between September and December 2016. During that period, there was a Teletandem partnership between a group of 8 students from a state university in Brazil, where this project is developed, and a group of 8 students from a university in the United States.

¹³ Original quote: “nível de proficiência”.

¹⁴ Original quote: “no nível linguístico de compreensão dos significados pretendidos por dificuldades do parceiro, aparentemente, de compreensão oral”.

¹⁵ I will better explain the methodological procedures further along.

¹⁶ For Phipps and Gonzales (2004), *linguaging* stands for how people, through language, interact, produce meanings and shape the world around them.

¹⁷ The data are from a research project duly approved by Research Ethics Committee of UFSC (Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa com Seres Humanos - CEPESH-UFSC) with the Approval Number 1.762.956. CAAE: 56955216.8.0000.0121.

I was the teacher-mediator of the former group and collected data for my doctoral research.¹⁸

This qualitative research¹⁹ can be considered as a *case study* (DUFF, 2014), because it looked at a contemporary phenomenon in its real context. For Duff (2014, p. 233), case studies are used “in order to provide an understanding of individuals’ experiences [...] within a particular linguistic, social, or educational context”. Hence, precisely because it is a case study, this investigation included two participants in particular regarding the Teletandem sessions: Alice and Becky.^{20,21} Alice, a Brazilian 27-year-old learner of English at the time of the data collection, interacted with Becky, an American 27-year-old learner of Portuguese.

The data used in this study are from Teletandem sessions, mediation sessions, experience reports, semi-structured interviews, Facebook²² private messages and reflective diaries.^{23,24,25} The Teletandem sessions between Alice and Becky took place on Zoom and were video-recorded. In the mediation sessions, which occurred soon after the Teletandem sessions, Alice, the other seven participants of the Brazilian university and the teacher-mediator were able to discuss different aspects related to the online sessions. Through the experience reports via Google Forms,²⁶ Alice had the opportunity to submit her personal impressions regarding her weekly partnership with Becky. Alice also participated in interviews, through which I could better understand what she had addressed in her experience reports. Both the interviews and the mediation sessions were audio-recorded. Even though I had not previously thought about using Facebook private messages, I ended up including them here as a methodological tool because in the middle of the data collection process Alice sent me some messages via Facebook about a specific issue, as will be seen further along. Finally, through reflective diaries I

¹⁸ The data used in this study are therefore from my PhD investigation (SCHAEFER, 2019).

¹⁹ For Patton (1985, p. 1), a qualitative research presupposes “an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there”.

²⁰ Fictitious names in order to safeguard the participants’ identity.

²¹ For ethical issues, a consent form (Free and Informed Consent Term) was signed by the participants in this study.

²² It refers to a popular social networking website.

²³ In relation to the eight students of the Brazilian university, in this study I included data only from Alice.

²⁴ In relation to the eight students of the American university, in this study I included data only from Becky.

²⁵ It should be explained that I included data from Becky, the participant of the American university, only from the teletandem sessions. This is because it was only with Alice, the participant of the Brazilian university, that I was able to gather complete research material. In other words, in addition to data from the teletandem sessions, I could obtain from the latter data from mediation sessions, experience reports, interviews and Facebook private messages.

²⁶ On Google Forms, it is possible to create virtual forms, e.g. open-ended, multiple choice and evaluation questions.

could note down my reflections and impressions of different aspects related to the data collection process.

The excerpts analyzed below were taken from (a) 2 out of 10 Teletandem sessions; (b) 1 out of 8 mediation sessions; (c) 1 out of 10 experience reports and; (d) 2 out of 4 Facebook private messages. Although I did not present excerpts from the interviews, I included data from these moments of dialogue between Alice and me in some parts of the analysis.

For Dörnyei (2007, p. 38), in qualitative research the findings are “ultimately the product of the researcher’s subjective interpretation of the data”. Effectively, the data collected underwent a long process of analysis, interpretation and reflection. For this purpose, I triangulated my interpretations regarding the data from the Teletandem sessions with the data from the mediation session as well as with the experience reports, interviews and Facebook private messages. As stated by Maxwell (1996), triangulation decreases the risk that the outcomes of a study reproduce biases or limitations of a single procedure. This way, I was able to look beyond the Teletandem sessions, that is to say, it was possible to have a more holistic look as concerns the reality of my data.

The excerpts analyzed in this study refer to “culture-related sets of episodes” (TELLES; ZAKIR; ANDREU-FUNO, 2015),²⁷ that is, sets of several interactive episodes where I noticed instances of an intercultural misunderstanding.

In order to facilitate and optimize the transcription process, I used *Transana*.²⁸ I translated the excerpts²⁹ from Portuguese to English, upon which I take full responsibility. Regarding the excerpts, I used “A” referring to Alice, “B” to Becky and “R” to the researcher. The information between two parentheses, that is, (()), as transcription conventions,³⁰ are related to the researcher’s comments.

²⁷ For Telles, Zakir and Andreu-Funo (2015, p. 374), *episódios relacionados a cultura* (culture-related episodes) refer to “any part of a dialogue in which the focus is on some explanation, questioning or curiosity about aspects of one’s own culture or the partner’s culture” (my translation). In my study, I borrowed from the authors the term “culture-related episodes” but, due to the specificities of my investigation, I adapted it to “culture-related sets of episodes”. Original quote: “qualquer parte de um diálogo na qual o foco recai sobre alguma explicação, questionamento ou curiosidade sobre aspectos da própria cultura ou da cultura do parceiro”.

²⁸ See <http://www.transana.org/> for further information on *Transana* program.

²⁹ I consider it necessary to present the excerpts in the original language (Portuguese). This is needed precisely because, as will be seen, restricted language abilities to communicate in Portuguese may be directly linked to an instance of communication breakdown. I nevertheless make the English translation of such excerpts available as footnotes.

³⁰ I used Marcuschi’s (1997) transcription criteria. Due to the specificities of my data, I decided, on the basis of the criteria proposed by the author, to create my own transcription criteria.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis is intended to answer the question posed in the introductory section: how did the overcoming of an intercultural misunderstanding occur in a Teletandem partnership? To this purpose, we will come across the sharing of personal opinions, display of emotion and instances of an intercultural misunderstanding.

In one Teletandem session, Alice let Becky know that one week prior to that session some people in Brazil had held a demonstration in support of Donald Trump, then candidate for president of the United States. According to Alice, who was indignant at this event, Brazilians should worry about problems related to Brazil and not to the United States. The coming excerpt was taken from the fifth Teletandem session. It illustrates how an instance of communication breakdown³¹ emerged while the participants were talking about that demonstration:

1. A: Nós temos tantos problemas aqui pra se preocupar com os problemas dos Estados Unidos... temos problemas o suficiente aliás tem muitos problemas... então acho bem difícil... mas... enfim né? ((she giggled))
2. B: *Sí...* ah... *yo...* ((taking a little while to speak)) *listo lista* para a eleição e... ah... *de todo... por eso...* não sei ah... *ridiculousness*.
3. A: Completamente... completamente... acho acho que *listo* em português dissemos [sic]... é... dizemos *pronto* eu não tenho certeza eu vou confirmar porque meu espanhol não é bom ((she laughed)) [...] é o mesmo que *all read* ((she attempted to say *all ready*)) né? você queria dizer [...].
4. B: Aham. ((the expression on her face seemed to indicate that she did not understand))
5. A: *I'm all read* ((she attempted to say *all ready*))... “eu estou pronto” nesse sentido?
6. B: *No sé...* ah...
7. A: ((she giggled))
8. B: Não sei posso... ah... pesquisar (incomprehensible)
9. A: Ok... aham... OK.
10. B: Aham.
11. A: Ah... ah... assim é... tem alguma pergunta que você gostaria de fazer... sobre algum...
12. B: Ah... ((thinking for a few seconds))... não... não sei em particular ah... ((she kept thinking for several seconds))
13. A: Ah eu tava então vou ((she giggled)) eu tava lendo um texto sobre... a música afroamericana... eu achei muito interessante... (*Excerpt 1 / Teletandem session / Alice and Becky / 02-11-2016 / original in Portuguese*^[32])

³¹ According to Avval (2011), communication breakdown refers to situations where the person is not able to assimilate or understand information, and, in the same manner, express what they mean.

³² 1. A: We have so many problems here then they ((Brazilians)) worry about the problems of the United States... we have enough problems by the way there are many problems... so I find it very difficult... but... anyway right? ((she giggled))

2. B: *Sí...* ah... *yo...* ((taking a little while to speak)) *listo lista* for the election and... ah... *de todo... por eso...* I don't know ah... *ridiculousness*.

In turn (2), it can be noted that Becky had trouble in expressing what she wanted to say in Portuguese, and she even employed linguistic elements of Spanish. In turn (3), Alice realized that “listo” is not used in Portuguese. Moreover, she laughed maybe as a way of not appearing to be “rude” for having corrected Becky’s utterance, and Alice further clarified that her uncertainty was because she did not know Spanish very well, which could be an indication of her attempt to protect Becky’s face. In turns (3) and (5), Alice attempted to find an equivalent of “pronto” in English, but that did not help much because she pronounced the expression “all ready” in a manner that Becky, in turns (4), (6) and (8), may not have understood. In turn (7), there was a case of communication breakdown, since it seems that Alice’s explanations were not clear to Becky. In this turn, Alice giggled probably because she realized that her partner was losing face in view of that situation, and, as a way of making Becky feel more comfortable, Alice asked her, in turn (11), whether she had any questions, which produced another instance of embarrassment by Becky in turn (12), because the latter either did not have questions or did not know how to ask a question in Portuguese. Yet again, in turn (13) Alice managed to protect Becky’s face by suggesting a discussion of a particular subject.

As already explained, the “level of proficiency” (p. 123) in Souza’s (2016) study, which refers to linguistic restriction to communicate in the foreign language, played a role in the emergence of misunderstandings in Teletandem sessions. Similarly, it can be seen in Excerpt 1 that, due to language restricted abilities, Becky may have not understood Alice’s explanations in Portuguese as regards the meaning of “listo”, causing, as was said previously, communication breakdown.

A day after that Teletandem session, Alice sent me a message whose content revolved around her relationship with her partner. The next excerpt, which was taken from the first Facebook private message, shows that Alice’s motivation to interact with Becky in the Teletandem sessions seemed to be dying:

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3. A: Completely... completely... I think I think that listo we say in Portuguese... like... we say pronto I’m not sure I’ll check it because my Spanish isn’t good ((she laughed)) [...] it’s the same as all read ((she attempted to say “all ready”)) isn’t it? you meant [...].
4. B: Uh-huh. ((the expression on her face seemed to indicate that she did not understand))
5. A: I’m all read ((she attempted to say “all ready”))... “eu estou pronto” in this sense?
6. B: No sé... ah...
7. A: ((she giggled))
8. B: I don’t know I can... ah... search (incomprehensible)
9. A: Ok... uh-huh... OK.
10. B: Uh-huh.
11. A: Ah... ah... like... is there any question you would like to make... about some...
12. B: Ah... ((thinking for a few seconds))... no... I don’t know in particular ah... ((she kept thinking for several seconds))
13. A: Ah I was then I’m going ((she giggled)) I was reading a text on... African-American music... I found it very interesting..

Tem as relações de poder e eu percebo que há por parte de alguns interagentes uma certeza que vem não sei de onde que os fazem pensar que são superiores / A interação com a Becky é sempre, tortuosa, complicada, mas vou detalhar melhor nos relatos, percebo que ela não se prepara muito, não há um grande interesse nesse sentido infelizmente / Notei outro ponto sobre o qual havíamos conversado, tenho uma grande dificuldade para entender o sotaque dela, há sim uma falta da minha parte, visto que eu não possuo uma fluência na língua, mas não consigo enxergar um real esforço da parte dela em se fazer entender, o que torna tudo mais complicado, mas enfim, dias melhores virão, aliás, interações melhores chegarão, assim eu espero. (*Excerpt 2 / Alice's Facebook private message / 03-11-2016 / original in Portuguese*^[33])

As can be seen in this excerpt, just as in Souza's (2016, p. 129) study misunderstandings were linked to "conflicts and shocks triggered by ideological divergences",³⁴ Alice's ideological perception of the presence of unequal power relations in the interaction with some of her American interactants³⁵ and, by extension, with Becky, was making room for a negative feeling about her partner, which is consistent with Dervin (2014, p. 193), for whom power relationship "determines what takes place in intercultural encounters". Said in other terms, it appears that Alice's perception of unequal power relations led to the emergence of an intercultural misunderstanding.

As Dervin (2014) pointed out, people build cultural representations as they interact in intercultural meetings. It may be the case that as the online sessions with Becky progressed, Alice developed a pessimistic outlook towards her partner. In fact, Alice highlighted already in her first private Facebook message that "I am the one who usually proposes the topics then there is even the issue of ego here, mine in this case".³⁶

Souza's (2016) study, as previously seen, revealed that situations of failed communication can cause intercultural misunderstandings. In effect, Alice's statement (Excerpt 2) "I realize that she doesn't prepare enough"³⁷ in the Facebook private message may be linked to the instance of communication breakdown in Excerpt 1, which could have been one of the catalysts for the emergence of the intercultural misunderstanding

³³ There are the power relations and I realize that there are on the part of some interactants one certainty that I don't know where it comes from which makes them think they are superior / The interaction with Becky is always, tortuous, complicated, but I'll give more detail in the reports, I realize that she doesn't prepare enough, there is no great interest in this regard unfortunately / I noticed another aspect which we had talked about, I have a great difficulty to understand her accent, there is of course a fault on my part, since I don't speak fluently the language, but I can't see a real effort on her part to make herself understood, which makes everything more complicated, but anyway, better days will come, in fact, better interactions will come, at least I hope.

³⁴ Original quote: "conflitos e choques desencadeados por divergências ideológicas".

³⁵ Over that period, Alice was also interacting with American students from other universities.

³⁶ Original in Portuguese: "geralmente sou eu quem leva os assuntos então há inclusive a questão do ego presente, no caso o meu."

³⁷ Original in Portuguese: "percebo que ela não se prepara muito."

in question. That is, the fact that Becky had not asked any questions in turn (12) of Excerpt 1 might have enhanced Alice's perception that her partner was "not interested", which in turn may have resulted in her view that there was the presence of unequal power relations in her online exchanges.

The content of the message that Alice sent me (Excerpt 2) made me deeply concerned, since I realized that she was losing her motivation to talk to Becky. Furthermore, this could be negatively affecting the two participants' interpersonal interaction as a whole, which could eventually cause the break-up of their partnership. Therefore, I decided that I could help Alice work on the skill of interacting (BYRAM, 1997) with her partner.

The emergence of this intercultural misunderstanding prompted me to consider that, instead of offering Alice "ready-made recipes" or, according to Kramersch (1993, p. 228), "bridges", I could help her reflect upon what was causing her pessimistic view, with the goal of overcoming it. This concurs with Kramersch (1993, p. 228), who claims that, instead of seeking to "teach the bridge", teachers should facilitate "a deep understanding of the boundaries" and help language learners in the process of overcoming cultural conflicts. Hence, with the purpose of "teach[ing] [Alice] the boundary" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 228) between Becky and herself, but also because I found that discussing this sort of situation in writing would be a somewhat difficult enterprise, my first suggestion was that she mentioned this event in her experience report so that we could talk about it in the interviews as soon as possible.

The following excerpt, taken from the second Facebook private message, depicts my reactions to Alice's critical viewpoint on her partner:

Bom dia / Não, não é ego (na minha opinião). Acho que vc, como mesma disse, está sugerindo os assuntos que gosta, já que não percebe essa iniciativa de sua parceira. Talvez, você devesse perguntar para ela se você assim está OK para ela. Quem sabe, Alice, você pudesse perguntar para ela se ela está gostando, se está tudo bem, se ela gostaria de falar sobre algum assunto específico... o que vc acha? (*Excerpt 3 / Researcher's Facebook private message / 08-11-2016 / original in Portuguese*^[38])

One day after this Facebook private message, in the Teletandem session Alice and Becky spoke about Donald Trump's victory in the United States presidential elections, which took place the day before that session. The next excerpt, which was taken from the sixth Teletandem session, portrays how this event affected the participants, but mainly Becky, emotionally:

³⁸ Good morning / No, it's not ego (in my opinion). I think that you, as you said, are suggesting the topics that you like, since you don't see this initiative on the part of your partner. Maybe, you should ask her whether it's OK for her like this. Maybe, Alice, you could ask her if she is enjoying, if everything is all right, if she'd like to talk about a specific topic... what do you think?

1. A: Como você está depois de ontem? ((she giggled)) a vitória.
2. B: Horrível (incompreensível)... ah... ((she started to cry, lowered her head and put her hands over her eyes)) (incompreensível)
3. A: É muito é muito complicado né? Imagino.
4. B: *Yeah*.
5. A: Mas dias dias melhores virão é... todo mundo tá aqui sem entender... e sem... sem compreender como que isso pode ter acontecido... eu não tô acreditando... e sabe o que eu fico mais... indignada é que muitos latinos votaram no Trump eu tô... não tô acreditando nisso. ((she giggled))
6. B: Não... ah... ((she was still crying)) não posso não sei ah... entender e... yeah. (*Excerpt 4 / Teletandem session / Alice and Becky / 09-11-2016 / original in Portuguese*³⁹)

In turn (2), after qualifying candidate Donald Trump's victory as "awful", Becky started to cry. In turn (3) and especially at the outset of turn (5), Alice attempted to comfort her partner, despite the fact that one week before the former had revealed an unfavorable opinion on her experience with Becky (Excerpt 2).

Right after the end of that Teletandem session, in the mediation session Alice referred to the event of candidate Donald Trump's victory and explained that this left Becky in a state of sadness. She qualified the fact that she had asked her partner about how she was feeling as an inappropriate attitude because she already knew that Becky had an adverse view of this candidate. She noted the following: "I was even like a little ah... impressed and frightened because she had never let the emotions show enough... so it surprised me".⁴⁰ She also stressed that Becky was "more open" and that the "things were on the way" between them. It may be said that with Becky's "display of feeling" in Excerpt 4 Alice came to realize that her partner was "different" from her other partners of the American university who, as she had referred to in the Facebook private message (Excerpt 2), consider themselves to be "superior", which shows that her perception regarding Becky was changing.

Excerpt 5 below was taken from Alice's sixth experience report, which was written two days after that Teletandem session (Excerpt 4). This excerpt also describes this participant's opinion about her latest online interaction (Excerpt 4) with Becky:

-
- ³⁹ "1. A: How are you after what happened yesterday? ((she giggled)) the victory.
 2. B: Awful (incompreensível)... ah... ((she started to cry, lowered her head and put her hands over her eyes)) (incompreensível)
 3. A: It's very it's very complicated, isn't it? I imagine.
 4. B: Yeah.
 5. A: But better days days will come, like... everybody is here without understanding... and without... without understanding how this could have happened... I can't believe it... and you know what makes me more... indignant is that many *latinos* voted for Trump I am... I can't believe it. ((she giggled))
 6. B: No... ah... ((she was still crying)) I can't I don't know ah... understand and... yeah.

⁴⁰ Original in Portuguese: "eu fiquei até assim um pouco ah... impressionada e assustada porque ela nunca demonstrou muito as emoções... então para mim foi uma surpresa."

A interação de hoje foi bastante atípica, a minha interagente estava profundamente emocionada devido ao resultado das eleições norte americanas, ela parecia bastante abalada, então o assunto girou basicamente em torno disso, e devido ao fato de estarmos vivendo algo bastante semelhante no Brasil nos sentimos unidas pela dor de alguma forma, ela me fez perguntas a respeito da nossa situação e eu relatei as minhas impressões. (*Excerpt 5 / Alice's experience report / 11-11-2016 / original in Portuguese*⁴¹)

It can be seen from this excerpt that Becky having expressed her sadness in the Teletandem session (Excerpt 4) had an impact on Alice, and she even stated that they “felt united” because in Alice’s country some important political events were also under way.

Linking back to Van Lier (2004), an ecological perspective can be approached in a deep way, meaning that the causes underlying the emergence of problems can be understood in a critical and deeper manner. In line with the deep way, hence, I set out to understand from a more ecological perspective (VAN LIER, 2004; KRAMSCH; STEFFENSEN, 2008) what was causing this intercultural misunderstanding. Thus, a few days before Alice wrote her experience report (Excerpt 5), I had started to conduct the interviews, which allowed for an appropriate occasion to discuss with this participant her negatives opinions concerning her partnership with Becky.

During these moments of exchange and dialogue with Alice in the interviews, I began to include my personal impressions. More importantly, my objective was that this participant, through the discussion of the cultural boundaries between “her self” and “the other’s self” (Becky’s) (CROZET; LIDDICOAT, 1999), could at least mitigate her negative feelings.

In the light of Alice’s explanations in the interviews and her experience reports until that point, I came to realize that this intercultural misunderstanding could be associated with these two participants’ lesser ability to communicate in the language that both of them were learning, which Souza (2016, p. 123) names, as said earlier, “level of proficiency”. For Kern (2014, p. 344), language ability “can affect learners’ negotiation of meaning and cultural understanding”. Indeed, Alice claimed in one of her experience reports that she was struggling to understand Becky’s explanations in English and that she could not express herself well in this language, which explains why one of my suggestions to Alice in one interview but also in one mediation session was that she asked Becky to speak more slowly in English. In the same vein, Becky’s lesser ability to communicate in Portuguese could be an underlying cause of Alice’s pessimistic view,

⁴¹ Today’s interaction was quite atypical, my interactant was deeply moved by the outcome of the North American elections, she seemed touched enough, so the subject basically revolved around it, and due to the fact that we are experiencing something quite similar in Brazil we felt united by the pain in some way, she asked me questions about our situation and I reported my impressions.

which might have contributed to this participant's perception that Becky was neither motivated to strike up a conversation nor very receptive to the topics Alice proposed to talk about.

Over the weeks, it appeared that Alice was developing a more optimistic opinion, and the participant herself acknowledged this in the second-to-last mediation session when she observed that "I can see that my interaction with Becky gets better every week like we are bonding".⁴² In fact, Belz (2007, p. 156) explains that one of the indicators that point to the construction of interculturality is the "decrease in the use of negative judgment over the course of a partnership". A week later in the last mediation session, Alice talked once again about her interaction with Becky. The next excerpt, taken from the eighth mediation session, shows her considerations:

1. A: Embora tenha... demorado um pouco mais para as coisas acontecerem acho que ela é um pouco mais introvertida um pouco mais tímida... é... eu percebo que isso foi satisfatório também assim então é... foi uma coisa construída assim eu vejo muita vantagem nesse aspecto.

2. R: Aham.

[...]

3. A: A gente tem muita coisa em comum e isso nos aproxima sem dúvida alguma... e...

[...]

4. A: Enfim é só... só tem que falar coisas elogiosas porque é foi tudo muito bacana assim... e acho que vou ter uma amiga assim por muito tempo então é muito bacana?

5. R: Então mudou a sua perspectiva em relação a ela?

6. A: Total.

7. R: Né? em questão da afinidade... mudou?

8. A: Sim sim... é eu vejo que ela é ainda muito TÍMIDA é... então eu tenho que ser mais ah... expansiva eu geralmente falo muito mais do que ela... e eu vou tentando trazer ela pro assunto assim alguma coisa que possa ser relevante pras nós duas né? não só pra mim.

[...]

9. A: Então foi uma experiência muito... enriquecedora... e eu acho que cresci muito assim... uma experiência de crescimento pessoal... enorme... muito bacana. (*Excerpt 6 / mediation session / 07-12-2016 / original in Portuguese*⁴³)

⁴² Original in Portuguese: "eu percebo que a interação com a Becky a cada semana fica melhor assim a gente cria mais afinidade."

⁴³ "1. A: Although... it took a little longer for things to happen I think she's a little more introvert a little shier... like... I realize that this was satisfactory too like so ah... it was something constructed, so I see a lot of advantage in this aspect.

2. R: Uh-huh.

[...]

3. A: We have many things in common and this brings us closer undoubtedly... and...

[...]

4. A: Anyway like only... I've got only complimentary things to say because it was everything very nice like... and I think I'm going to have a friend like for a long time so it's very cool.

5. R: So was your perspective on her changed?

6. A: Totally.

As can be observed, in turn (9) Alice underscored that the experience with Becky was enriching and provided significant personal growth. This is in line with Phipps and Gonzales (2004, p. 3), in the sense that *linguaging*, through dialogue with “the other”, can enable language learners to “understand the complexity of the experience of others to enrich their own”.

As already explained, intercultural misunderstandings “should be exploited” by the teacher (O’DOWD, 2012, p. 352). Seen from this angle, due in part because I regarded Alice’s negative views on her partner as an opportunity to overcome the intercultural misunderstanding in question, it may be argued that the construction of interculturality was taking place in Excerpt 6. This is because, through a decentering attitude, in keeping with Bredella’s (2002) and Kramersch’s (2005) conception of interculturality presented earlier, Alice proved to be able to overcome her pessimistic vision of her partner, since she evaluated her own attitudes, put herself in Becky’s shoes and became aware of what aspects could be negatively influencing their interaction. Furthermore, she recognized in turn (8) an aspect that could benefit that partnership, that is to say, the need to deal with topics with which they identified themselves. Her attitudes also meet Belz (2007, p. 155), for whom interculturality involves “modifying or re-evaluating one’s evaluations of other societies, cultures and individuals as well as re-analysing one’s evaluations of the self”. In short, it is possible to say that “empathy” is a common feature regarding Belz’s (2007), Bredella’s (2002) and Kramersch’s (2005) approach to interculturality, that is, the ability to put oneself in someone else’s position. Actually, Alice showed that she had such an ability in relation to her online partner.

As was mentioned, discussing the boundaries between the “self” and “the other” can open pathways for the construction of interculturality (CROZET; LIDDICOAT, 1999). It may thus be said that it was precisely the dialogue with the “other”, that is, with Alice’s teacher-mediator in the mediation sessions, interviews and also through Facebook private messages, that favored a possible “transformational engagement” of Alice (LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013, p. 42). This is in harmony with Helm (2016, p. 152), for whom misunderstandings should be seen as part of intercultural encounters as well as “transformative agents”.

O’Dowd (2012, p. 350) explains that heated debates focus on the issue of whether intercultural misunderstandings “should be seen as something problematic or as

7. R: Right? regarding affinity... was there any change?

8. A: Yes yes... like I see that she is still very SHY like... so I have to be more ah... expansive I usually talk much more than her... and I try to get her involved in the subject like something that may be relevant to both of us right? not only to me.

[...]

9. A: So it was a very... enriching experience... and I think I grew up a lot like... an experience of personal growth... enormous... very nice.”

opportunities for learning”. Indeed, the emergence of the intercultural misunderstanding helped in the process of the construction of interculturality in my study. Alice’s discomfort occurred unexpectedly in the Teletandem session (Excerpt 1) and this participant expressed feelings of insecurity in the Facebook private message (Excerpt 2). It could therefore be argued that it was through these feelings of “confusion” as well as through moments of dialogue in the Facebook private messages, mediation sessions and in the interviews that Alice had the chance to compare and reflect about “the self and the other”, which appeared to have helped this participant overcome her negative feelings. This finds resonance in Helm (2016). For her, the explorations of cultural differences through dialogue “contribute to awareness of self” (p. 153).

FINAL REMARKS

As was said earlier, in order to attain the objective of this study, that is, to discuss the way in which the overcoming of an intercultural misunderstanding occurred in a Teletandem partnership between an English learner and a Portuguese learner, I outlined the following research question: how did the overcoming of an intercultural misunderstanding occur in a Teletandem partnership?

To sum up very briefly, in response to the research question stated above, data analysis showed that initially, in the Teletandem session (Excerpt 1), there was a case of communication breakdown due mainly to restricted language abilities (KERN, 2014; SOUZA, 2016), which could have been one of the reasons why Alice would send me a Facebook private message (Excerpt 2) the day after that Teletandem session showing dissatisfaction with her partner. A few days later, in the Teletandem session (Excerpt 4), Alice would be surprised because Becky was touched by Donald Trump’s victory in the presidential elections in the United States. In effect, in the weeks that followed I would realize that this Teletandem session (Excerpt 4) had represented the beginning of a significant change with regard to Alice’s negative perception of Becky. A few weeks later in the mediation session (Excerpt 6), there were concrete signs that Alice had overcome her pessimistic view. Actually, this was due to Alice’s ability to see herself “through the eyes” (KRAMSCH, 2005, p. 553) of Becky. It could be suggested that the conversations that Alice had had with her teacher-mediator in the interviews and in the Facebook private messages also had a part in the overcoming of Alice’s negative view.

In essence, three reasons could help explain why Alice overcame her pessimistic perception of her online partner. Firstly, her surprise because Becky was deeply moved by Donald Trump’s victory in the presidential elections (Excerpt 4). Secondly, Alice’s self-reflection (BELZ, 2007) on this partnership (Excerpt 6). Thirdly, my role as a teacher-mediator in the mediation sessions, interviews and Facebook private message. As stated by Lopes and Freschi (2016), the teacher-mediation in Teletandem is of key importance

to promote further reflection, whereas Kramersch (2011) asserts that teacher-mediators should highlight “complexity and ambiguity” (p. 364) as well as what is underlying the participants’ viewpoints, that is, “what remains unsaid” (p. 364).

It should be pointed out that although the interviews have been rather useful for me as a research instrument, they proved to be moments for individual dialogue with Alice. Indeed, interview could be understood here more as “individual conversations” than as a methodological instrument, as arranging an individual conversation with the interactant / participant is a possible pedagogical intervention that teachers can resort to in situations of intercultural misunderstanding as in this study. Furthermore, interviews could be related to mediation sessions, since the latter can take place between the teacher-mediator and one participant (ANDREU-FUNO, 2015), and not only in group. From this perspective, I considered the interviews as a sort of mediation session.

Rocha and Lima (2009, p. 240) emphasized earlier that the role of the teacher-mediator in Teletandem is to “trim the edges and prevent disinterest, misunderstandings and cultural clashes from happening between the interactants”.⁴⁴ I do agree with the authors that the teacher-mediator should “trim the edges” and avoid disinterest, but I wonder to which extent it would be necessary to explicitly warn participants about the importance to avoid conflicts. In fact, data analysis showed that through the intercultural misunderstanding it was possible to help Alice overcome her negative view towards her partnership with Becky. My suggestion is that in mediation sessions teacher-mediators always underline the need to respect the individuality of each person as well as cultural differences in general, but it must also be taken into account that intercultural misunderstandings can be viewed as an opportunity for a possible “transformational engagement” (LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013, p. 42) of the participants, as it was the case with Alice. I contend that teacher-mediators should regard intercultural misunderstandings as a challenge *in lieu of* sidestepping them. By the same token, Belz (2002, p. 76) argues that intercultural conflicts “should be encouraged”, while for Helm (2016) they should be recognized as part of the intercultural dialogue.

In my study, I collected the data over a university semester, making it difficult to know the extent to which the learning opportunities that Alice accomplished were applicable in other situations. For instance, it was not possible to determine whether she began to have a more favorable perception about other American partners with whom she might have interacted in subsequent semesters. What I really want to stress here is that longitudinal research in TTB and other telecollaborative projects could investigate intercultural misunderstandings over a longer period, for instance, two semesters. O’Dowd (2016) also reinforces this need. For the author, research studies in telecollaboration

⁴⁴ Original quote: “aparar as arestas e evitar que ocorra desinteresse, mal-entendidos e choques culturais entre os interagentes”.

“have not attempted to evaluate the impact of virtual contact and exchange on learners over a period any longer than one university semester” (p. 284).

The application of different research techniques, mainly the experience reports and the interviews, helped me in understanding more deeply my data. Additionally, the use of different methodological procedures (*e.g.* the Teletandem sessions and the mediation sessions) allowed me to “read between the lines” of the participants’ utterances as well as to interpret different points of view. In light of this, I suggest that future research should also include methodological resources such as the ones I used, but also others where necessary, to concentrate attention on other possible instances of intercultural misunderstanding.

Although this research focused on a specific telecollaborative project, TTB, I suggest that the opportunity to investigate how pedagogical mediation can contribute to the overcoming of eventual intercultural misunderstandings is also possible in other projects.

To conclude, on the basis of the data outcomes of this study, one can see that there is a demonstrable need for the teacher-mediator to be willing to deal with intercultural issues not only in TTB but also in other telecollaborative contexts. In the same vein, she/he should be committed to favoring a more in-depth reflection in the event of possible intercultural misunderstandings.

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