

# The Rio–Warsaw Connection: Encouraging Interculturalism among Students

**I**t all began in Norwich. As they do every year, teachers from different parts of the world went in July 2012 to that beautiful little city in the east of England to take part in one of the two-week professional development courses offered by the Norwich Institute for Language Education (NILE). Sponsored by Rio de Janeiro’s Instituto Brasil-Estados Unidos (IBEU), I had chosen Advanced Language and Intercultural Awareness.

On the second day of the course, I—the only Brazilian participant—went with Karolina Isio-Kurpińska—the only Polish one—to a supermarket just outside the campus of the University of East Anglia, where our classes took place. We had a long talk about our respective countries and how similar and different our experiences were. During the rest of the course, we became good friends and even did our final project together. What we had gotten from that exchange would come to matter a lot very soon.

After returning from the trip, I read *Intercultural Language Activities* (Corbett 2010), one of the titles recommended by Uwe Pohl, our main teacher at NILE. The first chapter is about setting up an online community where students from different places interact and make discoveries about each other’s culture while practicing their English. The idea sounded fascinating; as we know, social networking programs are an effective way to get students communicating with each other (Harmer 2012), and foreign language classrooms create new cultural contexts every

school term (Kramersch 1993). If I were to give it a try, I thought, it would be only logical to work once again with Karolina, who agreed the project could be interesting. We looked forward to finding out what contexts would be created in a virtual environment, where participants were to feel free to contribute their own ways of looking at themselves and each other.

This article describes the ensuing ten-week project we developed for students from the two countries, and it offers an evaluation of the results along with suggestions to make online intercultural projects a productive way to improve the teaching and learning of English.

## GETTING READY

Karolina and I have come to understand culture as more than a body of knowledge about works of art, places, institutions, events, symbols, and ways of living—it is also “a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meanings with

each other” (Scarino and Liddicoat 2009, 19). That is why, as essential as reading is, no amount of it can replace actual experience and contact with what seems foreign and distant. Our main goal was to give the teenagers participating in the project something they cannot get from watching television and movies and at the same time enable them to see that learning English can be a real gateway to discovery. Most importantly, we wanted to make sure the cultural information participants shared with each other would be received “in a nonjudgmental fashion, in a way that does not place value or judgment on distinctions” between the cultures of the participants (Peterson and Coltrane 2003, 2).

By the end of 2012 we had made a few decisions:

- We would offer a ten-week project to a limited number of students at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) intermediate level B1 (Council of Europe 2001).
- The project would take place on an exclusive Facebook group, the social network used by most students.
- Participating students would have a new task every week to share what they knew and felt about different aspects of their realities. Our view, based on Freire (1996), was that each task should stimulate students’ curiosity and allow them to independently explore the possibilities of dialogue.
- Once we posted the tasks, the students would be the only ones to write.

We then formulated a ten-week plan; teachers of both countries added ideas (in Warsaw, as Karolina was now involved in other academic activities, two of her colleagues, Krystyna

Rubiec-Masalska and Agata Guzowska, were directly responsible for the participating students). On Sundays, after a brief exchange on Facebook, either Karolina or I would post the task(s) for the coming week on the group page. We would always be in complete agreement about the content and wording.

I created the Facebook group, and we selected the students who would participate. Although we limited the actual groups from each country to ten students, all who wished to be involved could participate; we assigned students who were not selected to work with the ones who were, even though only the latter would be posting on the group page.

I told all students who were interested that they had 24 hours to friend me on Facebook and send a private message indicating why they wanted to be in the project. In the following class, from among those who had sent me the message in time, I randomly drew the names of ten students. We also went over the main principles for students to observe, including modesty, politeness, sincerity, interest in the other party’s answers, and, above all, interaction.

### **THE TEN-WEEK RIO–WARSAW CONNECTION**

The “first edition” of what we called The Rio–Warsaw Connection included students from Rio’s IBEU and Warsaw’s General High School 34–Miguel de Cervantes. Following is a description of the ten-week project in intercultural exchange.

#### **Week One**

Students were tasked to introduce themselves, talk about any cultural assumptions they had about the project, and suggest guidelines for the group to follow. At the end of the week, we summarized the following four netiquette rules:

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1. All participants should post at least one comment a week in each thread, but we encourage you to post more!
2. You are all students of English, and this project is about fluency and communication, not language accuracy. Mistakes that do not influence meaning should not, therefore, be corrected. If you have doubts about what the other person means, ask him or her to clarify!
3. The use of emoticons is allowed and encouraged, and we also suggest you post photos!
4. We are here to learn about each other's cultures, so the most important netiquette point is mutual respect!

On Friday, at the end of the week, we posted a pre-task: without doing any kind of research, students were instructed to tell what they knew about their counterparts' cities.

#### **Week Two**

Week Two was a chance for students to talk about their cities—what they liked and disliked, and what they would recommend to visitors. As expected, all Brazilians could say about Poland is that “it’s cold,” and Polish students could think only of beaches, sunny weather, and the “giant Christ statue.” When students had the chance to share something about their cities, the teachers were pleasantly surprised by their enthusiasm. They posted pictures of places they liked, commented on each other’s posts, and spontaneously discussed food. One of the best moments in the whole ten weeks happened right then, when a Brazilian student talked about (and posted pictures of) *brigadeiro*, a popular local sweet, and one of the Polish girls went and made some. The moment we saw the photo she had proudly taken of the first truly Polish *brigadeiro* was definitely a highlight.

At this point, one of my students asked us if they could add each other as friends on Facebook. We told her that that was a great

idea. Soon, almost all of them had friended one another.

#### **Week Three**

We had every reason to enter Week Three optimistically, and that taught us a lesson. The topic was national culture. We asked students to talk about how their countries are viewed by themselves and foreigners and any stereotypes they were aware of; we also asked them to describe some typical dishes, as well as any gestures and body language, that might be specific to their country. After the excitement of the first two weeks, this time few students posted. Karolina sent a message encouraging them to post, which resulted in more contributions towards the end of the week.

This first bump in the road led us to conclude that the lull had most likely been due to some fading of the initial excitement and that our direct intervention might be necessary at certain times to encourage students to participate. All tasks should be presented as exciting opportunities to share—and learn—something that matters to them. That is, of course, provided we had designed the tasks well enough.

#### **Week Four**

We were more cautious with our expectations, but things got back on track. Once again, there were two tasks. The first was for participants to share the TV shows, movies, books, and music they like, a topic they enjoyed talking about. The second task was for them to post pictures of what they see from their windows and also pictures of their desks at home. The pictures aroused everybody’s curiosity and brought everyone closer together.

#### **Week Five**

Week Five was our second low point. When asked to share which news sources they usually turn to, and what the major headlines were at that moment, students found little to say. After some encouragement, a few stories were posted, but it became clear to us that, for our teenagers, knowing what was going on in the world was not a top priority.

### **Week Six**

In Week Six, we took a gamble. The previous Friday, again as a pre-task, we asked students to watch the 1994 U.S. movie *Forrest Gump* and list the various cultural and historical references they found. Then, as the week started, we asked them to imagine what Mr. Gump's journey would have been like had he lived in the students' respective countries. It turned out that (1) that movie was too old for most of our students to even know what it was about, and (2) they were not willing to do much research, even if that meant watching a film that was easy to find. I eventually got a few of my students to post something meaningful, but there was no denying it had been the worst week yet.

### **Week Seven**

We went for something completely different. The first of two tasks was for students to find and post pictures of examples of "English around them" in signs, shops, and street art, and a few of them did. The second task was for them to list English words frequently used by people in their countries, even if those people were not English speakers, indicating whether the words were cognates or false cognates and whether specific groups used them. There were enough contributions for the week to be considered satisfactory. Among the examples listed by both groups were words related to computers and the Internet, along with names of foods (e.g., *hot dog* and *cheeseburger*) and the expression "Whatever," which I presume students are using to mimic young Americans they see on TV.

### **Week Eight**

In Week Eight, students talked about national TV shows and movies they liked. They were to post pictures and links to videos and discuss which ones they thought people from other countries would enjoy and which ones were highly culture-specific. This was another good week, with less interaction than we would have liked but with interesting examples; for instance, the Brazilians named a few comedy films and light afternoon TV shows, while the Polish students mostly mentioned dramatic, historical movies. The female students did

seem to agree on their favorite male actors, though, with George Clooney and Daniel Craig being mentioned most often.

### **Week Nine**

At the beginning of the week, I posted a short message congratulating the Polish on their National Independence Day. When my students were encouraged to follow suit, a spontaneous conversation began, and participants from both countries posted pictures and discussed how they felt about that kind of celebration.

Also in Week Nine, students discussed how much of the movie, television, and music content they were exposed to was from English-speaking countries and the heavy influence of that entertainment on their countries. Here there was some interesting sharing.

### **Week Ten**

We asked students to talk about what lay ahead. What were their plans and expectations? How important did they think English would be in their future lives? Students produced a few long responses, and again we were happy with the result.

Finally, Karolina and I posted our reflections about the project, saying how happy we were with everything students had shared and how they had shared it. We also said the group would remain active on Facebook, so they would always be able to find each other there. At that point, all the Brazilian students who had participated got a certificate signed by the Polish teachers, and vice versa. We also sent each other's students little souvenirs from our countries.

## **THE SECOND AND THIRD EDITIONS OF THE PROJECT**

After the ten-week project, Karolina and I shared our experience on the Facebook group I had created for NILE. Two of our former NILE classmates, along with some of their students, joined in to create a second edition of the project, which was now called The Motril [Spain]–Rio–Warsaw Connection.

We updated the plan based on what we had learned from the first experience. Now, instead of discussing the news, our students were asked to talk about their respective schools—what they liked, disliked, and would change if they could. We kept the *Forrest Gump* activity, but now with some real preparation time in the classroom. We watched the trailer and a couple of scenes from the movie and had a discussion about them in preparation for the task. With the support of our respective schools, The Motril–Rio–Warsaw Connection thrived.

Nevertheless, at the end of the tenth week, as I reflected on everything we had done, I realized that the participation of students had been irregular and their interaction less impressive than in the original group. Because of the difficulties in coordinating tasks among three groups and communicating among a larger number of teachers, we decided to go back to the Rio–Warsaw format. Krystyna, IBEU teacher Sandra Saito, and I made the third edition of the project similar to the first one, with some improvements based on our accumulated experience. For instance, we would no longer have more than one task per week. Also, now that we had tried “horizontal expansion” by including more students at the same level, it was time to try “vertical expansion” by including students of different levels.

We created a second group, also with Brazilian and Polish participants at both the CEFR intermediate B1 and advanced C1 levels (Council of Europe 2001). This time, we dealt with more challenging tasks, most of which were designed by Krystyna, who had been with us since the beginning. These tasks included (1) having students share their favorite songs in their native languages (sharing English versions of the lyrics with the group); (2) creating a chain story (in

which participants took turns adding five to ten sentences to the same story they told collectively); and (3) posting personal messages to each other (we paired them up alphabetically). The undisputed highlight was when three of my students spontaneously made and posted a video on how to make *brigadeiro*. (One might think that sweet is an obsession of ours . . . .) Meanwhile, the intermediate students interacted a lot more than the ones in either of the first two editions. Their posts during the *Forrest Gump* task were particularly creative.

In the end, all three projects have enabled our students to learn things they otherwise would not have and to practice their English in a way they did not expect. We have been opening doors that lead to understanding and, as a consequence, increased tolerance.

After the third edition came to a close, I began to imagine a fourth Rio–Warsaw Connection. Some of the tasks may be rethought a bit, but the main improvement we will make is to follow our students even more closely and ensure they remain motivated and able to balance their everyday responsibilities with their participation in the project.

### HOW YOU CAN DO IT

Just as I have tried to adapt this project for students of different levels, I believe that fellow teachers from around the world can do something similar with their students, even if technological resources are limited.

What we are doing is all about interculturalism, so the starting point is to get in touch with people from another country—or even another city in the same country, as we know there is typically wide cultural variety within a single nation (that is certainly true of Brazil). Facebook itself is a place to find teachers from around the globe, as are some helpful websites from Corbett (2010):

- ePals ([www.epals.com](http://www.epals.com))
- Tandem City ([www.tandemcity.info](http://www.tandemcity.info))

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- eLanguages ([www.elanguages.org](http://www.elanguages.org))
- The British Council ([schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org](http://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org))

As mentioned before, some students who are not selected work with ones who are. This creates opportunities for pairs and trios; even if a few are entering the posts, all can be involved. That has worked well. When talking about themselves, some students would often actively include their partners. For example, one student wrote about her favorite band, while another classmate, who had not been selected, stated her preference for a different band. Teachers may select participants any way they want, provided all see the process as fair. And it is essential that no one feels left out.

Some teachers may be working with students who simply do not have Internet access. It might still be possible to collect the group's contributions in class, type them at the school or at some other facility, and later bring printed images of the screen to share and discuss with all participants.

At IBEU In-Service sessions, my colleagues and I discussed the notion of adapting the project for lower-level students, which would entail developing a set of simpler tasks and closer teacher supervision. It may even be necessary for the teacher to review each post before it is published. That is not ideal, but it might be advisable in some cases. Another idea is to conduct the project in a shorter time frame, perhaps five or six weeks, if the availability of teachers and students—and their time—is limited.

As far as the lesson plan itself is concerned, teachers may choose to talk about any topic they think students will be interested in. Here are a few examples:

- Bullying is a serious problem in a lot of places. Is it a problem in your school? How do people deal with it? Let's compare the approach to this issue in the two countries.
- Let's talk about your favorite outfits. What do you wear to school? Are uniforms required? Should they be? What about the times you go out with friends? Post a few pictures, and we'll see how similar teen fashion is in your countries.
- We are having a great time interacting online, but is that how you normally chat with your friends? This week, let's compare the different ways teenagers interact with classmates and relatives.
- In Week Seven, we talked about how English is all around us—in street signs and in the vocabulary we use. This week, let's see how much each of us is in contact with the language on a day-by-day basis. When do you get to practice your English? Chatting online? Playing videogames? What are the expressions you use the most?

Sustaining student motivation is often challenging. Actions that might help include:

- making sure that tasks for successive weeks are not too similar to each other
- having the class discuss the weekly task as group work
- praising students' contributions
- allowing students to propose the task for a given week. (That is something I plan to try in the next edition by organizing an in-class election of the best proposed task.)

There is always the possibility that students will stop posting for a while—or altogether. That is why it is a good idea to establish a few ground rules right at the participant selection stage. Is it acceptable for someone who has been selected to quit? Is there a penalty for that? Halfway through the third edition I had to replace a participant for the very first time—even after being warned and without presenting a reason, he stopped contributing. It is certainly wise to prepare for that possibility; in my case, a number of students had expressed interest in the project but had

not been selected, so finding a replacement was not difficult.

### EXPANDING STUDENT INTERACTIONS

One idea that has come up over and over again to enhance interaction is to use a program like Skype to get participants from different countries to see one another. The reasons I have not used it so far are the time-zone difference and Internet connection limitations. I do think it would be exciting to have students send video messages to each other at some point. One option would be to have students record their own videos, and then their respective teachers could put them all together.

Teachers who find this intercultural project interesting might want to investigate different, deeper ways to explore the proposed topics. It is my experience that the tasks assigned each week lead to lively classroom discussions, especially when we turn them into activities that lead all students to further examine their own culture and of that of their counterparts. Here are a few examples of such activities based on tasks in the ten-week project:

- When students are asked to think of English words used by people in their countries, they can begin by carrying out small-group conversations on the differences between the slang and the specific vocabulary that they and their peers normally use and those that are characteristic of other groups. In Brazil, for example, students are very much aware of vocabulary currently used by Internet surfers, such as the word *brother* and variations of it to mean “friend.” How do those differences come about? Do they serve a purpose? This is an opportunity for students to reflect on why they speak the way they do. In the same task, talking about cognates and false cognates is the starting point of an activity that could go on for several classes, in which students investigate the origins of words and their relationship to history and geography.

- The task in which participants reflect on how much they know about each other’s country and on what stereotypes are commonly associated with their own country could lead to a role-playing exercise. For example, a student from Rio plays the part of a tourist from Warsaw, in the city for the first time, meeting Brazilians from various regions and walks of life. What would this tourist expect to encounter? How would the people the tourist meets behave? What aspects of local culture might be especially difficult for him or her to understand? This activity could be a lot of fun as well as an invitation for students to think critically about their own homes.
- When students learn about their counterparts’ schools, they could be asked to write an essay on what it would be like for them to suddenly find themselves as newcomers there. If students have time to do additional research, they could make a presentation to the class about what life is like for a student in the other country, focusing on what they perceive as being easier or harder than what they are used to. Students could also try to imagine what, for them, a perfect school would be like. Then the class is divided into teams, and each one does the exercise from a different perspective—that of teachers, hall monitors, cleaning staff, and so on.

These ideas are potential follow-ups to activities in the project. As the goal is to enable students to expand their horizons as much as possible, it is a good idea to help them revisit and rethink assumptions under which they might not even know they operate every day.

### CONCLUSION

Not so long ago, we had pen pals and used actual pens and paper. We would sometimes find each other through ads in magazines and initiate a kind of correspondence in which it could take weeks to get a reply to each message. Now that technology has made instant, inexpensive communication between

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people on opposite sides of the earth a reality, many of us are still looking only for those who are much like ourselves. Such massive underuse of the potential that is in our students' hands presents teachers of English with a golden opportunity to broaden their students' horizons.

We have departed from the notion of teaching culture by simply transmitting information. We are exploring interculturality, which includes a reflection on both cultures, as both are "target cultures" at the same time, in a truly interpersonal process (Kramersch 1993). We are looking at people with whom we could not imagine what we have in common, and we are learning to identify and take apart stereotypes.

"Learning to be intercultural involves much more than just knowing about another culture: it involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others" (Scarino and Liddicoat 2009, 21). What we are accomplishing with our connection is just a first step, but it might be a rather meaningful one.

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**Hugo Dart** is a teacher at IBEU (Instituto Brasil-Estados Unidos) in Rio de Janeiro. He holds bachelor's degrees in Law and in Portuguese-English and is a postgraduate student in English Language.