Connecting Global Minds:

Online Telecollaborative Learning for Global Citizenship Education

Case History

Tushar Chaudhuri	Hong Kong Baptist University	tusharc@hkbu.edu.hk
Renia Lopez-Ozieblo	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	renia.lopez@polyu.edu.hk
Valérie Martinez	The University of Hong Kong	martinez@hku.hk
Ivelina Ivanova	Hong Kong Baptist University	ivelina@hkbu.edu.hk

Abstract

ILLSA is a publicly funded multilingual e-Learning project in Hong Kong which utilises the online platforms edX, FutureLearn, Google Drive and Wix to establish online cross-cultural teamwork among foreign language learners of higher education institutions in Hong Kong and Europe. Participants compare "healthy city" practices across the globe in the language they are learning - French, German, Italian or Spanish, while working in small cross-cultural groups online to evaluate their cities and communities, to perform research tasks and to organize a collaborative community project. A specially designed language course for each language on FutureLearn enables them to practice their language skills individually. Current sustainability issues, physical and mental health, cultural-, gender-, ethnicity-, and age-based diversity, and environmental aspects, are among some of the selected research areas. Occasional cooperation challenges among the participants due to differences in time zones, academic schedules and individual working patterns, are resolved with the support of the ILLSA team and collaborators.

Rolled out in 2018 and organised by three leading Universities in Hong Kong, ILLSA already involves 17 universities worldwide with nearly 300 participating students representing 40 nationalities. The project was widely reported in local newspapers as a unique good practice for foreign language learning. Project objectives include, among others: encouraging students to collaborate with each other on community actions and evaluate their own communities in the target languages, broadening participants' global vision by exposing them to sustainability practices in Hong Kong and Europe, along with enhancing their communicative skills in the respective languages. The learning outcomes are being evaluated by quantitative and qualitative analyses in the areas of language enhancement, intercultural competence enhancement and overall perception and impact. ILLSA practices could continue beyond its completion date, by being incorporated into the curriculum of language courses at higher education institutions across the globe.

1.   Introduction

"The ILLSA Project: A Telecollaborative Project on Integrated Language Learning and Social Awareness" (ILLSA) is a collaboration of Hong Kong Baptist University, The University of Hong Kong, and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong SAR. The project had a duration of three years and was extended by a further 6 months and is funded by the Funding Scheme for Teaching and Learning Related Proposals in the 2016-19 Triennium of the University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong SAR.

ILLSA fosters multicultural group collaboration among foreign language learners of French, German, Italian or Spanish studying at universities in Hong Kong and Europe. Learners partake in an online learning environment focused on defining and evaluating "healthy city" concepts in the areas of transport, quality of life, nutrition and fitness, and diversity.

At its core, ILLSA promotes curiosity towards sustainability and a healthy lifestyle (both physically and mentally), urges critical thinking, research and self-reflection with regards to environmental impact, and advocates for the creation of long-lasting sustainable actions and initiatives. Simultaneously, it engages its participants in synchronous and asynchronous dialogue, enabling internationalisation and providing topic-centric language practice. ILLSA is as diverse as its project languages, topics and participants, and has the following main objectives:

1) to enhance students' language learning experience by encouraging them to interact in the target language with international students learning the same language under different conditions. By including only participants with a similar level of knowledge in a group, the project aims to use the difficulties experienced by foreign language learners as a means of easing them into communicating with each other in that language and promoting further language practice.

2) to set up an online platform for students enrolled in language courses in Hong Kong UGC-funded institutions and students enrolled in similar courses at universities in Europe, in order to connect, collaborate and construct knowledge using the target language following the underlying pedagogical principle of Content & Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Dalton-Puffer 2011).

3) to enhance the existing language courses by offering students new on-campus opportunities for interaction with international students which is normally restricted to those students who participate in international student exchange programmes or win scholarships for attending summer language schools in the target countries - thus achieving "internationalisation at home".

4) **to instil confidence in Hong Kong students to think and act globally** and subsequently encourage them to participate in international exchange programmes offered by their universities, while in turn attracting European students to participate in said programmes with Hong Kong universities, thus creating additional intra-institutional and cross-cultural exchange opportunities.

It is important to note that the ILLSA project is not a formal curriculum feature with the usual assessments and before/ after tests. This has enabled participants to engage in fruitful conversations in a protected atmosphere free from the pressures of grades and credits.

2.   The infrastructure

The infrastructural set up of ILLSA is designed to support the principle of telecollaborative learning using Web 2.0 tools. Guth & Helm (2010: 20) argue that, "in particular Web 2.0 is not merely a tool for mediation but a significant social phenomenon which has generated a multiplicity of new contexts in which people interact (…)". They argue further that,

> the open, collaborative and relational mindset of Web 2.0 and the multimodal, social, Internet-based 2.0 environments and tools place the emphasis on collaboration and participation in Telecollaboration 2.0. As well as increasing the different modes in which learners can communicate, exchange, compare and contrast information, 2.0 tools facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge in the form of what can be seen as new cultural practices or artifacts such as blogs, wikis and virtual worlds, to name just a few. (ibid.: 22).

Since its 2018 launch with 63 students, ILLSA has held 4 cycles, with nearly 300 participants representing 40 different nationalities. ILLSA has involved 17 universities worldwide (in France, Germany, Hong Kong SAR, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Taiwan, the United Kingdom) and continues to build new relationships with students and academics across the globe. Following its success, ILLSA has been extended and will hold one more project cycle, in the autumn of 2020.

ILLSA's team includes staff members from the 3 organising universities, as well as student assistants on an ad-hoc basis, who connect students in Hong Kong and Europe, offer support and guidance through the project cycle and help to solve challenges. Local coordinators at each participating university include language teachers or academic staff members, with various degrees of involvement: from contact person, to supervisor, to teachers seeking to implement ILLSA in their curriculum. Communication between the ILLSA team, the participants and their teachers/coordinators takes place primarily via email, in person and via WhatsApp, the latter being also the most commonly used tool for private day-to-day interaction among group members.

Exercises on ILLSA combine collaborative research, individual and collaborative language practice (portfolio), and online teaching and learning over the course of 8 weeks (FutureLearn) during each semester. The research aspect of ILLSA is presented in group portfolios, accessible by each group and teachers/coordinators on Google Drive, and updated regularly by participants as they progress. The language exercises are hosted on a tailor-made language course on the FutureLearn platform. The project structure, as well as relevant information on the main and sub-topics, are easily accessible on its multilingual website, www.illsaproject.com. ILLSA further endorses sustainability and healthy living in each of the languages by sharing relevant news articles and infographics on its Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/theillsaproject/.

For the research element of ILLSA, students collaborate in multicultural groups of 5-6, consisting of two location-based teams (Team Hong Kong and Team Europe) with language knowledge of a similar level (A1-A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference – CEFR – for Spanish and Italian, and B1-B2 for French and German). Their work is presented in a portfolio following three project stages: introduction, research and group community project, and the tasks are:

- self-introduction and introduction to main topic, "healthy cities"; selecting the group's sub-topic for the duration of the project (transport/ quality of life/ nutrition and fitness/ diversity);
- research in a team of 2-3 students from the same city who evaluate it based on sub-topic tasks and compare their findings with the other team in their group, and
- planning and implementing a group community project simultaneously in two cities within the sub-topic to raise awareness for sustainability actions and/or issues among the local community.

The last two phases ask students to go beyond their online research to incorporate in-person city exploration, conduct interviews and take physical actions (e.g. organise an initiative, a small campaign, etc.) with the help and for the benefit of their community. At the end of the project, students can use their portfolios as a testament to their creative and collaborative work in ILLSA.

Screenshot 1. Research Task in Phase 2: Public transport in Giessen and Taipei (Cycle 3, Group 1, German)

Unterschiede und Ähnlichkeiten

	Unterschiede	Ähnlichkeiten
Verhältnis zwischen Gesundheit und Verkehr	Geht die Frage um die lange Zeit, in der man im Stau stehenbleibt, denken viele Leute in Taipeh an Krebs und Lungenkrankheit. Im Gegensatz dazu, denken die Leute in Gießen nicht daran.	In den beiden Städten glauben die Leute, es löst Kopfschmerzen und Rückenschmerzen aus, wenn man lange im Stau bleibt.
Schlechte Auswirkung von Verkehrsmittel	In Gießen steht Bus am zweiten Platz, aber in Taipeh steht Moped am zweiten Platz.	In den beiden Städten steht Auto beim ersten Platz, d.h. meisten Leute denken, dass Auto hat die negativste Auswirkung auf die Umwelt.
Was für eine negative Auswirkung	In Taipeh gibt es eine besondere Anzahl von den Leuten, die an sauren Regen denken, während die Leute in Gießen keine Idee dazu haben.	Meisten Leuten haben dasselbe Gedanke, dass Auto, Bus und Moped folgende Probleme auslösen: Luftverschmutzung, Global Erwärmung und Erwärmung der Stadt.

ILLSA's FutureLearn course is a MOOC which complements the portfolio activities by utilising vocabulary and specially created exercises with a focus on "healthy cities" and its sub-topics at an appropriate language level. Each of the 8 weeks of the course weeks focuses on a different aspect: self-introduction; vocabulary practice; reading, listening and writing comprehension; grammar practice, and a final test. Exercises – short tests and quizzes within the project topics – are based on current news articles and videos. Participation on FutureLearn is not compulsory but is strongly recommended, as it offers individual and more in-depth language practice.

Screenshot 2. What is a "healthy city"? A discussion on FutureLearn. (Cycle 2, French)

Je trouve qu'une ville pourrait être saine comme on a ces caractéristiques fondamentales: Les espaces vert, pas des gaspillage des ressources énergétiques et un plan urbain et urbanisme social. Mais pour cela on doit ajouter aussi l'education durable. Pour chaque personne différents aspects sont d'un intérêt parce que c'est un objectif trés complexe.

Pour moi, les fondamentales pour le bien-être en ville sont des espaces verts, und plan urbain et urbanisme social et un développment durable. Mais je pense aussi que une ville saine a besoin plus de trois aspects.

À mon avis, le développement durable, les qualités des produits alimentaires et le plan urbain et urbanisme social sont très important pour le bien-être en ville. Je pense que, Il est aussi très important d'avoir un bon système d'éducation.

3. The challenges

The most common challenges on ILLSA revolve around maintaining regular communication among group members. Vastly different academic schedules, combined with the already demanding university workload, work commitments interfering with project participation, and the time difference between Hong Kong and Europe have affected communication in a number of groups. In addition, the continued social unrest in Hong Kong in the autumn of 2019 led to further participation difficulties among the Hong Kong students. As a means of resolving those challenges, the project has offered extensions between the 2nd and 3rd phase, as well as a longer final phase.

Additional interactional challenges raised by students and/or teachers, include:

▪ Physical distance: Participants and teachers felt that the physical distance between participants (exacerbated by the difference in time-zones) had a negative effect on the engagement of various group members. Participants were therefore encouraged to have at least one live online session to meet each other and be able to put a face to the names of group members. Although in most cases this was only done once, it seems to have alleviated this problem.

▪ Level of required guidance: After the first cycle, it became clear that some participants required more guidance to complete the activities. Some felt that no-one was leading the

groups. Therefore, student assistants were engaged to provide a friendly helping hand to participants; due to the age factor, it was thought they would be a less invasive presence than one of the ILLSA coordinators.

The project team has also experienced challenges in the following organisational areas:

- <u>Mismatch in academic calendars:</u> The Hong Kong academic calendar starts much earlier than the European one, which means that Hong Kong students are in their final weeks of term when European students are just starting. One of the solutions has been to slow down the pace of Hong Kong students by encouraging them to work on FutureLearn in the first few weeks and/ or to encourage them to continue participating after the end of their semester.
- <u>Hybrid course vs. online course:</u> The mix of in-person and online activities in ILLSA seems to be more efficient when at least one teacher includes ILLSA as part of their class routine, following progress and giving feedback. However, that may not always be possible, as has been the case with most universities. Furthermore, ILLSA is designed as an online course aimed at developing self-study, self-awareness and autonomy as competences for students. As a solution, some teachers have tried to incorporate only selected elements or topics of ILLSA into their curriculum, while others have considered it as part of their individual student assessment for the semester.
- <u>Language course vs. content course:</u> Courses in France contain less teaching hours than courses in Hong Kong, making it difficult to incorporate ILLSA in the teaching curriculum of French universities. Individual solutions were negotiated. French learners in other European Universities (e.g. in Germany) did not face such challenges.

4.   How the initiative was received by the users or participants

A student survey demonstrates that most ILLSA participants are satisfied with the project and its structure, with their own performance, and with the language practice they have experienced. Their reviews about learning through ILLSA included, among others:

- *"An easy and entertaining way of learning."*
- *"It was a good project for me [to] learn the language by myself when I could not find any courses. Thus, I started reading more news and articles in the language."*
- *"The project contains a lot of reading materials in various aspects which are useful to deepen my knowledge of the culture as well as vocabulary for learning the language."*
- *"I found the project-oriented work much more engaging than an ordinary language course."*
- *I think the best part is the part in which there is "Learning by doing". Many good articles [could] be found only in the language and the research and reading improves reading skills as well as knowledge in the subject. It also improves the teambuilding skills and intercultural communication skills that are a necessity later when working in a company or team.*
- *"It is easy to use, and activities are very innovative and plenty recourses are given to learn about different topics."*

Several universities have participated in more than one ILLSA cycle, which further testifies to their satisfaction with the project. A survey conducted among teachers elicited responses, such as:

- *"I appreciated very much this opportunity of project-based learning. The theme of healthy cities was also well chosen: close to the students, it allowed interested and authentic communication during face-to-face sessions as well as motivation to work in groups for the project."*
- *"The issue is global. The sub-themes, directly related to everyone's daily experience, is a topic that occupies young people. The possibility of exchanging visions and experiences among the participants, with multimedia material, the communication that can be produced and processes of empathy and respect."*
- *"I particularly appreciate the authenticity of the communication that such a project allows."*
- *"Project-based learning gives the possibility to learners to act in the target-language and to use directly what they are learning. It is also another possibility for them to structure (on a more personal way) their learning."*

5.   The learning outcomes

The main objective of the ILLSA project is to enable students to interact with each other in the target language on a topic relevant to both sides. The corresponding learning outcomes for participants could be defined as:

- comparing, contrasting and enhancing their language skills by engaging in a collaborative language learning project with overseas partners;
- using the foreign language in an authentic context by meeting new people and learning about new cultures;
- getting a global perspective on common local social issues;
- using e-learning tools effectively

For project coordinators, the main access to the students' interactions was through their portfolios which were produced in response to the tasks set in the project and bear witness to the enhanced level of interaction and target language use by the participants. A preliminary qualitative analysis of some of the portfolios reveals a high degree of digital skills and higher order thinking to solve the project tasks even among the participants who had not yet reached threshold levels of language proficiency, e.g. A2-B1 of the CEFR. This analysis is ongoing as the project enters its final stage, when participants are also asked to respond to a survey on their own perception of how well they could achieve the above outcomes, among other questions. About 70% of the participants rated these as high to very high.

6.   Plans to further develop the initiative

After the funding period, the platform will be available to teachers and students enrolled in foreign language programmes in all 8 UGC-funded institutions in Hong Kong, thereby giving it much wider scope and outreach. It is hoped that the course will also generate rich data on MOOC-like courses and the role of online telecollaboration in higher education, as well as boost internationalisation efforts. The model can then be applied to offer off-campus credits leading to double degrees or minors from partner universities all over the world. After the initial three years of UGC-funding, the participating universities have developed the in-house capabilities of its staff and incorporated the materials into their curriculum to sustain and expand the project on their own. The present project coordinators will be engaged in championing and supporting the implementation of ILLSA in language courses all over Hong Kong and beyond.

7.   Preview of research emerging from ILLSA

The ILLSA project has also been rich in data, allowing us to carry out a number of studies observing how participants communicate among themselves and use the various technologies. One of those studies at the PolyU has explored how synchronous and asynchronous peer and teacher

feedback develop in the various language groups. The analysis focused on participants' attitudes to feedback from both students and teachers. The aim was to identify and explore the impact of attitudinal and behavioural factors in an intercultural engagement process leading to successful telecollaborations.

Data was collected in both qualitative and quantitative formats, the latter collated from questionnaires and the former from participants' comments elicited during interviews with former students. The corpus was taken from the first three cycles of the ILLSA project and it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. Is feedback (from peers or teachers) considered effective in improving overall content / linguistic issues?
2. What are the conditions that elicit the most feedback?
3. What are the reasons for not providing or accepting peer feedback?

Findings

ILLSA was designed to take advantage of computer mediated (CM) collaborations in the learning of the language. Participants were encouraged to use Web 2.0 multimodal, social tools in particular Google Docs for writing and Skype for oral communication to build knowledge and complete their collaborative project. In addition, participants were asked to follow a language related course on the FutureLearn platform. This was based on individual activities involving contributing to a number of discussion boards. Moreover, each cycle was different, and each language was presented differently in each country. This means that there are many variables that need to be taken into account when analysing participants' and teachers' comments.

Ziegler and Mackey (2017) report that both face-to-face and CM interactions between peers has been identified as positive for comprehension, vocabulary, pragmatics and proficiency development, grammar, accuracy and complexity. Interactional peer participation, hereon 'feedback', supports acquisition through negotiation, potentially benefitting not only the producer of the feedback but also the recipient (Ziegler & Mackey 2017). Feedback can make salient a linguistic feature, providing opportunities for identifying the gap between the mother tongue (L1) and the target language (TL) and allowing for a critical analysis of the output produced leading, or not, to its modification. Aside from these points, peer feedback provides students with alternative ways to express their ideas and facilitates the development of critical thinking skills in a non-threatening environment, helping, in the process, to create and develop relationships between participants (Storch 2017). In this study we tracked both language-related feedback and content feedback (interactions related to how to complete the project).

To complete the project, participants would have needed to engage in a minimum of negotiation, therefore, it was expected that there would be significant peer feedback during that phase of the

project. Seeking to minimize group-external involvement, the ILLSA coordinators and teachers did not provide content-related feedback, unless specifically asked. Participants report to having used mostly WhatsApp and email to communicate. Very few groups made use of oral communication, via Skype or others. If they did, this was limited to just one session. However, at local level in both Europe and Hong Kong, group members sometimes attended the same language classroom. Whenever that was the case, those participants reported to meeting face-to-face and to having a livelier WhatsApp exchange as well. These interactions were sometimes in the L1 and, in cases of higher proficiency level, in the TL as well.

During the completion of the FutureLearn activities ILLSA members commented on other students' postings made in the TL, whether on FutureLearn or on social media, providing encouragement when participants were lagging behind but avoiding influencing project related decisions or explicitly correcting language-related errors. When corresponding when participants, correct forms were incorporated in the body of the reply but without pointing out to the correspondent that their original form was incorrect. When asked to comment on language-related feedback, participants agreed that they did not mind receiving it, whether from peers or teachers. They welcomed teachers' feedback and (in the case of the teachers involved in ILLSA) this was never taken as a criticism but as an opportunity to learn. Feedback from other ILLSA team members was viewed as unobtrusive but also positive, as it meant that someone was reading the posts left in the various discussion boards. However, most participants were not aware of having been corrected through the replies to their posts.

In most cases, peers had a similar proficiency level and they seldom corrected each other. None of our participants reported being aware of correcting or having been corrected by a group member, in terms of the use of the language. Although, all our respondents commented that they would not mind being corrected by a peer. None of our participants were able to give a concrete reason as to why they had not provided language-related feedback. As the few real time interactions among our participants were not recorded, we cannot confirm their behaviour in oral exchanges, but we can confirm a reluctance to correct each other in text-based exchanges where language-based errors, even basic ones, went unmentioned and uncorrected. We did not find any differences that could be linked to cultural or individual preferences.

Despite all our efforts to engage students and encourage collaboration this did not always take place. This could relate to the nature of the task or the grouping of students, but also to social factors such as the type of interaction with peers and teacher, personal goals or attitude towards learning (Dörnyei, Henry & Muir 2015). Our participants were all volunteers, therefore self-motivated and they all recognised the benefits of the course. A number of participants had issues with time and commented that they would have liked to be able to spend more time on the project. As ILLSA was, in most cases, an extra-curricular activity, as the semester wore on, some of the participants prioritised their credit-bearing courses over ILLSA. The best completion rates were observed in those cases were participants received course credits for completing the activities.

This study suggests that feedback from peers and teachers enhances the development of content but its effects on improving the language are not clear. Participants are reluctant to correct each other and do not seem to notice corrections made to their own contributions. However, they are quite forthcoming with ideas that relate to content. Feedback improves as the relationship between participants tightens. In the cases we observed, this might be linked to having the chance to meet in person. All participants wanted to receive language related feedback, but most indicated that they liked the hands-off approach taken by the ILLSA team-members (minimising feedback). There was no specific reason given for not providing language-related feedback to peers. However, our study took place a few weeks (in some cases a few months) after participants had completed the project and they might not recall their reluctance to correct others.

Having learnt from previous cycles, we are running one last shorter cycle where ILLSA will coordinate group members from the beginning, setting up an initial oral session for each group and carrying out a closer follow-up. We believe this more hands-on approach might elicit more language-related queries and perhaps more peer discussions about the language as well as the content.

Other studies are looking into the overall impact of the project. For instance, in an HKU focus group study, participants' discourse was analysed for social awareness markers. Topics included, among others: student opinion on their city; their definition of a "healthy city"; whether students have been able to adopt "a new agenda" toward their prospective impact on their own (or a different) environment; what project they wish they could implement to improve their own (or a different) environment. HKU will be organised two other focus group in 2020 to further collect data. Theories of enunciation and dialogism represent the methodology allowing to compare and analyse the participants' discourse, and their prosodic realisation (Martin & White, 2003). The aim being to find a pattern in participants discourse of different focus group implemented, which may translate a specific dynamic toward social awareness after having done the ILLSA project. Regarding the first focus group, we have already underlined few makers that may revealed a self-reflection from the participants of the ILLSA project. Self-reflection toward social awareness will be further researched in our study. A planned qualitative study at the HKBU will look into the correlation of project completion to 21st century skills enhancement. These analyses will be compiled in a Springer publication later this year. We sincerely hope that this book will bring new insights into how telecollaborative projects can be designed to make computer mediated communication for language learning CMCL (Lamy & Hampel 2007:7) both transformational[1] and translational[2]

---

[1] SAMR Model Puentedura, R. (2006)
[2] T3 Framework Magana, S. (2017)

References:

Dalton-Puffer, C. (2011). Content-and-Language Integrated Learning: From Practice to Principles? *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 182-204. doi:10.1017/S0267190511000092

Guth, S. and Helm, F. (eds) (2010). *Telecollaboration 2.0. Language, Literacies and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Lamy, M., and R. Hampel (2007). *Online Communication in Language Learning and Teaching*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.lib-ezproxy.hkbu.edu.hk/lib/hkbu-ebooks/detail.action?docID=367902.

Magana, S. (2017). *Disruptive classroom technologies: A framework for innovation in education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Martin, J. R. & David Rose. (2003). *Working with discourse: meaning beyond the clause*. London; New York: Continuum.

Puentedura Ruben R. (2006). Transformation, Technology, and Education (2006) http://www.hippasus.com/resources/tte/ (last access: 23.09.2020)

Dörnyei, Z, Henry, A & Muir, C 2015, *Motivational currents in language learning: Frameworks for focused interventions*. Routledge, New York.

Storch, N 2017, 'Peer corrective feedback in computer-mediated collaborative writing', in H Nassaji & E Kartchava (eds.), *Corrective feedback in second language teaching and learning: research, theory, applications, implications*, Routledge New York, pp.66-79.

Ziegler, N & Mackey, A 2017, 'Interactional feedback in synchronous computer mediated communication. A Review of the State of the Art', in H Nassaji & E Kartchava (eds.), *Corrective feedback in second language teaching and learning: research, theory, applications, implications*, Routledge New York, pp.80-94.