Jarosław Krajka
University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

Learning how to Assess across Cultures –
Teachers’ Perceptions of Language Assessment in a
Telecollaborative Project

Abstract
Nowadays, language teachers need to be equipped with language proficiency, language
teaching methodology as well as knowledge about prospective students, in order to effectively
trigger their language acquisition processes. An important part of this final sphere is
intercultural teaching competence, or the sensitivity to different cultures of learning
represented by students, which encompasses, among others, the ability to adapt instruction,
select materials, choose and use assessment techniques. The purpose of the paper is to report
upon the study which aimed at building prospective teachers’ intercultural teaching
competence in the area of assessment through telecollaboration.

1. Introduction
Language assessment is a highly important part of the teacher training process, with most
modern philologies featuring a separate course on how to evaluate, design, implement and
analyze language tests. Systematic coverage of principles of assessment, both in its formal
and alternative dimensions, characteristics of properly constructed tests, techniques of testing
receptive and productive skills, is essential to equip language teachers with the skills
indispensable for delivering language instruction successfully.

However, if we take into account the fact that English language teaching is increasingly
taking place in heterogeneous, multicultural and multilingual contexts, broadening a
perspective on language assessment seems to be necessary for the development of
intercultural teaching competence. Together with an increasing focus on Teaching English as
an International Language, with migrations and job openings abroad creating opportunities for
conducting English language instruction to students of other nationalities, cultures and mother
tongues, intercultural teaching competence needs to be developed during the teacher
development process with a widened perspective on language assessment.
The purpose of the paper is to report upon student teachers’ perceptions of language assessment in an intercultural context. A telecollaborative study involved tandems of student teachers from Poland and Turkey and aimed at increasing student teachers’ awareness of language assessment in different instructional settings.

2. Background to the study

When taking into account the question of diversity in English language teaching, there exists quite robust literature on teachers’ language awareness of diversity of Englishes (e.g., Carter, 1995; Hazen, 2001; Graddol, 2006; Farrell and Martin, 2009; Crystal, 2010; Jodłowiec, 2012). In particular, such aspects as correctness, standards and variety introduced by different contexts in which English is used (Nelson, 1995; Wach, 2011; Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Bielak, 2014) have received researchers’ attention, who were striving to answer the question of “Which English to teach?” (Dziubalska-Kołaczyk, 2005; Rinvolucri, 2006; Farrell and Martin, 2009; Niżegorodciew, 2014) and how intercultural competence is essential for prospective language teachers (Bandura, 2011). While World Englishes and English as an International Language contexts are quite thoroughly described (e.g., McKay, 2002; Jenkins, 2003; Seidlhofer 2004, 2005), much less attention has been devoted to how language teachers should make use of the new theories highlighting the pluricentric view of the English language (Kachru, 1990; Pennycook, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2007), not only by teaching World Englishes to promote intercultural awareness and increased understanding (Modiano, 2001; Matsuda, 2002, 2003), but also being sensitive to the local ecology of the learning process (McKay, 2003; McKay and Bokhorst-Heng, 2008).

The issue of preparing language instructors for meeting the challenge of teaching English to students of different cultural, social, economic backgrounds has recently become especially important due to increased mobility, European integration, demand for English language instructors in specialised contexts (ESP, adult learners, migrants). Relatively little has been said in language teacher instruction on how relevant widely-established and “traditional” language teaching approaches are to different instructional contexts (Hofstede, 1986; Rao, 1996; Chow and Mok-Cheung, 2004; Jin and Cortazzi, 2011) and what difficulties can be encountered while implementing them (see, for instance, Li, 1998, on CLT in China). Since L2 learning challenges learners to go beyond a comfort zone not only into new languages and cultures with new levels of proficiency but also into new ways of learning, student teachers need to grasp at least basic awareness of how different particular “cultures of learning” (Cortazzi, Jin and Wang, 2009) can be, which are certain frameworks of
expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about successful learning and teaching, about learning and using different language skills in classrooms, and about how interaction should be accomplished.

Highlighting the international nature of language teaching, according to Fenner and Newby (2000), should be accomplished, among others, by focusing on various cultures when choosing teaching materials, trying to cater for the needs of all students by understanding them, as well as agreeing upon clear in-class rules and assessment schemes taking into account T-LS’s culture discrepancy. Since language assessment is closely connected with politics and language policy (Bachman and Purpura, 2008; Ross, 2011) by inevitably involving values, ideologies and interests, being infused with issues of power, identity or national sovereignty (see, for instance, Phillipson, 1992), teaching student teachers how to conduct assessment is the most convenient opportunity for preparing them for dealing with diverse contexts (Krajka, 2010; Wysocka, 2013), hence meeting the requirements of “culturally-sensitive pedagogy” (Brown, 1994; McKay, 2003).

In order to widen the scope of language teacher training and increase prospective teachers’ sensitivity of local ecologies, telecollaboration as an instructional context seems most appropriate. Even though the crux of research has been into the effect of telecollaboration on language learning (e.g., Jauregi and Bañados, 2008; Bueno-Alastuey, 2010, 2013; Guth and Marini-M aio, 2010; or Grosbois, 2011, to name just a few studies), more and more research has shown the applicability of telecollaborative projects and knowledge co-construal in teacher education (Guichon and Hauck, 2011; Helm, Guth and O'Dowd, 2012; Dooly and Sadler, 2013; Krajka, Marczak, Tatar, & Yildiz, 2013; Bueno-Alastuey, 2014). However, the concept of gaining effective language assessment skills in intercultural telecollaborative exchanges seems to be a relatively new area, worthy closer investigation.

3. Acquiring language assessment skills in telecollaboration – the study

The data for the present study were collected over a long-term telecollaborative project implemented to assist graduate teacher training. The details of the research context, data collection procedures, as well as the findings on student teachers’ perception of acquiring teaching skills via telecollaboration, are given below. The results of the telecollaborative study inform the way further telecollaborative research, already planned and coordinated for the winter semester of 2017/2018 academic year, is to be implemented.
3.1. Research questions and aims

The aims of the study into supplementing student teacher training in language testing and assessment with the telecollaborative component were as follows:

- to give students the opportunity to evaluate ready-made tests and examinations from different countries and to reflect on their applicability and adaptability in their own context;
- to foster students’ skills of designing tests and scoring procedures as well as provide feedback on their peers’ products;
- to show students how to tailor assessment to fit the needs of given students, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts;
- to examine the change of attitude towards language assessment and peer feedback;
- to investigate the process of knowledge co-construal in the telecollaborative framework;
- to verify the applicability of telecollaboration as a supplement to face-to-face teacher training and investigate the practical constraints of its integration into the regular teacher training framework.

3.2. The participants and the instructional context

The project was conducted at the graduate (M.A.) programme in English teacher education, supplementing the course in “Language testing” taught over the summer semester of the 2016/2017 academic year at University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. The course followed a fixed syllabus of learning how to design and evaluate testing instruments for specific language subsystems and language skills.

The participants of the project were 30 Polish M.A. students (1st year graduate course, henceforth referred to as PL) and 60 Turkish B.A. students (TR). The difference in size of the class meant that 1 PL student had to be paired up with 2 TR ones. Given certain differences in competence level (B.A. pre-experienced ones for TR and M.A. partially-experienced ones for PL), it was hoped that a useful case of online mentoring might appear, in other words, PL partners would give support to their TR counterparts.

Great care was paid to make sure that the Polish and Turkish partners were matched as closely as possible: the same name of the course (“Language Testing”), a very similar syllabus (which was negotiated by both instructors to fit the project), the same coursebook (H.
D. Brown’s *Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practice*). However, there were also some differences which had to be struggled with throughout the project:

- day students (TR) vs. extra-mural students (PL);
- three times as many TR students as PL ones;
- undergraduates (TR) vs. graduates (PL);
- pre-experienced (TR) vs. mixed (job-experienced and pre-experienced – PL);
- collaboration-focused vs. assignment-focused (mixed on both sides).

### 3.3. Process and data collection procedures of the “Language testing” project

The project spanned the period of the whole summer semester, which was satisfactory and appropriate for both partners in the view of forming relationships, exchanging views, collaborating on common products and giving feedback to one another.

The two instructors coordinating the exchange on both sides attempted to give it the same structure of pre-project (students working together with their own instructor, getting ready for telecollaboration, getting familiar with the tasks to be conducted, gaining knowledge of their partners’ instructional contexts), project proper (communication, cooperation and collaboration of partners in groups within teacher-controlled and student-controlled learning environments) and post-project (reflecting upon the experience, getting ready with the final assignments, providing feedback on the course to the instructor, getting credits).

Table 1. The timeline of the “Language testing” collaborative project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project phase</th>
<th>Online work</th>
<th>In-class work</th>
<th>Tasks for students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1 March 5 - March 18</td>
<td>Group forming, relation building, making acquaintances between partners</td>
<td>Class 1-2: Introduction to language testing: testing, assessment and evaluation, types of tests and test items, criteria of a properly constructed test, test-making procedure</td>
<td>Attitude survey Testing problems – your problem, my solution Learning diary 1 Forum discussion 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2 March 19 - April 1</td>
<td>Getting to know your exam, telling you about my exam – how are grammar and vocabulary tested during Matura and YDS</td>
<td>Class 3-4: Testing grammar and vocabulary</td>
<td>Forum discussion 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3 April 2 - April 15</td>
<td>Constructing grammar and vocabulary tests for matura (PL students) and YDS (TR students), exchanging these, giving peer feedback</td>
<td>Class 5: Testing receptive skills</td>
<td>Learning diary 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4 April 16 - April 29</td>
<td>Taking YDS tests (PL students) and matura tests (TR students) and adapting them to fit their local contexts</td>
<td>Class 6: Testing productive skills</td>
<td>Forum discussion 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The expected deliverables were student-made mock exams (for PL students matura, for TR ones YDS), student suggestions for their partners’ exams (for PL students suggestions for YDS, for TR ones – for matura), revised exams, three forum discussions and four learning diary entries. The data corpus was complemented by entry and exit attitude questionnaires, evaluating participants’ attitudes to assessment, intercultural exchanges and technology-mediated instruction. It is important to note that the assessment scheme for the project took into account varied kinds of activities, hence, not all of them were assessed in the same way and to the same extent. For instance, entry and exit attitude questionnaires were not graded at all, forum discussions and learning diaries were up to students’ choice (2 out of 3 forums and 3 out of 4 diaries), while student-made tests and suggestions for partners’ products were assessed formally by giving grades.

3.4. Learning how to assess across cultures – results and findings

As the project yielded a wealth of data whose analysis is still under way, the present paper will only focus on the issues of how students perceived acquiring language assessment skills in telecollaboration with partners from a different country. Therefore, selected pieces of data retrieved from different instruments will be used below to substantiate our discussion.

As evidenced by the specific data in Table 2, an overwhelming majority of participants (almost 70%) agreed or strongly agreed that working with teachers from other countries is a motivating experience (Q2), which is corroborated by a similar figure (almost 60%) opting for “Strongly disagree” and “Disagree” in a reverse-coded statement Q3 “I am still not interested in problems of teachers from other countries.” A similar number of respondents felt that thanks to adapting their teaching materials for use with foreign students, which was one of the tasks executed during the project, they learnt to be more flexible with preparation for classroom teaching (Q4). Similarly, almost 60% of the participants agreed that communicating with partners from a different country helps them find creative solutions to classroom problems (Q8).
Table 2. Feelings about teaching skills in intercultural projects after the course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>neither disagree nor agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. It was hard to participate in an online project since we had too much work to do even without it.</td>
<td>10 (12.3%)</td>
<td>6 (7.4%)</td>
<td>30 (37%)</td>
<td>21 (25.9%)</td>
<td>14 (17.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. Meeting teachers from other countries proved to be a motivating experience.</td>
<td>5 (6.2%)</td>
<td>3 (3.7%)</td>
<td>18 (22.2%)</td>
<td>24 (29.6%)</td>
<td>31 (38.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. I am still not interested in problems of teachers from other countries.</td>
<td>23 (28.4%)</td>
<td>23 (28.4%)</td>
<td>24 (29.6%)</td>
<td>5 (6.2%)</td>
<td>6 (7.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. Adapting my teaching materials for use with foreign students helped me become more flexible with my preparation for classroom teaching.</td>
<td>3 (3.7%)</td>
<td>4 (4.9%)</td>
<td>24 (29.6%)</td>
<td>34 (42%)</td>
<td>16 (19.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. Matura and YDS have too little in common, I still see no point comparing or confronting them.</td>
<td>12 (14.8%)</td>
<td>13 (16%)</td>
<td>29 (35.8%)</td>
<td>11 (13.6%)</td>
<td>16 (19.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6. Our study programmes are too different from each other, it was hard to find something to discuss together with partners from the other country.</td>
<td>8 (9.9%)</td>
<td>13 (16%)</td>
<td>26 (32.1%)</td>
<td>20 (24.7%)</td>
<td>14 (17.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7. Even though Polish and Turkish students learn in different school systems, they have the same problems with grammar or vocabulary acquisition.</td>
<td>8 (9.9%)</td>
<td>9 (11.1%)</td>
<td>28 (34.6%)</td>
<td>24 (29.6%)</td>
<td>12 (14.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8. Communicating with partners from a different country helped me find creative solutions to classroom problems.</td>
<td>5 (6.2%)</td>
<td>6 (7.4%)</td>
<td>25 (30.9%)</td>
<td>22 (27.2%)</td>
<td>23 (28.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, not all the perceptions were that positive, since Polish and Turkish partners generally saw the disparities between language assessment systems in both countries (matura and YDS), which made the project slightly more difficult to accomplish (Q5). Also the answers to Q6 (“Our study programmes are too different from each other, it was hard to find something to discuss together with partners from the other country”) show that even though the subject matter of the teaching process is the same, the methodology used is also largely similar, the national curricular objectives make the instructional contexts quite different from each other. The perception of those institutionally-conditioned differences introduced some kind of uneasiness into the project. Perhaps future projects of this kind should not go that deep into the question of politics of language assessment, but rather should focus on collaborative co-construal of those products that could be universally used in the instructional contexts of both partners (e.g., reading comprehension or grammar+vocabulary tests). Even then, however, differences in expected learner achievements will influence the balance of tasks within such tests – the tests prepared by Turkish student teachers need to use translation, reading tasks and word-for-word equivalents, which are not preferred to the same extent in Polish foreign language education.
4. Conclusion

Even though university education is falling behind primary and secondary schools with the use of telecollaboration for language learning and general education (see, for instance, an immensely successful eTwinning project), it is gaining more and more attention of educators due to its potential for fostering intercultural communicative competence, facilitating acquisition of teaching skills and increasing student teachers' awareness of different instructional contexts for language education across the globe. As demonstrated by the present study, adding a telecollaborative component to the teacher training module can be an interesting opportunity for knowledge co-construal by partners from different countries. However, for online exchanges to be effective, proper care needs to be put into designing, running and evaluating such activities.

Bibliography


This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.

This publication reflects the views only of the author and the Commission or the Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Publication date: 30.09.2017