Telecollaborative Writing within an Algerian EFL Context: Insights from the *Ibunka2019* Project

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Abstract

Following a case study research design, the present paper reports on a cross-cultural project (called *Ibunka2019*), in which the author monitored his English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing classes. The project is an email-based exchange among learners of English from six countries (Algeria, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and the Netherlands). For data collection, the Algerian participants' emic perspective was accessed via their self-reports, gained by a post-project online survey; besides, their messages produced as well as the discussions with them during and after the project made valuable retrospective data for the present study. Particularly, the study discusses the merits of the project relative to the writing module, manifestations of learner autonomy, and the challenges encountered. Moreover, it tackled other relevant issues, namely the integration of interculturality, EFL learner mindset, and lingua franca perspective. This study adds to the scarce literature within the Algerian context on telecollaborative EFL teaching and learning.

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1. Introduction

Telecollaboration refers to any technology-mediated interaction among language learners from different cultures/countries, who are geographically distant, for learning purposes (Demir & Kayaoğlu, 2021). Language learners can engage in telecollaborative tasks via different tools (PCs, mobiles, tablets) and platforms (e.g., emails, social networking sites, or specially-designed platforms), a practice which may have a positive effect on the learners' diverse skills: linguistic (use/perception of the target language language), intercultural (awareness of diversity across nations/cultures), relational (building good relations with partners), and so forth.

In the Algerian context, researchers and practitioners are well aware of the importance of telecollaboration for effective foreign language teaching and learning (e.g., Dendenne, 2019; *La Télécollaboration Universitaire en Classes de Langues* Conference, 2019[1]). Thus, telecollaboration projects are ever-growing, though arguably in a slow pace (see below). This said, telecollaboration in the Algerian foreign language teaching and learning context at a tertiary level remains an underexplored area, which deserves the attention of teachers, researchers, and other stakeholders.

In the present study, the author will elaborate on the monitoring of his EFL writing classes while taking part in an email-based cross-cultural exchange project known as *Ibunka2019* (see below). Participation in this project was made as an integral part of the writing module addressed to third-year students at a teacher education college during the 2019-2020 academic year. The present study aims to uncover the pedagogical benefits of engaging in telecollaborative writing tasks under the *Ibunka2019* conditions (e.g., authenticating the writing tasks, providing opportunities for further practice, developing learner autonomy) and the awareness-raising potential of it (e.g., about the word's cultural diversity, the status of English as a global lingua franca, requirements of successful intercultural communication). The present study then comes at an opportune moment, given that telecollaboration projects are still very scarce in the Algerian EFL context. I hope that the present study will contribute to filling this gap and encourage further research.

The present paper is structured as follows. This introductory section contextualises the study and presents its purpose and significance. In the second section, I provide a review on telecollaboration and English as a lingua franca (ELF), integrating telecollaboration in second/foreign language (L2) writing, and telecollaboration in the Algerian foreign language teaching and learning context.

The third section is devoted to the presentation of the *Ibunka2019* project. The fourth section is dedicated to data analysis, in which I deal with the pedagogical benefits (relative to the writing module), manifestations of learner autonomy, and the challenges encountered. In this section, I also discuss other relevant issues: integration of interculturality, learners' EFL mindset, and the pedagogical lingua franca perspective relative to the project's proceedings. The fifth section is dedicated to the discussion of the outcomes of the data analysis in light of the existing literature; here too, the study's pedagogical implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research are provided.

2. Literature Review

The relevance of telecollaboration in the EFL context is a fast-growing area of research in applied linguistics and second language acquisition. English is used as a lingua franca worldwide; English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is defined as a means of communication among those who do not share a common language – whether in face-to-face or technology-mediated contexts. Many scholars have contributed to its conceptualisation (e.g., Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2007; Matsuda, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2010; Sharifian, 2009). This line of thought has opened new possibilities for ELF-oriented research and instruction in L2 English contexts. Therefore, given this specificity of the English language, many studies have explored the use of ELF among non-native speakers (NNSs) as a vehicle for telecollaboration projects. These studies have examined the empowering nature of using ELF, well beyond the fear of not being able to emulate the native speakers' (NSs) performance (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2006; Ke, 2012; Ke & Suzuki, 2011; Ke & Cahyani, 2014; Kohn, 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017). In line with the above-cited studies, I will follow a lingua franca perspective in the present study.

As far as the instructional usefulness of online and telecollaborative L2 writing, studies have investigated the potential of technology for helping students develop their writing skills in many L2 contexts: English (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2006; Fedderholdt, 2001; Ke & Suzuki, 2011; Ke & Cahyani, 2014; Kessler, 2020), French (e.g., Andrianirina & Foucher, 2012; Cebuc & Sadouni, 2017; Sadouni & Cebuc, 2018), and Spanish (e.g., Yanguas, 2020). These studies seemed to agree on the fact that, through telecollaborative L2 writing, the students did not only enhance their

linguistic and communicational skills, but they also develop positive attitudes towards other participants' cultures and learnt to respect differences (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2006).

On the effectiveness of telecollaboration for intercultural (communicative) competence awareness and/or development, the literature seems to be conclusive on this issue; that is, many studies agreed on the fostering effect of intercultural telecollaboration, especially for intercultural awareness-raising (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2006; Avgousti, 2018; Demir & Kayaoğlu, 2021; Özdemir, 2017; Toscu & Erten, 2020). Interestingly, the fruits of such endeavours can be harvested in a couple of weeks only (e.g., Özdemir, 2017; Sardegna & Dugartsyrenova, 2021).

In the Algerian context, to date, only a handful of studies can be found on the use of telecollaboration in foreign language teaching and learning, in French as a foreign language (e.g., Cebuc & Sadouni, 2017; Sadouni & Cebuc, 2018) and EFL (e.g., Benabdallah, 2016; Bennacer, 2019; Meziane & Kara Terki, 2011; Meziane & Sari-Mitchel, 2014) contexts. As far as the EFL classroom is concerned, the existing studies are very insightful in that they revealed many pedagogical benefits and highlighted many obstacles facing the integration of telecollaboration in the Algerian EFL classroom. For example, Meziane and Kara Terki (2011), one of the early studies on this issue, reported on the Abou Bekr Belkaid University of Tlemcen's experience of participating in the Global Understanding cross-cultural programme. From the students' perspective, the project brought them many benefits like a self-regulated mode of learning, direct feedback, a motivating and entertaining learning environment, and the opportunity to communicate with NSs in an authentic setting. Despite the gains, the participants did also highlight certain shortcomings: technical and medium-related issues, affording time and efforts to do the required tasks, and the demotivating topics due to their repetitive nature.

To sum up, the above studies agree on the fostering influence of telecollaboration projects for more effective foreign language teaching and learning at linguistic, cognitive, intercultural, and relational dimensions. The dearth of such studies in the Algerian context makes telecollaboration an almost underexplored area of research, which deserves the attention of Algerian scholars. I harmony with this literature, the present study is guided by two central questions. These are:

1. What were the pedagogical benefits gained and the challenges encountered during the participation in *Ibunka2019* project?

2. How did *Ibunka2019* contribute to raising the students' awareness of issues

like interculturality and English as a lingua franca?

3. Presentation of *Ibunk2019* Project

Ibunka (meaning "different cultures" in Japanese) is an online cross-cultural email exchange project that has been initiated and moderated, since 2000, by Masahito Watanabe (Yokohama National University, Japan), (see Watanabe, 2006, for further details). Supported by a specifically-designed platform, Web Bulletin Board (WBB, Figure 1), the project is about an asynchronous written communication in English among partner students/teachers from various countries. The author was delighted to join the project with two of his classes on its twentieth anniversary to represent Algeria.

3.1. Procedures

The 2019 edition of the project lasted for about three months (from 23/09 to 17/12) and was divided into four phases (Table 1). During the first phase, 'school life' was the theme which the students were encouraged to write about; they talked about topics like the school system in their country, their school routine, the motivation behind the choice of their current major, and so on. During the second phase, the participants discussed the topic of 'cultures', where they talked about a selected aspect relative to their own culture like popular traditional dishes, famous tourist attractions, traditional attire, and so on. During the third phase, the project participants were supposed to write about 'social issues' like peace, violence, family, divorce, and so forth. The fourth phase of the project was devoted to celebrating the end of the project, via creating a short video or a PowerPoint presentation. Due to its scaffolding nature, the project encouraged the participants to gradually move from shorter to longer messages and comments during the first three phases. The dates in the Table were not necessarily abided by. Some participants joined later and the contributions continued until the beginning of January 2020. It is worth noting that not all the participants (except for the Japanese students, who were supervised by the project moderator) engaged actively in the last phase of the project, which took place simultaneously with the project's third phase.

Table 1

Writing under Ibunka2019 Conditions

Phases	Dates	Themes	Writing Requirements
1	23/09 to 20/10	School life (e.g., school routine, school system)	Postings of 200 or more words, Comments of 100 or more words
2	21/10 to 17/11	Cultures (e.g., traditions, festivals, food, tourist attractions)	Postings of 300 or more words, Comments of 100 or more words
3	18/11 to 17/12	Social issues - world peace (e.g., wars and conflicts, crimes, education, family, environmental issues)	Postings of 400 or more words, Comments of 100 or more words
4	18/11 to 17/12	Special work for commemorating the project (e.g., video, PPT presentation)	Students create three-to-five-minute video clips and upload them onto a shared cloud storage

Students were assigned user names and passwords to access the WBB and were assured that the platform would be exclusively reserved for the project participants and thus could not be accessed by other internet users. For the participants' privacy, the data were erased by the end of the project. The participants were asked to update their profiles and post their photos, but not all of them did so; only two of my students accepted to upload their photos. Therefore, the absence of the users' picture was compensated by a standard avatar.
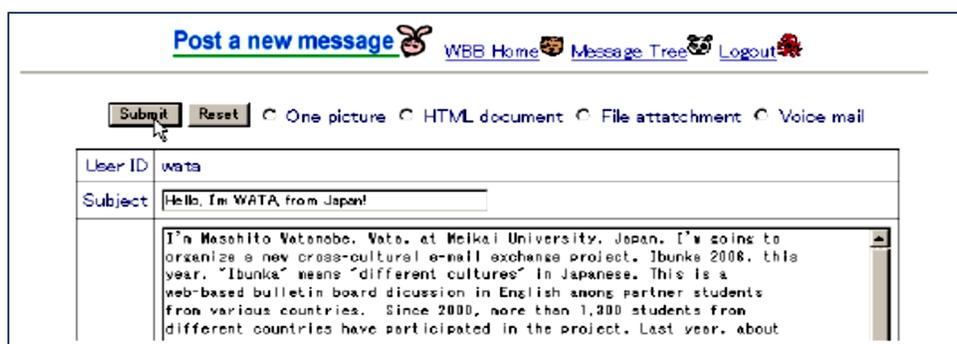
Figure 1

WBB Main Rubrics (From Newsletter_01, the 2018 Edition)
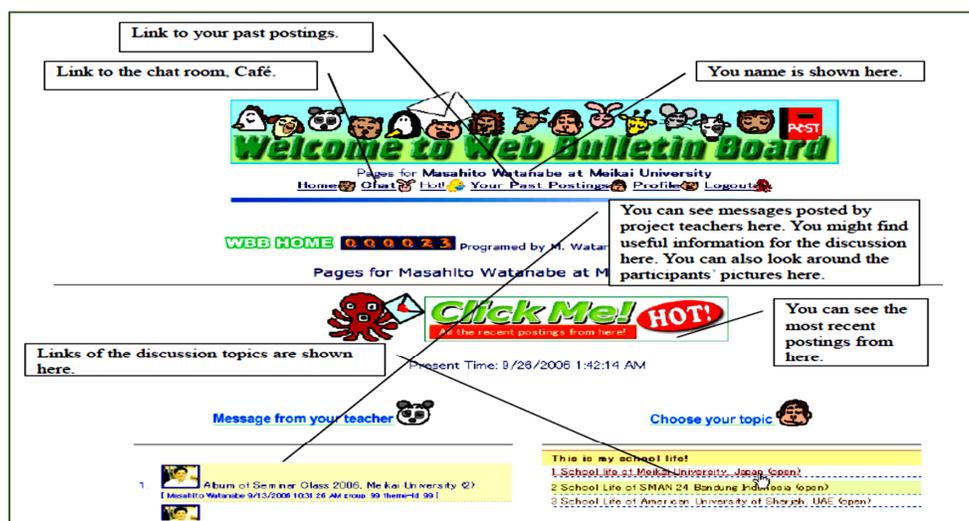
Students were supposed to write their messages in an email-like window that allowed for attaching data like pictures or vocal messages (Figure 2). The message and the replies to it appeared as a thread like in any ordinary email service. The platform included the basic options like editing, deleting, and confirm-before-sending. Moreover, the WBB also disposed a chatroom, which the participants could join and engage in an informal talk with other coparticipants.

Figure 2
Email-like Message Window (From Newsletter_01, the 2018 Edition)


3.2. Incentive for Participants

To motivate the participants, rewards were offered by the end of the project, in form of participation certificates (Level 1 and Level 2 Participation Certificate, Figure 3), including each student's scores of their inbound and outbound messages. Level 2 Participation Certificate requires that the student (a) write at least one post for each of the three topics (first three phases' themes), where each should contain at least, 200, 300 and 400 words, respectively; (b) write three comments on the postings of other partner students for each of the three topics, where each of the comments should contain at least 100 words. To get a Level 1 Participation Certificate, the student should meet the requirements of Level 2 and also receive at least two comments from other partner students for each of the three topics. Only one of my students got a Level 1 Participation Certificate, but this was not in fact a big issue for the students.

I tried to keep my students motivated by making this project an integral part of

their writing classes and the annual assessment. Particularly, the topics of the second and third phases of the project were appropriated to meet the types of the essays being practiced during the writing classes; these are the expository, comparison-contrast, and cause-effect types.

Figure 3

Level 1 and Level 2 Participation Certificates (From Newsletter_01, the 2018 Edition)
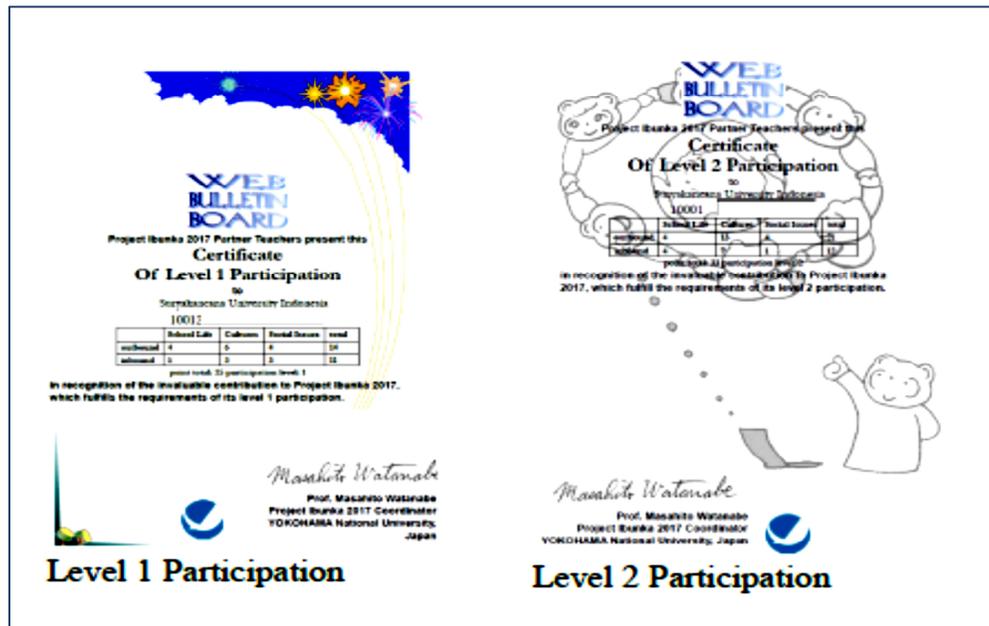
Throughout the project, the moderator sent a weekly newsletter. It included guidelines for the participants, instructions to make the best out of the project, and samples from the teachers' and students' postings. Seeing their messages reproduced in the newsletters was itself considered a valuable reward for the students and their teachers. Twelve newsletters were sent throughout the project.

3.3. Participants

In *Ibunka2019*, the participants were from universities, colleges, and secondary education institutions from six countries (Table 2). The Table below includes the number of participants, among which, seven were teachers who monitored the

students and engaged in the project with some postings too (project moderator included). The students involved are heterogeneous in terms of their linguistic proficiency, and only the Algerian and Indonesian students were majoring in English. My students were third-year student teachers, and their level in English was on average between B1/B2. In all groups, female students outnumbered their male counterparts. To conceal the participants identity, only their first names or nicknames are supplied along with information about their nationality, gender, and age, given between brackets each time words are quoted from the students: M=male, F=female, Number/18=age, Country codes: the codes included in Table 2.

Table 2
Project Participants

Country	Number of Participants	Institutions
Algeria/ALG	66	Teacher education college
Brazil/BRA	16	University
Indonesia/INA	122	University/Vocational high school
Japan/JPN	38	University
Taiwan TWN	86	University
The Netherlands/NED	7	Secondary school
Total	**335**	

3.4. Data

After the completion of the project, an attitudinal online survey was administered to the students (44 out of 66 students filled out the survey, see the Appendix). This survey mainly included items to which the students had to respond via a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) (items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17), open-ended questions (items 1, 2, 8, 15, 18, and 19), and an opportunity to say anything freely about the project (item 20). Besides these items, the participants had to supply their names, gender, and age. Quotes from the survey takers will only be slightly edited to remove some grammar and spelling mistakes – when reported in the present study – while vocabulary and style will be retained.

For further insights, the students' performance during the project was examined too, that is, the 2055 posts (around 368654 words) that were produced by the

project participants. Similarly, the discussions which the author engaged in with his students during and after the project were also valuable retrospective data. While the online survey provided the main data, which were analysed and reported in the present study, the other two resources may sometimes be considered in the data nalysis and discussion of the study's findings for further support.

4. Data Analysis

In the following subsections, I will deal with the pedagogical benefits of participation in the *Ibunka2019* project, manifestations of learner autonomy, and the challenges encountered during the interactions.

4.1. Pedagogical Benefits: Enhancing the Authenticity of the Writing Tasks

Communicating during *Ibunka2019* is a precious opportunity to make the writing relevant to the students' context. Students are stimulated to write for a real communicative purpose, other than an exam requirement. They are freed from the need to write in an imaginary situation assuming the involvement of native speakers as their interlocutors. Thus, the significance of projects like *Ibunka2019* lies in the fact that it proffers a context in which using English is meaningful and relevant, independent of external authorities (NSs or NS teachers) (Widdowson, 1996). This is what two of the participants tried to convey when they wrote on the merits of the project:

  • *I've learnt how to write in an official way with direct conditions and that really help me to organize myself and my way of thinking when writing.* (ChahraZed-F-21-ALG)
  • *It was the best chance and experience I have ever lived with the outside world.* (Maram-F-21-ALG).

Ibunka2019 project helped create opportunities for writing outside the classroom. In the first phase of the project, it was mainly considered a writing task for the students in parallel to their practice sessions in the module. But, during the second and third phases, the project could be appropriated to meet the types of the essays being practised. That is, the cultures theme lent itself to the expository and comparison-contrast types of essay. Therefore, when students were writing about aspects of their culture (e.g., traditions, dishes, weddings), they were encouraged to

make it in the form of an expository essay. When we moved to the comparison-contrast essay, they were encouraged to exploit the data from the project messages and replies to compare/contrast the various cultures involved. For example, the rituals of Eid El-Adh-ha (the Sacrifice Feast) could be compared and contrasted relative to the two Muslim cultures involved (Algerian and Indonesian), and the school system could be compared between two different countries (e.g., secondary school in Algeria and the Netherlands). As for the third phase topics, they fitted well into the cause-and-effect type of essay (e.g., causes of divorce, effects of climate change, consequences of bullying).

Receiving feedback from peers from different countries and learning contexts was indeed a fostering factor, as suggested by two of the participants:

● *I think that writing under Ibunka2019 conditions made writing more interactive via comments and replies to other comments because it is important to know the opinions of other people toward your topic. Interaction encouraged us to write more, and their comments helped us to develop our writing and maybe to change our thinking toward a specific subject. Interaction is really important in such kind of projects to be more successful.* (Nesserin-F-20-ALG).

● *Ibunka project motivated and supported me to write more and more, comment on other's messages, and reply to their comments on mine, so it really was helpful to develop my writing skill.* (Nabila-F-20-ALG).

Developing students' confidence to engage in meaningful communicative tasks that have a real-world impact like making one's school system known to others, knowing about a different school system, making friends from other countries and maintaining contact with them even after the project is over. Some students are even trying to learn their partner's language (e.g., the case of Manel with the Indonesian language)

In tune with what has been said above, the students appreciated the fact that the *Ibunka2019* project gave them the chance to improve their writing skills, while simultaneously

- Learning about other countries' cultures and making new friendships:

● *Through Ibunka, I developed my writing skills, I took a lot of information about different subjects and I had the chance to know persons from different places*

and communicate with them and the most important thing is that I learn more about other's culture, traditions, and religion, thanks Ibunka ♥ (Rayen-F-20-ALG)

• *What made me more interested in Ibunka2019 project is that it was and still considered as a great opportunity for students to communicate with others from different countries…Briefly, I can say that through this project students could enhance their writing skills and could also acquire new information through the interaction with the other students by responding to their writing passages.* (Selma-F-20-ALG)

- And present one's culture/country to others.

• *I really liked how Ibunka gave us the opportunity to present ourselves, cultures, thoughts, and beliefs without any discrimination. And also, it made those long distances between different countries and cultures very short and close.* (Oussama-M-25-ALG)

4.2. Manifestations of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is manifested in many aspects during the *Ibunka2019* project, so there is compelling evidence that such projects are indeed "autonomy-enhancing acts" (Teng, 2019, p. 27).

Although the broad topics were set by the project moderator, students were independent to decide on the sub-topics, commenting on their peers' messages and replying to others' comments, especially in the second and third phases of the project. Nonetheless, the students did not hesitate to ask the teacher to proofread and comment on their posts before they submit them. They also found it necessary to share with the teachers the feedback of others. For example, one of my students was extremely happy that a Japanese student liked her message about Ramadan rituals in Algeria and interpreted the message as a willingness to convert to Islam. The student told me about this incident enthusiastically and asked for guidance on how to best reply to the Japanese student.

Although the teacher strived to edit and give feedback on the students' messages before they post them on the WBB, he could not read all the messages prior to their posting due to time constraints. Therefore, the students were oftentimes urged to take the responsibility and act independently. As can be seen from Figure 4, students' reactions to this statement: "I could manage to take responsibility of my

writing even without the help/with little help from my teacher" suggest that they managed to maintain a degree of autonomy while doing the tasks. Some other students, however, were not much confident when tried to act autonomously.

Figure 4
Students' Reactions to the Likert Statement: "I Could Manage to Take Responsibility of my Writing."
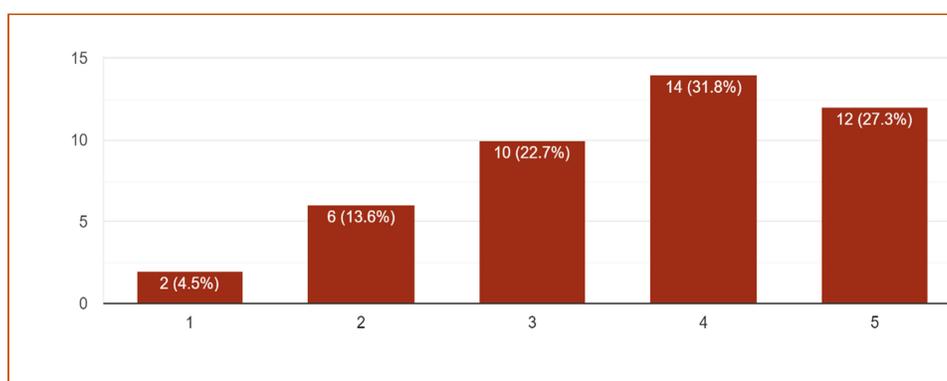
It is interesting to read some of the justifications the students gave with their choices. The reasons provided stand to reflect the students' divergent levels in writing. The following narratives are representative of those students who believed that they were able to act autonomously:

• *We were responsible of our writing, (ideas, sentences, mistakes, words). We were obliged to choose everything by ourselves without the help of the teacher, and sometimes with his help. So, we were more careful about what we were saying and even thinking.* (selected 5, Dyhia-F-20-ALG)

• *Because I felt like I didn't need the teacher's help, and of course in case I did I would've asked.* (selected 5, Oussama-M-25-ALG)

• *In this project I didn't rely on my teacher too much, I chose the topics and write without his help. This project taught us to be independent.* (selected 4, Sara-F-20-ALG)

• *Our teacher helped us in correcting the mistakes in our publication, but*

obviously he cannot be with us all the time so that he helps in writing comments or replying and so on. This is why I selected the medium answer. (selected 3, Rania-F-21-ALG)

Meanwhile for other students, it was not always possible to act independently and they gave many reasons for that. The following representative quotes voice those students' concern about the quality of their writing:

• *Because I had to show my teacher my writing first before I posted it, so that I knew whether I made mistakes or not.* (selected 2, Achwaq-F-21-ALG)

• *I need some help because I was afraid of errors.* (selected 2, Yousra-F-22-ALG) *Because I'm not able enough to take this responsibility.* (selected 2, Kheira-F-20-ALG)

• *Actually, I was making mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. I had an egg on my face. Thanks to my dear teacher who helped to correct my mistakes.* (selected 3, Yasmin2-F-19-ALG)

The students logged in from home or from the class (via their mobiles) and navigated their activities in the WBB independently. The asynchronous nature gave the participants the freedom to read, post, and comment on the messages at their earliest convenience. Moreover, they joined the chat room freely. They did not hesitate to make friends and seek other opportunities of communicating/learning with them after the project was over using other platforms like Facebook.

In fact, the students acted as ambassadors of their countries; they made known their traditions, festivals, school system, and so forth, inciting their partners to appreciate them. In this regard, one of the participants emphasised: "*It was a good experience that made me really proud that I'm an English student. I was happy to talk about our traditional dishes. Thank you, sir*" (Charifa-F-20-ALG). This also helped build a positive self-image as the students received praise on their English, hobbies, struggles, and their country's tourist attractions/traditions/food. We can read below typical compliments on:

-Proficient level of English:

• *Oh yes, I think your English is good, you are good at talking and I want to be like you and the last thank you for reading my comment. ;)* (Widi-F-18-INA to Amel-F-21-ALG)

• *I'm really impressed that you studied hard to become an English teacher and you made it. I think it's a good system that the students' job is guaranteed after graduation.* (Shotaro-M-19-JPN to Manel-F-21-ALG)

- Traditional dishes:

• *I read your comment and saw the pictures of Algerian food you put. Both Chakchouka and Couscous look so delicious! One of the main ingredients of Chakchouka are tomatoes. I guessed that a lot of tomatoes are eaten in Algeria because I have an image that tasty tomatoes are grown around the Mediterranean Sea.* (Nagisa-F-JPN to Khawla-F-20-ALG)

- The national football team (that had just won the African Cup of Nations) and its iconic star, Riyad Mahrez:

• *Actually, I don't know about Algeria well but I just know Algeria's national football team and some players. I know Riyad Mahrez. He controls a ball as if he's a magician. So, at first, huge congratulations to Algeria on winning African Nations Cup.* (Shotaro-M-19-JPN to Manel-F-21-ALG)

4.3. Challenges Encountered

Engaging in the *Ibunka2019* project made it necessary to deal with many limiting – sometimes even irritating – challenges. It is no surprise that the technical problems are the main obstacle to this kind of projects. Internet connection is an issue for most of the students, as revealed by Houria below:

• *Problems of connexion also even my own account I could not get access to which drove me crazy.* (Houria-F-21-ALG)

Moreover, as most of the students spent the whole week on the Campus where the internet connection was not always available, they had to wait until they were back home on weekends to post their messages, comment, or reply to comments.

As for working on the WBB, though it was user-friendly, some students did not find that it was a well-designed one. For example, the students preferred to log into the WBB right from their mobile. That was an inconvenience that should have affected the engagement in the project, given the fact that the WBB was specifically

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designed to be effectively used via computers. Moreover, for them, it was an old-fashioned platform that resembled sites from the 1980's. Most students are familiar with the use of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). For this reason, it is unsurprising that some were disappointed when they shifted to work on a less sophisticated platform. Since the WBB writing window refreshes every 15 minutes, the students were advised to construct their posts first in a text editor then copy it. These difficulties are echoed in the students' narratives below:

- *The only thing I didn't like in the Ibunka2019 project was its website. From my perspective, it was not well designed and organized. We were not able to download/[upload] more than one image. Moreover, the deadline for each topic was not effectively applied; some students continued to post about the first topic even though its deadline was over.* (Achwaq-F-21-ALG)

- *What really bothered me in this project is the manner in which is designed, it's tricky to log in besides we can't receive a notification if someone has commented or answered our comments. It is hard to check every time.* (Yasmin1-F-20-ALG)

- *I really did not like the steps that I obliged to follow to post my message.* (Khadidja-F-21-ALG)

- *It didn't give us enough time when we wrote the essays which was just 15 min that made us under pressure thinking how to finish in a hurry and ignoring writing mistakes.* (Lamis-21-F-ALG)

Some students found restricted by the suggested topics and also by the word limit imposed on posts and comments, during each phase, even though the students did not seem to always abide by this requirement. Similarly, the project phases had so tight deadlines. Students wanted longer intervals to post their messages, receive comments, and reply to them. Sometimes, the students felt disappointed when they did not get feedback from their peers, or they did not get the feedback they were expecting. The following quotes reflected the students' concern about the design of the project itself:

- *The obligation to write each time, because sometimes I wasn't on the mood to write.* (Amira-F-21-ALG)

- *I didn't like something in the last phase, which is about the message that must contain exact number of words or more.* (Yasmin2-F-19-ALG)

- *I didn't like being obliged each time to write about a certain chosen topic. I*

like to write freely about whatever I want whenever I want 😕✋. (Maram-F-21-ALG)

- *I did not like that the number of the participants was huge, so I was not able to read all the essays.* (Messaouda-F-21-ALG)

Meanwhile, other students raised the issue of the lack of interaction from the other participants:

- *Even though my writings are read, they are not commented (criticised or encouraged by) and this cold my heat to write or share no longer.* (Nouria-F-20-ALG)

Interestingly, for some students, the difficulties faced were quite trivial if compared to the huge benefits gained from the project:

- *Actually, the challenges I faced were, maybe, trivial comparing to the great valuable things I have learned. To be honest I have no difficulty that deserve really to make it as a challenge in this IBUNKA project.* (Nouria-F-20-ALG)

- *It was a great experience. Even though it didn't last long, we could seize out time in writing and communicating with other Ibunkers. I wanna say thank you for this incredible opportunity. much love* ☐ (Hadia-F-21-ALG)

4.4. Other Relevant Issues

Not only did *Ibunka2019* offer my students a window of opportunity to practise writing within a meaningful context, but it also gave them a chance to raise their awareness on issues of interculturality and ELF, which are essential in nurturing empowered intercultural speakers in them.

4.4.1. Interculturality

Given the fact that this project involved students from six countries (Algeria, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and the Netherlands), it is intercultural by its very nature, which provided a great opportunity to raise the students' awareness about issues of world diversity. It thus came as no surprise that most of the students agreed with the Likert statement that the project sparked their interest in other cultures, traditions, values, perspectives, and so forth (Figure 5). Students are made aware that engaging

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in conversations in English with people from various countries require not only grammatical correctness but also the ability to build comity/rapport (Aston, 1993; Spencer-Oatey, 2008); a need which is often emphasised in such telecollaborative tasks (e.g., Demir & Kayaoğlu, 2021).

Figure 5

Students' Reactions on the Project's Potential for Cross-cultural Awareness Raising
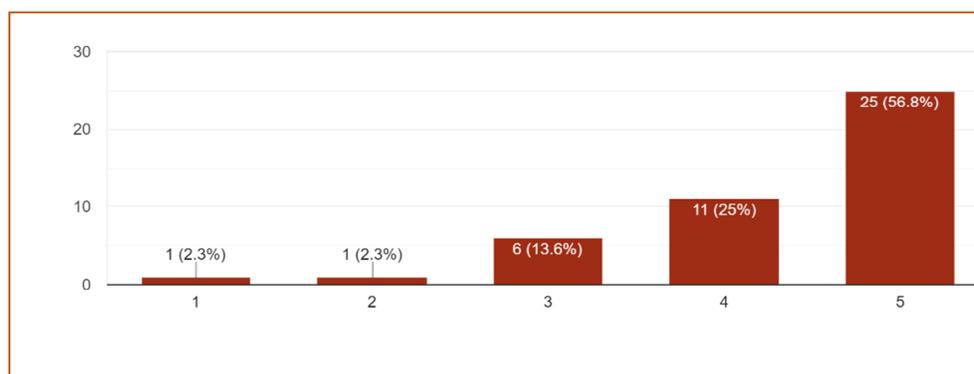
The project is very helpful, as it exposed the participants to the cultural aspects of other countries. It is information rich on both the so-called 'big C' and 'small c' cultural aspects. The first is all about the factual side like artifacts, traditions, food, weddings rituals, touristic attractions, customs, history, geography, and educational system. As a case in point, the Algerians explained that their country is the largest in Africa and located along the Mediterranean Sea; this piece of information was perceived as new by many non-Algerian participants. Similarly, a Taiwanese participant talked about some landmark festivals in his country: Lantern Festival, Chinese New Year, and Moon Festival. Small 'c' culture is all about the invisible and deep dimension of culture, including beliefs, values, insiders' perspectives, underlying food, hobbies, music, and so on. As an example, a participant from Indonesia talked about the Hijab (or Jilbab) fashion and its signification as a religious and social practice in her culture, and another talked about 'Angklung', a traditional musical instrument, and what it means that people still play this instrument and keep their ancestors' heritage alive. The comments from the students on such topics provide opportunities for reflecting, appreciating, enquiring about, and comparing/contrasting other cultures with one's own (e.g., Chinese New

Year celebration in Taiwan and Indonesia). In fact, the students were triggered to appreciate their culture and reflect on it first of all. This happens when they select a tradition that best represents their (regional) culture, and write about them and invite others to comment on. Therefore, each writing opportunity is an opportunity to reflect on one's own culture before they reflect on the culture of the Other.

4.4.2. Learners' EFL Mindset

It is worth noting that, even after participating in the project, students still favour communicating with NSs, as they serve a better model for them (cf. Ke and Suzuki, 2011; Ke & Cahyani, 2014). The statements below serve as vivid examples:

• *I liked everything in the Ibunka 2019 project. The only thing I didn't like is the fact that we were talking with non-native speakers. It would be amazing if we were talking with natives in order to acquire the language and their style of writing.* (Nessrine-F-20-ALG)

• *It was really an interesting project, useful and amusing. I suggest to allow us to communicate with native speakers.* (Sarra-F-20-ALG)

Meanwhile, other students complain about the coparticipants' recurrent grammar and spelling mistakes which, for them, made the reading of their essays a very hard task, as revealed in this statement by Halima (F-20-ALG):

• *What I did not like is that sometimes I read some essays that really had a lot of grammar and spelling mistakes.*

In a similar vein, in response to the Likert statement: "I would you like to participate in the same project but, this time, with native speakers (e.g., from the UK or the USA)," most of the students expressed their strong willingness in this regard (Figure 6).

Figure 6
Students' Willingness to Communicate with Native Speakers
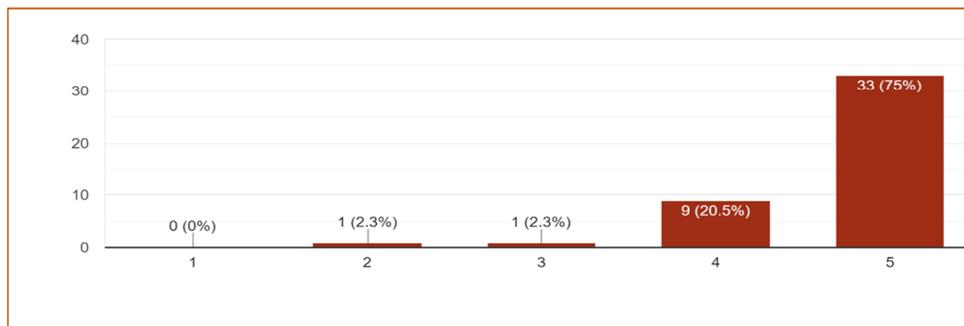
But when they were asked if they see communication with non-native speakers "more beneficial and relaxing," there was a disparity in students' responses, more than half of them seemed to agree with the Likert statement (Figure 7):

Figure 7
Students' Reactions to the Likert Statement: "Communication with Non-native Speakers is more Beneficial and Relaxing"
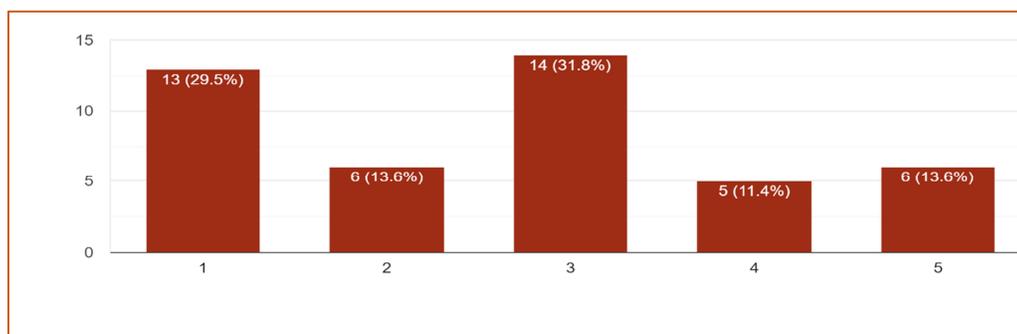
This suggests that even when the students are communicating under lingua franca conditions, they still maintain an EFL mindset, assuming that native-like competence can only be developed while communicating with NS peers, despite the fact that they appreciate this type of communication, which is a window opened to them on a world larger than the NSs' or the classroom's one. Thus, they assumed that poor grammar, spelling, vocabular (and pronunciation) can be a real hindrance

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to communication even among NNSs (read the three statements above). In fact, though poor their English might be perceived by themselves and their peers, the students succeeded in this endeavour to a large extent: more than 2000 messages/comments/replies were posted mainly by the students, which suggested that communication among NNSs is a less anxious experience than when communicating with NSs (e.g., Kohn, 2016).

What has been said above could serve as a reason why the participants were apologetic and complaining about their poor linguistic command, while they complimented their counterparts on their good English. Obviously, such a behaviour aiming at establishing comity (Aston, 1993) or rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) among the project participants reflects a membership in a community of practice, non-native speakers of English, who are being instructed in an EFL setting (see Dendenne, 2021, for further details on this issue relative to the participation in *Ibunka2019* project). These are archetypal narratives of students complaining about their poor command of English:

- *I like languages too but unfortunately, I'm not that good at it. My English isn't too well and my Dutch is even worse, which is quite funny in my opinion.* (Bertus-M-15-NED).
- *I study English education, it's not easy for me because I'm not really fluent to speak in English.* (Junisa-F-18-INA)
- *I was very hesitant when I chose this English Education Study Program at first. You know why? because I was just desperate, not at all proficient in English. I'm afraid, inferior, very inferior. Maybe the other friends are already proficient in English. But I try to convince myself. So that fear and inferiority slowly fade away.* (Siti-F-18-INA)
- *Amel, I'm very shy because there might be a lot of grammar mistakes as I write this.* (Widi-F-18-INA)

Or complimenting other participants' good English:

- *Oh yes, I think your English is good, you are good at talking and I want to be like you and the last thank you for reading my comment ;)* (Runi-F-18-INA to Caca-F-18-INA)
- *Thank you for your reply! You are studying English very hard! You said you are not good at English, but I don't think so. Your English is fine and easy to*

understand! I'm also not confident in English. I'm majoring science and engineering, but I'm doing my best to study English. (Kent-M-19-JPN to Andina-F-18-INA).

4.4.3. Pedagogical Lingua Franca Perspective

In telecollaboration projects, two types of language constellations can be found: tandem and pedagogical lingua franca (PLF) approach (e.g., TECOLA, 2019; Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017). In a tandem constellation, the students practise each other's language alternatively. For example, communicating in Arabic as Arabic NSs with English learners of Arabic. Then, doing it the other way around: communicating as Arabic learners of English with NSs of English. In a PLF constellation, students use their shared target language as the language of communication, where both sides are interested to learn that language. The language used is considered as a 'pedagogical lingua franca' because the students use it in a pedagogical context and under pedagogical guidelines, with a mentoring support from their teachers (the PLF could a language other than English, e.g., Arabic, Chinese, German, Spanish) (e.g., Kohn, 2016; Kohn, 2020; Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017). This is the approach adopted in the *Ibunka2019* project. Given that the chosen PLF is the world's real lingua franca, this makes our project a valuable awareness-raising experience about the reality of English, which is used as a global language and whose NNSs outnumber by far its native speakers (e.g., see Crystal, 2003, pp. 60-67).

The striking advantage of the PLF approach lies in "its emancipatory quality with regard to promoting confidence and self-assurance" (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017, pp. 361-362). Here, the focus of the learner is on establishing friendly relationships and engaging in negotiating endeavour, instead of seeking to emulate a NS behaviour. Our observations lay support to Kohn & Hoffstaedter's (2017, p. 363) ones that students are "more critical about their own performance than their interlocutors." This is manifested, for example, in the self-deprecation tokens spotted in the corpus (361 tokens), where many of them centre on their poor language/English proficiency (e.g., *"sorry if there is a mistake; sorry if my story is a bit bored for you;" "a small school is convenient for a lazy person like me;" "please don't mind my opinion;" "I was probably too naive to understand this world;" "I'm very shy because there might be a lot of grammar mistakes as I write this"*). Indeed, the nature of technology-mediated interactions, especially when a PLF constellation is adopted, tend to enable the students to reflect on their potential to show empathy, build rapport, and engage in cooperation with others (Kohn &

Hoffstaedter, 2017).

5. Discussion

The predominantly qualitative perspective adopted in the present study allowed us to uncover the rewards gained from the *Ibunka2019* project, the challenges encountered as well as tackle other relevant issues (interculturality, EFL learner mindset, and the PLF perspective).

Making *Ibunka2019* an integrated instructional means for the writing module offered the participants the opportunity to use 'their' English in a meaningful context (both to them and their coparticipants). Following Widdowson's (1996, p. 67) understanding of 'authenticity,' this project provided ample opportunities for the students to deal with a language that "can be *appropriated* in the context of learning" (italics original). These students are thus "induced to invest the language with their personalities and purposes." It means, the Ibunkers used the language to communicate with people from all over the world and, at the same time, satisfied the requirement of the task at hand (practising writing) in accordance with the objectives of the module's curriculum.

Moreover, engaging in telecollaborative writing incited my students to foster their autonomy (e.g., selecting topics, reading posts and choosing the ones to comment on, constructing texts and posting them independently). Indeed, such projects provide compelling evidence of the students' increased agentic behaviour as they engage in the project tasks, given the intertwined nature of autonomy (being able to act independently) and agency (taking initiative) (Teng, 2019).

Despite the many challenges encountered by the students during the project, which are not uncommon in such types of projects. These challenges were mainly related to the internet, a limitation which is often reported in slow-connection contexts like the Algerian one (e.g., Meziane & Kara Terki, 2011). Besides, the design of the project itself was also one of the main challenges encountered, due to, for instance, the platform, tight deadlines, and the number of participants. Nonetheless, these challenges should not deter the teachers from deploying telecollaborative practices in EFL classes even in low-tech learning contexts (Al-Jarf, 2006).

Thanks to writing under *Ibunka2019* conditions, I had ample opportunities to integrate interculturality. Raising the users' awareness of the diversity of world's countries on matters of beliefs, attitudes, traditions, food, and perception of social issues was but the first step in training the future intercultural speakers. In agreement with the idea that interculturality is not to be dealt with as a separate content, but it should rather be integrated in the various foreign language activities (e.g., TECOLA, 2019), *Ibunka2019* is believed to have an excellent potential for raising students' cross-cultural/intercultural awareness through writing tasks, despite the relatively short period of the project. This conclusion is in line with the numerous findings that agreed on the effectiveness of telecollaboration for intercultural (communicative) competence awareness and/or development (e.g., Al-Jarf, 2006; Avgousti, 2018; Bennacer, 2019; Demir & Kayaoğlu, 2021; Lenkaitis, Calo, & Venegas Escobar, 2019; Özdemir, 2017; Sardegna & Dugartsyrenova, 2021; Toscu & Erten, 2020). Telecollaboration has been deemed a fostering practice relative to confronting stereotypes and misconceptions on the culture of the Other and increasing interest in one's own culture (Avgousti, 2018) as well as relative to increasing students' eagerness to build good relationship with their coparticipants and creating ample occasions to put into practice students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Demir & Kayaoğlu, 2021). Based on this, I am convinced that this project can help enrich the students' understanding about the world's cultural diversity and adds to the often-limited information offered by EFL textbooks, which usually focus on 'big C' aspects, with no or little opportunity to reflect on them (e.g., Gómez Rodríguez, 2015; Ait Aissa & Keskes, 2015; Weninger & Kiss, 2013). It is also an opportunity to go beyond the focus on the 'inner-circle' countries/cultures (Kachru, 1992), particularly the UK and the USA, generally preferred in English language textbooks (e.g., Akalin, 2004; Alptekin, 2002; McKay, 2002), and to move towards a more *internationalized* depiction of cultures.

On another point, finding out that the project participants tended to favour communication with NSs is, in fact, unsurprising, taking into account that transformation of learner beliefs and conceptualizations towards English is likely to take time (Ke & Suzuki, 2011; Ke & Cahyani, 2014; Timmis, 2002), which is why the adoption of telecollaboration should be an unrelenting teaching and learning practice in the EFL classroom. Indeed, this entrenched emphasis on NS competence and exonormative models (in curriculum, testing, teachers/students' rhetoric, etc.) is an obstacle for them to realise the affordances of communicating using ELF and the fact that they are developing a strategic competence while striving to ensure

successful communication with limited resources (Tarone, 2016).

Nonetheless, EFL learner identity should never be a barrier in the face of empowering these students to be "emancipated" ELF users (Kohn, 2018a; 2020, p. 4), given that identity by its very nature is "constructed, reconstructed, maintained, and negotiated to a significant extent" (Teng, 2019, p. 41). Undoubtedly, the transformation from an EFL mindset to an ELF one needs awareness, time and recurrent opportunities to communicate using ELF in meaningful situations. In this regard, telecollaboration projects can be a valuable support and a viable option to implement in EFL classes. According to Kohn's (2018/2020, p. 1), based on a social constructivist understanding of learning, EFL students create "MY English," that is, their own version of the language as "emancipated agents of learning and communication" – in agreement with the findings of Ke and Suzuki (2011) and Ke and Cahyani (2014). They are freed from the NSs' *haunting ghost*, as they navigate communication successfully with others using English. This is in harmony with Widdowson's (1996) line of thought that students are not required to imagine a context where they have to communicate with a NS. Rather, they should be offered opportunities where to use English in "meaningful" settings to them and their interlocutors alike. And here, the empowering nature of the PLF approach (e.g., Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017) comes to the fore.

The PLF perspective makes a great contribution in projects like *Ibunka2019*. Undoubtedly, designing telecollaboration projects, following a lingua franca constellation, is very useful for the learners (the users, rather) of English to open their eyes to the global status of the language being used and the fact that aiming for a NS competence should not desist them from appreciating their competence in using it to communicate with other NNSs to build relations and seek opportunities for cooperation as true global citizens. In this context, Al-Jarf (2006, p. 16) showed that engaging in telecollaboration helped the EFL students involved to develop "a global perspective" (p. 16) on the use of English. Moreover, projects like *Ibunka2019* are in tune with current developments in English language teaching, which encourage the implementation of an ELF-aware pedagogy to counter the engrained focus on correctness and NS competence (e.g., Bayyurt & Sifakis, 2018; Sifakis et al., 2018; Sifakis & Tsantila, 2018). However, as Kohn (2016, 2020) and Kohn and Hoffstaedter (2017) emphasised, awareness-raising needs to be complemented by opportunities to engage in ELF communication and make

English their own, exploiting it for their own purposes, like when using it as a PLF to interact with other NNSs.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

I would like to echo my earlier call to Algerian EFL scholars and practitioners to invest in telecollaboration as an effective instructional means in the age of globalisation and intercultural communication (Dendenne, 2019). Telecollaborative activities can be appropriated to teach the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), plus translation as a fifth skill, in an authentic context. Beyond this linguistic dimension, intercultural telecollaboration can be an effective tool for awareness raising on issues of interculturality, diversity, human rights, ELF, world Englishes, and so forth. Furthermore, telecollaborative tasks have a fostering effect on the development of learners' autonomous and agentic behaviour in and out of the EFL classroom.

On the issue of identity, the students' narratives as reported in the present study are of immense importance to teachers, as they help in understanding how learners construct their identity as EFL learners so as to be able to accompany them to negotiate their assumed identity and transform it, when necessary. For example, the Ibunkers admitted freely their deficiency in English and appreciated the fact that some of their coparticipants arrive to write/speak good English, following a predominantly an EFL mindset (cf. Boonsuk, Ambele & McKinley, 2021). They appeared to undermine their ability to act strategically and build good relations with the coparticipants so as to push the communication forward despite their limited linguistic proficiency. Teachers need to be aware of this assumed identity so as to be able to invite their students to transform this EFL mindset into an ELF one. This is in harmony with the reality of the English language, which is used nowadays as the default lingua franca around the globe.

5.2. Limitations

Two main limitations need to be highlighted here, which could hopefully inform the design of future research. First, in the *Ibunka2019*, neither the teacher nor the students had the opportunity to participate in the design of the project's activities and the negotiation of its deadlines. Instead, they had to appropriate it in accordance with their own context, which left little opportunity for pedagogical differentiation (Kohn, 2018a).

Second, in the results and the discussion, I gave more weight to the data gained by the online survey more than the students' actual performance during the project and the insights gained from discussions with them during and after the project.

5.3. Suggestions for Further Research

Telecollaboration in the Algerian foreign language pedagogy, and EFL in particular, is an underexplored area of research. Indeed, conducting further research on the relevance of telecollaboration as a twenty-first century instructional means in the EFL classroom is highly encouraged. Particularly, EFL teachers and students have an array of choices to make when deciding to engage in telecollaboration. In this regard, they may choose between synchronous or asynchronous and written or spoken (audio/video-based) modes of communication as well as between a lingua franca perspective or a NS-NNS one. It is important to note that the decision-making on these – and other – issues should be open for negotiations among teachers and students from the institutions involved. If a differentiation in learning is to be achieved (e.g., Kohn, 2018a), listening to students as partners on an equal footing is a must. Indeed, taking the learner features (monolingual vs. bilingual; belonging to a minority ethnic group vs. belonging to a majority ethnic group) and preferences (e.g., learning style, favoured platforms) is the first step in the design and implementation of an effective telecollaboration project.

6. Conclusion

Following a case study design, I reported on my experience with two EFL written expression classes, while taking part in the *Ibunka2019* project during the 2019-2020 academic year. The findings of the study centred on the pedagogical benefits gained from the participation in the project: enhancing authenticity of the writing tasks and fostering learner autonomy. In addition, challenges encountered during the project were categorised and discussed (e.g., internet connection, the platform, the design of the project). This project unlocked also ample opportunities to integrate interculturality into the project activities, shed light on the learners' EFL mindset, and explore the empowering potential of the pedagogical lingua franca perspective. Moreover, the discussion section of the study touched on the pedagogical implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

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Notes:

[1] Held by the Department of French, University of Blida 2, Available in https://univ-blida2.dz/fr/2019/11/10/colloque-international-sur-la-telecollaboration-universitaire-en-classes-de-langues-pratiques-enseignantes-defis-linguistiques-et-horizons-culturels/

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Appendix: The post-project online survey's items

1. What did you like in the *Ibunka2019* project?
2. What you did not you like in the *Ibunka2019* project?
3. Do you think that communicating with non-native speakers is more beneficial and relaxing than communicating with native speakers?
4. Participating in *Ibunka2019* project helped me RAISE my awareness about the traditions, values, perspectives, and so forth, of the cultures involved.
5. I would LIKE to participate in the same project but, this time, with native speakers (e.g., from the UK or the USA).
6. The participation in the *Ibunka2019* helped me RETHINK the English language as a global means for international communication, rather than a mere subject for examination.
7. I COULD build a good relationship with the/some participants from the other countries.
8. Can you please say why or why not?
9. Writing under *Ibunka2019* conditions MOTIVATED me to do the tasks required (posting, commenting, replying...)
10. Writing under *Ibunka2019* conditions MADE writing for me more authentic and meaningful (my writing had real-world effect/writing on interesting topics/communicating with people from other countries/making my country and culture known to others).
11. Writing under *Ibunka2019* conditions MADE writing more interactive via comments and replies to others' comments.
12. Writing under Ibunka2019 conditions ENHANCED collaborative learning with

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classmates/the teacher.

13.I found the *Ibunka2019* tasks very COMPATIBLE with and COMPLEMENTARY to my writing lessons.

14.I could manage to take RESPONSIBILITY of my writing even without the help/with little help from my teacher.

15.Can you please give, at least, ONE REASON?

16.The committed mistakes (by me or my partners) were NOT an obstacle in the face of smooth communication/doing the project's tasks?

17.The Web Bulletin Board (*Ibunka*'s website) was an INTERACTIVE and USER-FRIENDLY writing environment.

18.What were the DIFFICULTIES/CHALLENGES you faced during the project?

19.Can you please mention, at least, ONE difficulty/challenge?

20.FEEL FREE to say a last word on your participation in the *Ibunka2019* project or give suggestions for future projects.