INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN BRAZIL AND CHINA: VIRTUAL EXCHANGES FOR ENGLISH LEARNING

COLABORAÇÃO INTERNACIONAL ENTRE BRASIL E CHINA: INTERCÂMBIOS VIRTUAIS PARA A APRENDIZAGEM DE INGLÊS

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ABSTRACT: *This educational experience report aims to discuss and analyze a pedagogical experience in which Brazilian students and professors interact with Chinese students and professor during virtual exchanges for learning English as an additional language, part of a project called PCI, held in state colleges of São Paulo in partnership with a Chinese university. The structure and purpose of the project are detailed to demonstrate how students interact learning English via texting apps, as well as cultural aspects are discussed comparing the differences existing in both countries. Concepts such as telecollaboration and m-learning give the basis for the theoretical approach present in this experience.*

KEYWORDS: *International Collaboration; Language Learning; Cultural Exchange.*

RESUMO: Este relato de experiência educacional tem como finalidade discutir e analisar uma experiência pedagógica na qual alunos e professores brasileiros interagem com alunos e professora chinesa durante intercâmbios virtuais para aprendizagem de inglês como língua adicional, parte do projeto denominado como PCI, realizado nas faculdades estaduais de São Paulo em parceria com uma universidade na China. A estrutura e o propósito deste projeto foram detalhados, a fim de demonstrar como os alunos interagem aprendendo inglês utilizando aplicativos de mensagens, comparando aspectos culturais que diferenciam os dois países participantes. Conceitos como telecolaboração e m-learning baseiam a abordagem teórica presente neste relato de experiência

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Colaboração Internacional; Aprendizagem de Línguas; Intercâmbio Cultural.

GIVING THE CONTEXT

Communication has always been a bridge linking people from the whole world throughout mankind history and it keeps challenging all of us even nowadays. Through words it is possible to navigate and cross different cultures and territories, setting up contact with others and learning not only about languages but also understanding

behaviors and adapting to new perspectives.

When it comes to communicating and learning at the same time, the project to be described and analyzed in this paper aims to clarify how virtual exchanges between two extremely different countries such as Brazil and China may constitute a relevant sample of collaboration and partnership.

Everything began some years ago, when colleges from the state of São Paulo, in Brazil, started collaborating with the United States, with the purpose of improving communication skills in English as students´ target language. The well-succeed experience inspired other colleges to follow the same path. As the time went by, many other collaborations with more countries and languages were involved in the project, including partners from the USA, Mexico, China, India, Colombia, Argentina, Portugal and so on.

According to Succi Junior (2020), the Virtual Exchange or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) - terms used worldwide - started at Fatec Americana in 2013 and it has expanded to other Fatecs since 2018 through the term used internally as International Collaborative Projects (PCIs)[1] promoted by Unidade de Ensino Superior de Graduação - Cesu[1] (undergraduate Programs) and Languages Coordination. Succi Junior (2020, p. 133) points out that the International Collaborative Projects aim at helping professors and students to establish meaningful exchange in a collaborative way, in order to build knowledge and global citizenship. In such cases, technology support promotes academic-professional practices concerning the interaction between students and partners in international environments.

As Succi Junior (2020) mentions, the PCI planning usually starts after the "match" between two different institutions (Brazil and China, in this experience report) regarding the academic calendar, institutions administrative demands, limitations on a specific software use and length of project. At this point, objectives are considered, assessment and linking with the disciplines from both institutions are analyzed in order to map the project and collaborators as well. According to Succi Junior (2020, p. 134-136), the mapping is also composed of phases in which students are invited to collaborate to achieve the specific objectives established by the PCI. The most common phases are:

Table 1 - Virtual Exchange phases commonly used

PCI´s phases	Assignments
Phase 1	Students' self-introduction (Icebreaker)
Phase 2	Students know the partners contexts
Phase 3	Development of the main activities and collaboration
Phase 4	Results presentation
Phase 5	PCI evaluation

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The professors involved in the specific projects follow and monitor the groups` development to ensure the completion of the task in each phase and make some adjustments whenever necessary.

PRESENTING THE PROJECT

Despite a wide range of choices among countries and languages, this experience report describes specifically the collaboration for learning English as an additional language between Brazilian and Chinese undergraduate students. The first semester of 2022 represents the 8th edition of the project running by the two countries and encompasses the participation of eight Brazilian English professors and 6 Chinese English professors.

The project developed by the Brazilian state institutions Fatec Itaquaquecetuba, Fatec Mogi das Cruzes, Fatec Americana, Fatec Campinas and by the Chinese Tianjin Normal University (TJNU) is entitled *Cultural experiences in learning an additional language*. The preparation phase is carried out by the Brazilian and Chinese English professors through Zoom meetings, e-mails and messages sent on LARK platform.

The general objectives are to improve students' intercultural, technological, and English language skills, to have students talk about different everyday topics such as hobbies, their cities and important buildings, holidays and festivals, social media and food and drinks. The project usually lasts six or seven weeks according to the table below.

Table 2 - Virtual Exchange phases commonly used between Brazil and China

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Schedule	date	date	date	date
Duration	one week	three-four weeks	one week	one week
Assignments	Icebraker	Intercultural topics discussion	Oral presentations	Project evaluation

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The activities are developed by students from both universities divided into seven to ten groups of six to ten students, depending on the number of participants in that semester, through Platform LARK[1], the main communication tool. At the end of the project, each team collaboratively prepares an oral presentation in order to share the team´s ideas about intercultural topics discussed. They are encouraged to choose one or two topics to organize each group presentation and share what they have learned through the interaction.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Since 2019, the partnership with China has been in progress at Fatec Itaquaquecetuba, a state college from São Paulo. When the collaboration started there, the participants were

undergraduates in Commercial Management, while the Chinese students major was Psychology. After the first experience, via WeChat, a very popular texting app in China, many things have changed for the best.

Each semester the number of participants increased, which made it possible to include more courses from the institution and give more students an opportunity to thrive and challenge themselves by interacting with foreigners, by the way, for most students, it is the first contact with people from abroad in their entire lives. This collaboration is significant for Brazilian students, even more when they live in a financially depressed area, like the ones living in Itaquaquecetuba, where the lack of opportunities is an ordinary scenario. The students from Mogi das Cruzes report a different reality about opportunities and a better level of development of the city compared to Itaquaquecetuba.

One of the colleges collaborating with China is Fatec Itaquaquecetuba. This college is located in the state of São Paulo, in Brazil. The region where it is located is the eastern part of the state, not so far from the capital, just 35 kilometers away. At this state college, Fatec Itaquaquecetuba, there are 4 courses available: Commercial Management, Executive Secretariat, Information Technology Management and Business Management. In the same region of São Paulo, another college taking part of the project is Fatec Mogi das Cruzes, specifically with undergraduates majoring in Logistics.

Unlike the Chinese, trying to define a group age for the Brazilian students in those colleges is quite impossible. You can find very heterogeneous groups in which the youngest student is 18 years old while the oldest student is 60. On the other hand, there is a characteristic that unites all those undergraduates: the dream of reaching a better quality of life through qualification. Most of them believe that after graduating, their chances to have a better job increases considerably. Consequently, improving English skills is part of the process for competing in the job market for better opportunities. It explains why most students take it so seriously when they participate in the cultural exchanges, eager to learn English.

The other state colleges from São Paulo collaborating with China are Fatec Americana and Fatec Campinas. Fatec Americana is located northwest of the state capital São Paulo, about 126 kilometers away, and its population was estimated at 242,018 inhabitants in 2010. Over the last 30 years the undergraduate courses offered by Fatec Americana are Business Management, Digital Games, Information Security, Logistics, System Analysis and Development, Fashion and Textile and Textile Production. The collaboration with the Chinese partners took place in 2020 at Fatec Americana and the participants were undergraduate students in System Analysis and Development.

Concerning Fatec Campinas, the institution is located 99 km northwest of the state capital. In 2020 its population was estimated at 1,213,792 inhabitants, being the third most populous city in São Paulo state and the fourteenth in the entire country. The undergraduate courses offered by Fatec Campinas are Business Management, Chemical Processes, Energy Management and Energy Efficiency, Information Technology Management and System Analysis and Development. The project has been in progress at Fatec Campinas since 2021 and the participants major were Chemical Processes and

Business Management. Like the students from Fatec Itaquaquecetuba and Mogi das Cruzes, participants from Fatec Americana and Fatec Campinas are always motivated and willing to collaborate.

Our partner in China is the Tianjin Normal University, in the province of Tianjin, a very modern city in the north-east of the country. Tianjin Normal University is a public university founded in 1958 in Tianjin, China. With several courses and thousands of students, the variety of participants from different majors enriches the experience during the interactions with Brazilians, undoubtedly.

Nearly 70% of college students in Brazil are work-study students, and they are at quite different age levels. The average age of Chinese college students is 22. Different cultural backgrounds and age levels lead to differences in various aspects in the collaboration. Daily arrangements, experience, topic coverage, and exchange of concerns, etc.

In terms of life, work and study, most Brazilian partners have richer experience than Chinese students. Brazilian students offer more mature opinions in many aspects, especially work and family. They can hold various topics easily. The social role of Chinese students is relatively simpler. Most of them live with their parents. Chinese students are accustomed to a commute between home and school for many years. Most of them are taken care of by their parents in their daily life without having their own small family. Some of the Chinese students have part-time jobs but it's just a minor occupation in their spare time instead of a serious work-study pattern.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Various factors may influence the choice of shared communication tools or platforms. First, it should be free and stable which is the basis for long-term communication. Second, it must meet basic functional requirements. Real-time communication leaves no pressure for the students to reply in the form of messages at their convenience. Third, sometimes graphic delivery fosters a good supplement for difficulties in language expression. Forth, video conference function facilitates further and more efficient communication, though due to time difference and lack of confidence in English speaking, some students may avoid trying it.

Up to now, the well selected tool has been Lark. There are problems to be solved, but in most cases, LARK serves as a good assist in COIL/Virtual Exchange. It can present subtitles during a conference and can even offer subtitles for uploaded records which can help a lot for better understanding and language application improvement. Lark can also show the users who have already read their messages, which can give the users great reassurance for idea delivery. Certainly, LARK is not perfect. The professors are making constant efforts in pursuit of better tools and task arrangement, which will be constantly improved for better learning and communication experience.

ENGAGING TOPICS FOR CONVERSATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

Every year the group of participants changes, the number of students vary a lot, the

minimum of Brazilians taking part is around 15, the maximum is 60, on the other hand, in China there are always a minimum of 40 students, every semester. The Chinese professor divides the total of students into two groups, so that one part works with Fatec Itaquaquecetuba and Fatec Mogi das Cruzes and the other part with Fatec Americana or Fatec Campinas.

Commonly, participants work in smaller groups with around 8 students interacting together in English, using communication apps. The experience lasts around three months, with 5 to 6 topics spread during the weeks. The subjects suggested every week elicit students, giving them opportunities to get to know more about each other's countries, cultures and interests. An example of the group's distribution can be illustrated on the Figure 1.

Figure 1 - An example of groups distribution
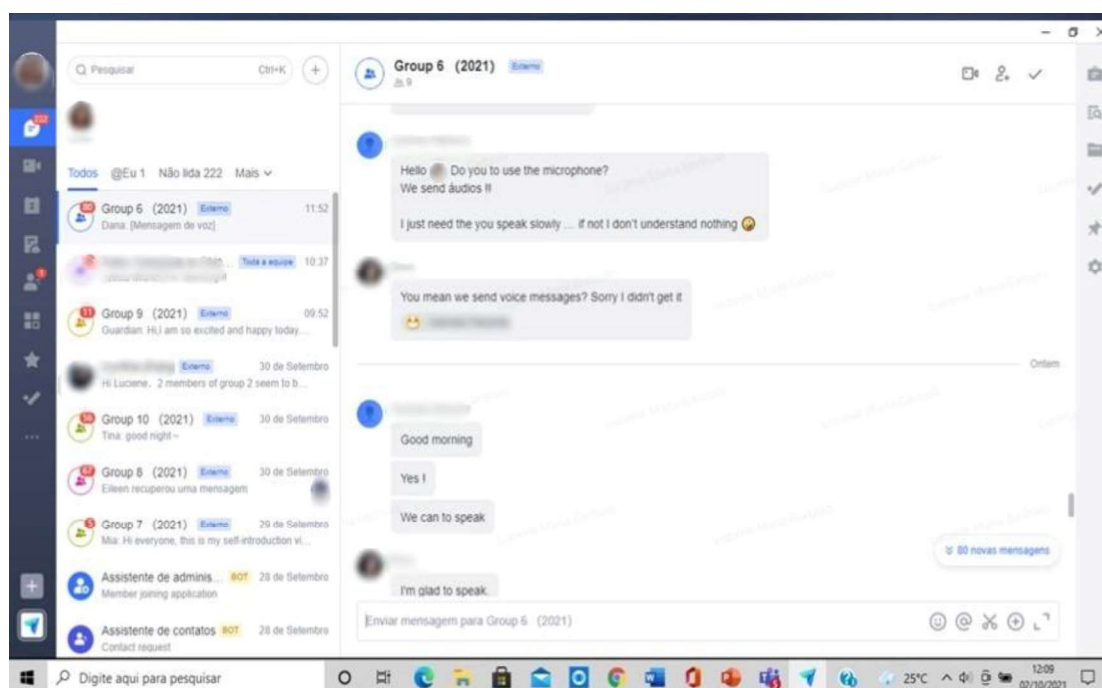
Source: Interactions on LARK.

At the beginning, students introduce themselves by sharing short videos in which they include personal and academic information. Brazilians also include professional data. Some of them talk about hobbies and show some pictures to illustrate what they consider relevant to inform. In the coming weeks, they discuss issues related to their cities and countries; cultural festivals, holidays, and celebrations; hobbies and interests; social media; typical food and drinks.

During the interactions, they share not only written information by texting, but they also share videos, audios, and pictures. Most of the participants could interact and accomplish the weekly assignments in order to improve their English linguistic skills, such as speaking, writing, reading, and listening.

Figure 2 - Video interaction
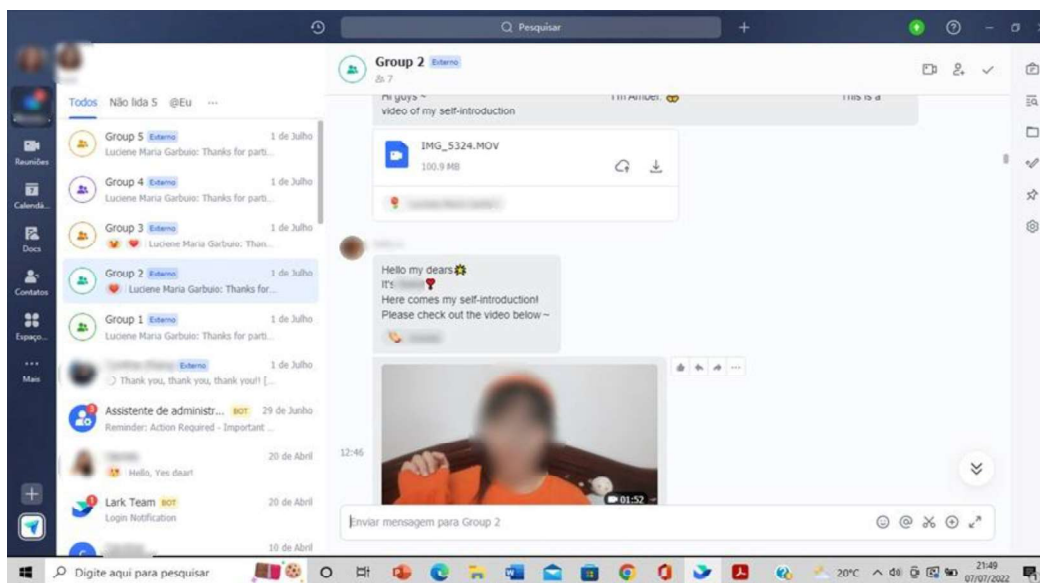
Source: Interactions on LARK.

The speaking can be represented by the videos recorded as an assignment for the Icebreaker and the final oral presentations. This interaction can be seen on Figure 2, which shows the self-introduction video and Figure 3 illustrates the video and audio posted by one of the Brazilian participants speaking about her weekend and trying to explain what she had done with her family over the weekend. In both cases, participants develop their speaking and listening skills in this kind of interaction.

Figure 3 - Video and audio interaction
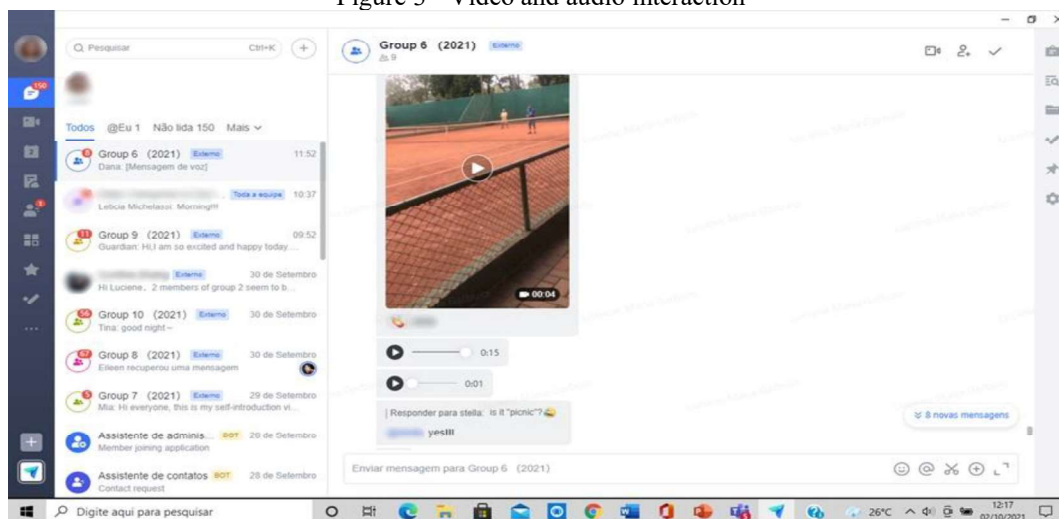
Source: Interactions on LARK.

· Participants interact mainly by writing, especially due to the time difference. For such interaction students have time to think about the best way to get their message across, sometimes using an online dictionary. Figure 4 represents the interaction and development of writing and reading skills, when the participant tries to explain how we celebrate Easter in Brazil.
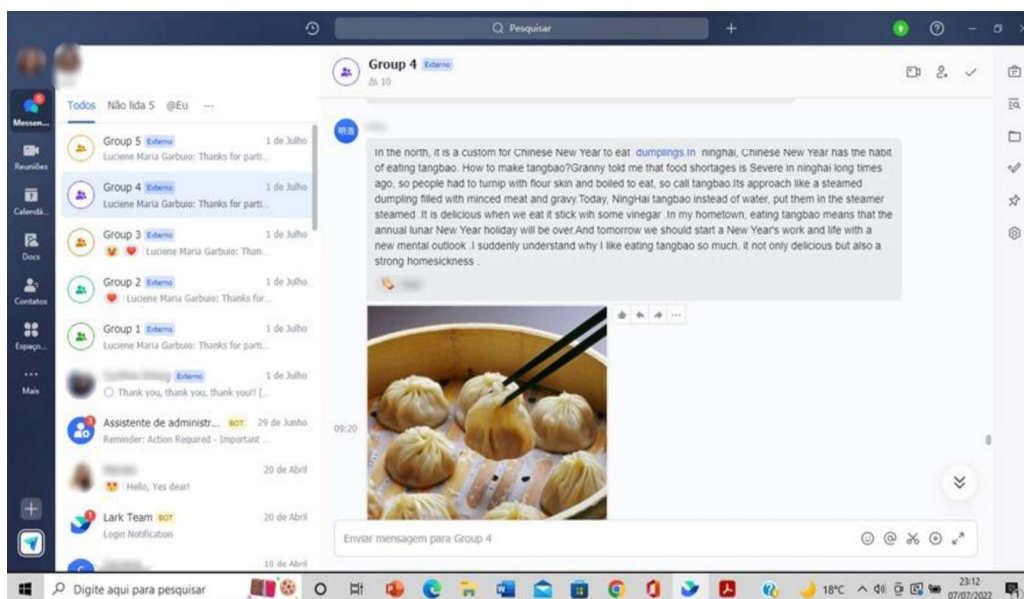
Figure 4 - Brazilian writing explanation on how Easter is celebrated in Brazil
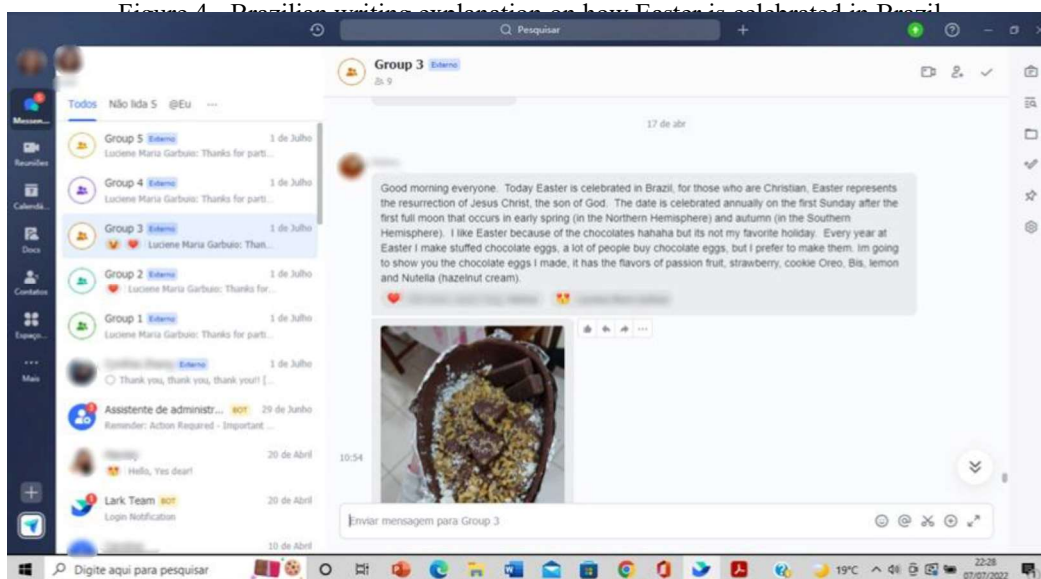
Source: Interactions on LARK.

On the other hand, Chinese participants explain in Figure 5 how they make dumplings and in what specific celebration Chinese eat this kind of food.

Figure 5 - Chinese writing explanation on how dumplings are made

Source: Interactions on LARK.

On Figure 6, students interact comparing two different preparations for beef. They started this talk because the Brazilian student mentioned lunchtime habits during the weekend. Another example of interaction that enriches both sides culturally is a short talk about weather and climate, on Figure 7.

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Figure 6 - Brazilian and Chinese student compare preparation for beef
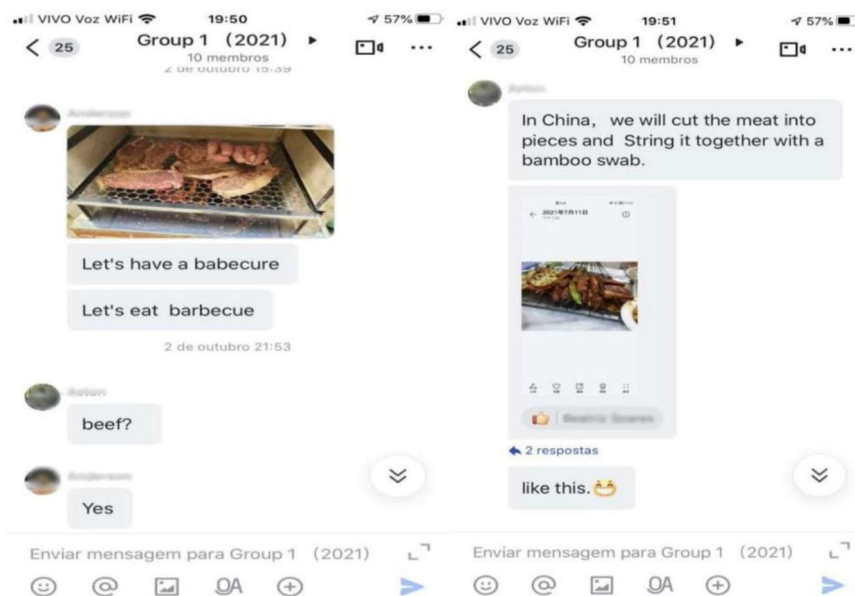
Source: Interactions on LARK.

Figure 7 - Brazilian and Chinese students comparing the weather in both countries

Source: Interactions on LARK.

At the end of the project, each group creates a presentation with slides regarding the main points they learned with colleagues. Chinese students prepare a separate presentation and Brazilians do the same. The idea is enabling them to reflect on what they learn about the other country and culture and highlight this.

THE ROLE OF M-LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

Comprehending cultural exchanges as a mere opportunity to access a foreign language is far beyond a naive point of view. From the perspective of social and digital inclusion, Brazilian students can benefit much more deeply when they keep contact with speakers of English living in different countries. They start noticing that part of what they believed they knew about a certain country, culture or people, most of the time is a simple misunderstanding. Sometimes prejudice ends completely in the face of a new friendship. These changes represent a passport for new paradigms, a more flexible and open point of view.

As they get aware of cultural differences, that coexisting is something possible and healthy for living in a society, students learn much more than words, consequently they change themselves into more adaptable, empathetic and challenging people. Getting to know that other colleagues on the other side of the globe are engaged in overcoming learning difficulties, makes them feel motivated to keep trying, developing and improving.

In terms of social and digital inclusion, telecollaboration and the use of mobile devices, together with wi-fi connection changed the way people access the whole world through a screen. For Brazilians, cellphones have a remarkable role in both social and digital inclusion, contributing to keep students connected, even when they are not in the classroom, then they can access information about the topics to discuss in the project, talk to colleagues and send files on LARK, full time, with no need of a computer lab as it was in the past.

Currently students keep connected to social media, apps, send and receive emails while they are on their journeys to work in the public transportation, Chinese colleagues receive messages from Brazilians during the weekend, in the middle of the night. To sum up, there are no territories in the cyberspace (LÉVY, 1996), and this project proves that.

The interactions among students are mediated for the target language via technology, making the internet essential for the project. During all the process, communication apps foster the telecollaboration (FIGUEIREDO, 2019) among participants, even when students are far from each other. Online interactions, sometimes synchronous, other times asynchronous, happen due to the virtualization and ubiquity. (LÉVY, 1996) From this perspective, both m-learning and u-learning (SACCOL; SCHLEMMER; BARBOSA, 2011) are concepts that are the basis for this part of the analysis.

According to Figueiredo (2019), the telecollaboration enhances mediation through language and allows participants to access cultural aspects. The definition of telecollaboration from O´Dowd (2018, p.1) complements this concept, including the notion of virtual exchanges, as follows:

Telecollaboration or `virtual exchange`, are terms used to refer to engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts and geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes.

Drawing a parallel between the concept of telecollaboration and m-learning, when it comes to online interactions for language learning, the relevant role of mobile phones and

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handheld computers needs to be exalted. For Saccol, Schlemmer and Barbosa (2011), m-learning can be defined as mobile learning, when learning processes occur by using mobile and wireless technologies, including the mobility of apprentices.

In addition, it is necessary to discuss the concept of u-learning, as ubiquitous learning, when factors such as geographic distance and different time zones fall to the floor as obstacles for communication. Students keep connected to colleagues by using communication apps all day long and everywhere. Although many students use computers as the main tool for interactions, most of them use their cellphones to access all the information, attend synchronous meetings and text with colleagues day-by-day.

Since 2019, it is easy to observe that cellphones are changing their roles as simple telephones into pedagogical materials and devices for studying and learning in Brazil. During the pandemic, several students could only keep studying and graduate because their cellphones were their online class and document creator simultaneously. They could watch online classes, read e-books from online libraries, apply for tests, complete assignments, make presentations of their researches for obtaining their degrees. To top it off, during the Pandemic, cellphones were essential allies of Education in São Paulo, avoiding students to abandon their dreams of getting their diplomas, in many cases, the first to graduate in the family. The more technology develops allowing people to connect and communicate, the more we will live in a united world, with no borders or wars, but more cooperation and partnership.

TASK DESIGN

The time difference and the differences in daily arrangements of the students limit the immediacy of their mutual communication. In this case, tasks should be designed with the difficulty in instant interaction considered.

Too short a period is not enough for students to know better about each other or communicate in depth. Most Brazilian students are busy in their spare time since they have jobs to do and family to take care of. Chinese students usually have a national-level English test every semester. If the project span is too long, too much energy and time must be consumed which may affect the interaction and learning effect. An appropriate time span can keep students' enthusiasm. To achieve good devotion and active participation without affecting the follow-up study or other work, proper task assignment and pace balance is critical and significant. In this case, the overall experience for all students will be good.

Since class matching is usually based on the cooperation between professors, there are no specific requirements for students' majors, and the topics that students can discuss are usually non-professional topics. This also makes cultural themed activities an inevitable and most feasible activity support.

Cultural communication topics usually cover a wide range, and there are many factors to consider when choosing a task topic.

First, fun. Whether most students will be interested in the topic is the top concern. Boring topics may trap the unfamiliar partners from both sides into hopeless

embarrassment and inactive participation in group communication which may turn out to be an ice machine.

Second, degree of task difficulty. If the topic itself has a certain degree of professionalism or specialization, lower task requirements should be a sensible compromise. For example, as for topics about city buildings or places of interests, students are encouraged to share pictures and texts while making introduction from their own perspectives rather than display from a professional perspective such as architecture or urban planning.

Third, task span. The students from both sides usually need at least one weekend to complete most of their tasks, since most of them tend to express more when they are relatively free. Therefore, it is more reasonable to give the students a week to complete a task. Although most students will exchange ideas whenever it's possible, weekends will certainly witness the greatest brainstorming. The communication between the two sides tends to be more intensive.

CONCLUSION

This educational experience report aimed to demonstrate and analyze how this cultural experience lived by Brazilians and Chinese can unite people under the purpose of building knowledge, exchanging culture, and learning together. During the last 4 years, every semester the challenges have become bigger, more complex, the benefits have got richer, and people involved have been thriving and becoming better human beings as a consequence of coexisting in the diversity.

The Collaborative Online International Learning project is a great opportunity for students to communicate with different students overseas regardless of the time-space differences, despite the eleven hours' time difference between Brazil and China. Furthermore, English language skills can be developed such as Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking as students discuss cultural aspects concerning both cultures.

The schedule organized by Brazilian institutions and the Chinese university and the teachers' assistance throughout the weeks could guarantee the project development and the students' interactions. Adjustments are usually necessary for the following editions concerning procedures, chosen topics for discussion and possible participants synchronous meetings.

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