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Published online: 22 Sep 2023.

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"JUST TAKE YOUR TIME AND TALK TO US, OKAY?" – INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION STUDENTS FACILITATING AND PROMOTING INTERCULTURALITY IN ONLINE INITIAL INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT: Meeting others abroad and/or online is considered important in the broad field of intercultural communication education (amongst others: international education, minority and migrant education, but also teacher education, language education) to test out one's learning about interculturality. For several weeks, a group of university students from China and a group of local and international students studying at a Finnish university met regularly online to talk about global educational issues. Using a specific lens of interculturality, which focuses on the discursive co-construction of identities, we explore their initial interactions, how they deal with the uncertainty and potential awkwardness of their very first encounters, before they start working on their educational tasks. Based on the students' self-disclosure (practices, thoughts, identity construction), and adopting a dialogical discourse analysis, the authors examine their co-construction of interculturality. The results show that the students try to facilitate interculturality while promoting it together more or less successfully. Reasons are discussed. The authors argue that research on the underexplored case of online initial interactions, which represent crucial moments in establishing and negotiating interculturality, could provide important research and pedagogical input for intercultural telecollaboration.

Keywords: initial interactions, self-disclosures, interculturality, dealing with uncertainty of first encounters

1. Introduction

Communicating with people whom we have not met before is something that we do in a whole range of settings. From passing encounters with strangers in public places to initial encounters with new people in workplaces, meeting people for the first time is part and parcel of our personal and professional lives (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2021). In meeting a new acquaintance, first

conversations are important for the relations that are subsequently established between interlocutors (Svennevig, 2014). Internationally, the broad field of intercultural communication education, which is anchored in a variety of educational fields such as *international education, minority and migrant education*, but also *teacher education* and *language education* (see R'boul and Dervin, 2023), has highly contributed to reflect on and examine what happens when people from different economic-political, cultural, linguistic contexts (amongst others) meet in all kinds of educational contexts and to prepare them to cooperate and learn with each other (Gutiérrez-Santiuste and Ritacco-Real, 2023). In this paper we make use of the notion of interculturality, a critical and dynamic approach to such educational encounters focusing on co-construction, change and identity negotiations (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004; Dervin, 2013; Holliday, 2010), to examine international students' first encounters during telecollaboration. We argue that doing research on this under-researched aspect of telecollaboration could benefit both scholarship and teaching of intercultural communication in educational contexts.

Following the COVID-19 crisis, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in international and intercultural education is deemed critical as it could benefit all students (Ismaili, 2021). A lack of interaction among students remains one of the most pressing obstacles to this increasingly popular delivery method (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Although research on short-term or long-term international telecollaboration is plentiful (Barbosa and Ferreira-Lopes, 2021), to our knowledge, very few studies have focused specifically on what happens when students meet online for the first time, during the very first minutes of their encounters (see Ibnelkaid, 2018). Previous research has tended to focus on the totality of interactions during short-and/or long-term encounters (Katsumata and Guo, 2021) or during specific moments of discussion-questions (Sardegna and Dugartsyrenova, 2021), examining individual students' development of intercultural competence (Uzum *et al*., 2020), students' use of politeness strategies (Savlovska, *et al.*, 2021) and how students have managed to lead a project together (Porto *et al*., 2021). We argue that, considering the complexity, instability and fluidity of interculturality (Piller, 2017), whereby people perform balancing acts of being and doing together (Dervin, 2013), more information is needed about specific shorter-term moments of encounters during telecollaboration so as to improve the way we prepare students for longer-term interculturality in education.

In this study, based on the very first minutes of initial online interactions between groups of Chinese students based in Beijing and both local and international students studying at a Finnish university, we maintain that there is a need to focus on such critical moments as special entry points into interculturality in education. This focus is based on the argument that perspectives that attempt to generalise about someone's (long-term) acquisition or development of intercultural competence or success at communicating with people from other countries need to be counter-balanced by approaches that

are more fine-grained in intense and potentially stressful moments of encounters (Ferri, 2016), as could be the case of online initial encounters. Critical interculturality, which focuses on how people co-construct identities in interaction and co-change, represents an important approach to observe what people say and do interculturally (Dervin, 2016, 2022; Piller, 2010).

The following research questions are asked:

- What happens *interculturally* when strangers, who will be cooperating around global educational issues, meet each other for the very first time?
- How do they deal with the uncertainty and somewhat awkwardness of these first online encounters and co-construct interculturality (Kern and Develotte, 2018)?

The paper uses self-disclosure (SD hereafter), through which the students can reveal personal information to others (Spencer *et al.*, 2013), as a way of identifying relevant pieces of discourse relating to how they 'do' interculturality. Subsequently we adopt dialogical discourse analysis, through which voices are used to construct self and other, to examine their SDs and thus explore the different layers of interculturality in the opening sequences (Grossen, 2010).

2. DEFINING INTERCULTURALITY IN INITIAL ONLINE INTERACTIONS

In this section, following the aforementioned research objectives, we first conceptualise online collaborative encounters between Chinese and Finland-based students, looking into the original entry point of initial interactions. We note from the outset that the students from the Finnish university were both local Finnish students and international students registered at this university. We then explore and define the notion of interculturality, especially through a critical take, which serves as the main analytical element of the initial online interactions between the students.

2.1. *Initial Interactions as an Original Entry Point Into Intercultural Telecollaboration*

Interactions between people who have not previously met in which they orient to getting to know each other as opposed to a passing encounter in which one engages in some form of small talk to pass the time, are variously termed as 'first conversations', 'first encounters', 'getting acquainted interactions', 'initial encounters', and 'initial interactions'. In this paper, we use the term initial interactions, as it is the term that has been most commonly used to date in the pragmatics of online encounters (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2021).

As asserted in the introduction, the originality of this paper is to focus on initial interactions (i.e., the first minutes of interaction in international telecollaboration), rather than examining several months of data to observe how students develop

intercultural competence – which has often been the focus in studies on telecollaboration (Toscu and Erten, 2020). Ibnelkaid's (2018) chapter entitled *Enacting the scenography of a video call within its opening sequence*, is one of the rare papers to have focused on initial interactions in telecollaboration, using data derived from video chats between language learners. However, Ibnelkaid's focus is on the scenography of online interaction, i.e., techno-bodily constructed items (non-verbality, observed behaviours …), rather than what happens *interculturally* between the interactants in relation to self-disclosure.

The previous literature shows that there are at least three strands of research facilitating the exploration of initial interactions. First, some studies explore the relations among interlocutors focusing on the way the partners get acquainted or build a sense of 'agreeability' (Flint *et al.*, 2019; Haugh and Carbaugh, 2015; Whitehead and Lerner, 2021), compliments and compliment responses (Black and Barron, 2018), and self-presentations (Kim, 2022; Sinkeviciute and Rodriguez, 2021). Second, the linguistic and interactional aspects of getting acquainted among second-language users face-to-face is a popular topic of research. As such Haugh and Chang (2019), who examined the interactional sequencing of meeting others in a second language, provides a good example. Third, some researchers have explored the identity interlocutors construct through the influence of various identity markers (for instance gender) in intercultural encounters (Stevanovic *et al.*, 2019)

While most of these studies focus on getting acquainted in face-to-face settings between people in non-intimate, everyday settings (Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2021), few studies have tried to explore how partners co-construct who they are and how they do interculturality, and especially, how they deal with the uncertainty of the first minutes of encounters in intercultural telecollaboration among international students from different countries, as is the case in this paper. Again, the focus in the literature appears to have been on full-length telecollaboration experiences (see Kern and Develotte, 2018). Examining opening sequences can help us explore the participants' starting points with interculturality, the very first phenomena of co-construction occurring interculturally between them, and the directions interculturality might be taking later on in their telecollaboration. Intercultural initial interactions may be stressful and unpredictable, especially when they take place in another language (here: English as a global academic language, see Kern and Develotte, 2018). They are thus rich resources for examining what people do to face the aforementioned uncertainty and potential awkwardness of being placed together online.

2.2. *Interculturality as a Complex, Unstable and Fluid Phenomenon*

Depending on the economic-political context, interculturality can be understood as the interaction and meeting between people from for instance different races/language family backgrounds/nationalities (Peng *et al.*, 2020). Educationally, it

is often argued that, when people 'do' interculturality, they should be respectful and tolerant of each other. What interculturality means and how people should do it has been determined in many ways in the literature on telecollaboration, with models of intercultural competence such as British scholar Michael Byram's (1997) model dominating analyses of the impact of telecollaboration. In this paper, we are not interested in 'assessing' the students' interculturality but in observing the beginning of what is happening in international educational telecollaboration online for preparing students for future encounters. Such moments are decisive in orienting future intercultural relationships and dialogue (Kern and Develotte, 2018).

The notion of interculturality is based on the concept of *culture*. Yet, the concept of culture tends to cover a broad range of elements, which makes it difficult to work with. It often seems that culture is 'everything' (Piller, 2017). This is why, today, culture tends to be conceptualised beyond the nation-state (as in 'national culture'), generalizations/stereotypes (as in 'Finnish culture tends to make people shy') and essentialism (reducing members of a culture to a 'solid' essence) in research (Holliday, 2010). As such Dervin has emphasized that interculturality could be treated *without culture*, focusing on the instability, fluidity and co-construction of the *inter-* and the *-ty* of the notion instead (Dervin, 2016, 2022) and examining how people co-perform constant acts of balancing between self and other, re-negotiating who they are, and using, at times, *discourses about* their culture to do so (see Piller, 2010). According to Dervin and Jacobsson (2021, p. 11): 'interculturality is about interactions, encounters between people who might perceive each other as different and who thus need to negotiate their (co-)being, their identity and their interaction in order to be able to (maybe) make each other feel comfortable or to have meaningful encounters'. Interculturality is thus neither a static nor a predictable phenomenon. Starting from the data that we have collected (video recordings of the students' initial interactions) we observe the kind of interculturality that is taking place between the students from China and the Finnish university and, especially, how they are 'doing' interculturality individually and together.

3. DATA COLLECTION AND METHOD

Following on from Fred Dervin's long-term engagement with online intercultural communication education (for instance: Dervin, 2014; Dervin and Vlad, 2010), the authors, who are from China and Finland, have been cooperating academically for a couple of years, setting up online projects between their students in the field of education, aiming to link up theory and practice of intercultural communication education (see Peng and Dervin, 2022). The data for this paper was collected during one of these projects (duration: 2 months). All the students were either majors or minors in education (undergraduate and Master's students), specializing in intercultural and/or sustainable education.

The students were organized in online groups of four to six students (half from the Chinese University and half from the Finnish University) to talk about the importance of specific educational issues related to the United Nation SGD4 in their respective contexts (T: 17 groups; 32 students). We note that the Chinese students had been introduced to the complex issue of interculturality at length , and, although the very focus of their interactions were not directly about interculturality, they were guided and asked to pay attention to this aspect of their cooperation. By adding online interactions with students from different countries, we wanted the students to have the opportunity to experience inter-culturality as part of their studies and to test out some of the theoretical elements and strategies that had been introduced to them in their respective programmes. We note that the online interactions were compulsory for all the students, fully integrated in the courses and taken into account for final assessment in the two institutions.

The project schedule included one joint online meeting between all the Chinese and Finland-based students and three meetings of two hours each, for which the students were divided into 17 sub-groups. The students met independently, using the communication tool ZOOM to get to know each other and to discuss the aforementioned educational issues. The online sessions were recorded and sent to the lecturers. For this paper seven groups who had given permission to take part in this study were retained, with their initial interactions transcribed into English, including translations of some Chinese used by some students during the interactions too.

Basic information about the student groups is found in Table 1.

As aforementioned, our focus here is on the students' initial encounters, from the moment the students log into Zoom until they start dealing with the tasks they were asked to complete ('discussions about educational issues in their respective contexts'). The total duration of all initial interaction data is over one hour for the seven groups under review, with some groups having very short initial interactions (see for instance group 4, 2:20) and others longer interactions (group 5, 33:04). In order to identify relevant moments in the data, Self-Disclosure (SD) is used. We argue that SDs are privileged moments which can reveal how the students do and deal with the interculturality of their initial encounters since they reveal the kinds of information, practices and thoughts that people initiate to 'cross over' to the other – an essential aspect of *inter*-culturality (see Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004; Dervin, 2016). SD is a process of communication through which one person reveals information about themselves to another (Sprecher et al., 2013) and includes everything an individual chooses to tell the other person about themselves. Specifically, the information disclosed can be *descriptive* or *evaluative* and can vary, for example, from *thoughts, feelings, goals, failures* to *dislikes* (Ignatius and Kokkonen, 2007, p. 59). In operationalizing SDs, we considered any self-referential statement produced by a participant, including information that was either volunteered or elicited

TABLE 1: Information about participants

Group number	Duration minutes)	Number of students	Finland-based students	Chinese students	Use of camera
1	10:00	5	One female from Finland One male from Liberia	2 males (share a camera) and 1 female	All on
2	10:23	5	One female from Finland One female from India	2 females and 1 male	All off
3	10:40	5	One female from Hungary One female from Hungary One does not say	3 females	Only Chinese students' cameras on
4	2:20	4	One female from Peru	3 females	All on
5	33:04	5	One male from Ghana One female from Turkmenistan	3 females	All on
6	5:20	3	One female from Argentina	1 male and 1 female	All on
7	6:30	5	One male from US One female from Hungary	I male and 2 females	All on

through direct questioning (Strambi and Tudini, 2020). Combing through the transcriptions and translations of the data, we have identified 93 SDs in what the students said and did together. Making use of dialogical discourse analysis (Grossen, 2010, see below), observing for instance the verbs used by the students implying a specific action (Angermuller, 2014), we reviewed each SD from the data together several times, identifying in the end two main categories in the initial interactions: *facilitating interculturality* and *promoting interculturality*, with each subdivided respectively into three and four other categories (for instance: *showing curiosity*). *Facilitating interculturality* has to do with practicalities during the initial interactions while *promoting interculturality* refers to enhancing relational and emotional aspects of the students' encounters. As we examined, discussed together and agreed on the category for each identified instance of SD, renegotiations had to occur at times until we reached a consensus. For example, the subcategory of *showing curiosity* (9 instances) was placed in *Facilitating interculturality* since the SDs show that the kind of curiosity displayed seems to serve organizational purposes rather than promoting interculturality. We also realized that some SDs could fit into different categories at the same time (for instance: showing curiosity and creating support) and thus categorised them accordingly. Table 2 presents the types of SDs identified in the data.

We note major differences in terms of identified SDs between the student groups, with group 4 having displayed only 2 SDs and group 5 27 SDs, which already indicates differences in the way interculturality was done in the student's initial interactions. While we were negotiating the content of SDs we also noted that SDs indicated that the interactional effects of 'doing' interculturality (the inter- of interculturality, see Dervin, 2022) on the participants could be *one-way* (just one student concerned, not leading to perceivable reactions from others) or *reciprocal* (the action of one student, for instance empathizing, leading to another student's response). Maybe without much surprise, the SD of *organizing* (*facilitating interculturality*) dominates with 55 instances since the initial interactions also served as a way of dealing with practicalities of things to come ('educational tasks'). This might be why categories from the *Promoting interculturality* perspective are less prominent than those of *Facilitating interculturality*.

Following the identification and categorization of the SDs, we adopted dialogical discourse analysis to examine how the students construct what they say in their SDs and in reactions to others' discursive input (Grossen, 2010). Dialogical discourse analysis has been amply used in research on interculturality in education and beyond (Simpson, 2022) in order to explore the complexities and instabilities of doing interculturality. Interculturality always requires the balancing, confrontation and manipulation of multiple voices between those involved in doing (Domokos, 2015; O'Neill and Viljoen, 2021). In analysing the data, we paid attention to the concrete voices that the students include to

TABLE 2: *Shaping interculturality through SDs*

| Group | Total SDs | Facilitating interculturality | | | | Promoting interculturality | | |
		Organising	Looking for and offering help	Showing curiosity	Empathizing	Constructing positive identity	Signaling interest	Creating rapport
1	20	9	3	3	2	2	1	0
2	10	5	1	0	1	2	1	0
3	16	8	1	2	1	2	1	1
4	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	27	17	1	3	1	2	1	2
6	13	12	1	0	0	0	0	0
7	5	2	0	1	1	0	1	0
Total	93	55	7	9	6	8	5	3

create their identities, react to what others say and do and when they look for reactions from others (Bakhtin, 1981). Such voices are identified in the students' use of for instance personal pronouns (*you, they*), the passive voice (as in *I was told to do this, told* indicates a voice), the inclusion of modal verbs and adverbs (as in You *should not say* this; *should* hints at the presence of someone's voice). We argue that the different voices identified in the students' SDs can help detect the type of interculturality that they are trying to construct together during the opening sequences. We make use of dialogical discourse analysis in examining the illustrative excerpts in what follows.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Facilitating Interculturality

According to the items of SDs that we have identified, at the early beginning of their encounters, the Chinese (C[1]) and Finland-based (FI) students try to build relationships through offering and asking for support, which seems to represent a positive condition or requirement for experiencing and developing interculturality (Dervin, 2022; Piller, 2017). In this category entitled *Facilitating interculturality*, which means leading interactions towards interculturality by offering and asking for support for and from each other, three elements are noted: *organizing* (total number of occurrences in the data, T: 55), *looking for and offering help* (T: 7), and *showing curiosity* (T: 9). The most commonly used elements of organising is a basic strategy which includes mostly distributing who takes the floor or checking equipment to make sure that dialogue can happen. For instance, FIz in group 2 says 'So, what we'd like to start with telling a bit about ourselves and then we can maybe start off with the assignment that we have to do'. In what follows, we focus on the two strategies of *looking for and offering help* when the students negotiate with each other due to language barriers or other knowledge differences, as well as *showing curiosity* leading to partners giving details about the place they come from.

4.1.1. Looking for and Offering Help

Looking for and offering help when facing misunderstandings, a dilemma or uncertainty in communication with others, especially in initial interactions online, is a common phenomenon (Wylie *et al*., 2017). Getting a response from others could be considered as a catalyst for facilitating interculturality among the Chinese and Finland-based students. In total, we found seven occurrences of different forms of help among the seven groups including four occurrences of request for help (asking for linguistic support), one occurrence of help volunteered (mediating in Chinese) as well as two occurrences of multi-faceted help (i.e., different types of help from participants take place simultaneously).

We focus on two excerpts out of the seven occurrences, which were chosen for the following reasons: Excerpt 1 is an example of volunteered help, which contains mediating (acting as a go-between). We note that out of the four occurrences of volunteered help, the vast majority consist of (simple) requests for translation or asking for linguistic support. Excerpt 1 is thus a special and interesting case of 'doing' interculturality. The second excerpt is an example of multifaceted help based on three students offering/requesting help together, which reveals the interactional effect of 'doing' interculturality reciprocally.

The first excerpt is from Group 6 and includes three students (a FI and two Chinese students). After solving a problem concerning the internet connection, FIa takes the floor, shares the meeting agenda and negotiates 'housekeeping' with the Chinese partners. We note at this stage, as a contextual piece of information, that one of the Chinese students (Cb) declared his English to be poor prior to the excerpt.

Excerpt 1 (Group 6)
FIa: Excellent, well so, that's why we have this meeting to try to ... I don't know if you would like to start, we would either start and of course, introduce yourself and myself today to see in such a way, ok? Shall we?
Ca: Okay.
FIa: Okay, great. You want to start or (that) I start?
Ca: 我们开始吧，该我们做自我介绍了，我先来吧 [Translation: let us begin. It's time for us to introduce ourselves. I'll do it first]. (Switch to English) My name is Ca (...).

When FIa asks the Chinese partners a question about self-introductions, Ca merely acquiesces the question with 'okay'. The use of this simple filler by the Chinese student could be interpreted in different ways. For example, one could assume that Ca does not understand the gist of FIa's question and simply considers it as a polite description of what they are going to do; it could also be that Ca is not sure how to start introductions. FIa takes the floor again to repair and reformulates her original question: 'You want to start or (that) I start?'. Instead of answering Fla's question, Ca turns to her Chinese peers to offer help in Chinese to clarify the situation, i.e., mediate with FIa's voice indirectly, and to volunteer to speak. The aforementioned filler (Okay) could indicate that Ca was considering how to include her Chinese peers in this introductory part of the interactions. As asserted before, one of the Chinese students' English was not deemed good enough by the student himself (Cb) to be able to communicate with other speakers of English. Throughout the initial encounter in this group, one feels that Ca acts in what could be labelled as *a caring way* for this Chinese peer, constantly mediating and translating for him after Fla's turns. This is what she does in this excerpt by mediating in Chinese instead of positioning herself towards FIa's question directly (see the use of the filler *Okay*), negotiating turns for introduction and then introducing herself. Helping her Chinese peer appears to

be her priority here rather than making sure that interculturality between FIa and herself is occurring smoothly in this opening sequence. Following the excerpt, Ca introduces herself in English.

Excerpt 2 from Group 5 could represent a more successful example of facilitating interculturality through offering and looking for help. After Cc finished sharing a video about her university in Beijing, FIb asks the Chinese student to give him back the right to host the Zoom session.

Excerpt 2 (Group 5)
FIb: Alright, so wait, let me project what? And so, Cc, can you make me back to the host? Go to look at my picture. The three dots there. So, you click them, put your cursor on the three dots on my picture on mine, and then you see make host somewhere.
Cc: Sorry I can't understand what you mean.
Fb: OK, so make me back the host. So, I can share my screen for here.
Cd: 把主持人权限给他 (In Chinese) [in English: You make him as a host]
Cc: Sorry I don't t know how to... in English?
FIb: Ok, so you see my box on the screen. You see where my picture is. There are three dots in here. [Silence for a few seconds]. Ok, thank you thank you very much.

In this somewhat 'mundane' moment of interaction, we can see what we label as *multifaceted help* occurring, triggered by a FI. First FIb looks for technical help from Cc and guides her to operate the requested function in Zoom, however, Cc does not understand how to do it, apologizes first and looks for help. Then FIb explains what to do again in English while Cd tries to play the role of the mediator by offering help in Chinese to make sure that Cc understands FIb's voice about these technicalities – probably assuming that Cc does not understand FIb's voice in English. But Cc ignores her and apologises again in English to FIb for not understanding how to manage the technical issue in Zoom. It takes a few extra seconds and further guidance from FIb, before Cc manages to give FIb the right to project a document in Zoom. In this excerpt help comes from three different voices: technological help requested from FIb (help to operate Zoom), volunteered help from Cd in Chinese and technological help offered by FIb. The kind of interculturality taking place here could be considered as reciprocal (and thus 'going across to the other' in the first minutes of interaction) in the way interculturality is facilitated. This 'mundane' moment of intercultural interaction shows that interaction problems do not necessarily have to do with language or 'culture' but with the medium of interaction too.

To sum up this first analytical section, we note that, in Excerpt 1, interculturality is happening but in a delayed form of intercultural dialogue, while mediation between Chinese peers appears to be preferred as a first step to make sense of how they can initiate communicating with others. In Excerpt 2, interculturality takes a different stance as solving the technical issue opens up a different type of dialogue, which seems to be working well, especially between FIb and Cb (Dervin *et al*., 2022). The *inter-* of interculturality is

negotiated in the familiarity of using different languages and using the Zoom online learning platform.

Another layer to facilitating interculturality taking place in the data has to do with curiosity, i.e., being interested in/showing an interest in the other. The next section is devoted to this aspect.

4.1.2. Showing Curiosity

Curiosity is considered as a strong motivator for communication among people, especially for initial intercultural encounters online (Rawal and Deardorff, 2021). Both the Chinese and Finland-based students were given broad instructions as to what should happen before they start working on their education tasks in order to make the experience more flexible and less 'programmed'. One such instruction was to introduce themselves and their institutions as they wished – which some did in more depth than others, for example, some Chinese students had prepared a short video about their university and/or their hometown for the Finland-based students. Some of the videos were several minutes long. For some groups, such videos were well received and, as we shall see, triggered some discussions while, for other groups, watching a video was not followed up. While analysing the initial interactions, we often felt that curiosity concerning for instance others' institutions and/or hometowns seemed to serve the purpose of facilitating interculturality in the first moments of interaction between the students, as if they were being polite, ensuring the smooth running of the crucial moment of intercultural initial interactions. Through the identified instances of SD, we see that some students ask questions to others, showing some form of curiosity about them, which seems to support moving forward in the interactions. Nine Occurrences with different kinds of interest were found in the data, namely: *interest in naming others* (T: 1), *recognizing others visually* (T:1), *asking questions about studies* (T: 4), *interest in the other's culture* (T:3).

Due to space limitation, we have chosen one excerpt out of the nine occurrences for the following reasons: It is a good example showing several layers of curiosity for the other leading indirectly to curiosity about interculturality itself, as we shall see. While its main purpose is to facilitate interculturality (the students follow the 'broad instruction' of introducing their institution), the excerpt seems to be doing more than this.

As a reminder, the Finland-based students can by no means be labelled as *Finnish students* as they represent many nationalities, passports, languages. And the Chinese students are part of a Minzu 'ethnic' university, representing also both the majority Han and minority ethnic groups in China. In Excerpt 3 from Group 5, after Ce introduced her university through playing a two-minute video showing students with different Minzu costumes dancing at a university event, FId seems to be interested and wants to learn more about the connotation of the dance.

Excerpt 3 (Group 5)

FId: Wow, I can't dance. So what's the, what's the idea behind that dance and why should everybody at university learn to dance? This song was the idea behind the song behind it.

Ce: As you know. Okay, China is a multi... multinations country. And we have 56 Minzu and our school gets a lot of Minzu. The dance we just saw is a collection of music and dance with different minzu's characteristics. As well as different Minzu clothes ... the styles and we want to show you the diversity of our school student video. And every student in our school needs to learn this dance, and we can dance it, yeah.

FId: I think dance is a powerful tool for bringing people together, so that's so good and it's good to know. It's really good...

After watching the video, the student from the Finnish University starts to use a positive exclamative (*wow*) to express what could be considered as his surprise and/or his admiration for the Chinese students' dance, appearing eager to know more about the meaning of this phenomenon. After the Chinese student discusses China's multi-ethnic situation (assuming through the generic voice of 'as you know' that her Finland-based partners know China's situation well) and the uniqueness of her university with the motto *unity in diversity*, the Finland-based student starts a discussion about dance as 'a powerful tool for bringing people together', seemingly opening up his curiosity about the student's video to a broader interest in interculturality itself. We shall come back to this very excerpt in section (4.2.4) when we discuss the idea of creating rapport in the initial encounters.

This first analytical section shows that the strategy of facilitating interculturality used by the students tend to lead to minimal engagement with each other. However, the attempt to provide peer support in solving technical issues is also an important aspect of intercultural telecollaboration (see excerpt 2). Further, the language barrier was also solved by peer language support (excerpt 1), leading to an interesting instance of interculturality. In what follows we explore how the students seem to promote interculturality while being together in the first minutes of interaction (Dervin, 2022; Piller, 2017).

4.2. Promoting Interculturality

Based on the SDs identified in the data, we have detected another category related to 'doing' interculturality in the initial interactions. We name this category *promoting interculturality*, i.e., making use of emotional and relational strategies that could allow people to go over to or move across to the other. In other words, this refers to doing the *inter-* to facilitate moments of interculturality in meaningful ways, potentially leading to creating a first sense of togetherness and reciprocity in the initial interactions (Dervin, 2016; Yuan *et al.*, 2022, p. 77). The category corresponds to four strategies in the transcriptions: *constructing a positive identity* (T: 8), *empathizing* (T: 6), *signaling interest* (T: 5) and *creating rapport* (T: 3). In what follows, we present these

strategies starting from constructing a positive identity which had the highest number of occurrences.

4.2.1. *Constructing a Positive Identity*

Identity has become central in research to examine intercultural encounters since the 2000s (Dervin and Jackson, 2018). Identity has also been increasingly described as an unstable process which is 'liquid' and 'fluid' (Bauman, 2004; Dervin, 2016). When faced with different others during intercultural encounters, identity comes to life for most students, who may start questioning and/or showing their identity (Young and Barrett, 2018, pp. 1–11). Significantly, although identity is 'floating', when people talk to each other, they are led to ensnare it into somewhat solid categories. Constructing a positive identity for the other corresponds to a strategy of presenting a positive face or image to attract and/or to be pleasant to them or try to find an entry point to interest the other (Walsh, 2022). In this section, the students put forward a positive aspect of their identity in the initial interactions online to try to build a bond, make others feel comfortable and thus create interculturality, in-betweenness and togetherness.

In total, we found eight occurrences with different forms of identity construction among the seven groups, including four occurrences of constructing a positive identity in reference to a hometown, two occurrences of constructing a positive identity related to Chinese Minzu ('ethnic' groups), personality, and hobby. These all derive from the Chinese students. From the Finnish side, one occurrence of constructing a positive identity (that of a nation and personality) was noted from a Finland-based student. For all occurrences, no reciprocity was found in the data, that is, the students from the other group did not react to or comment on the positive identity put forward. Neither did they ask for instance follow-up questions.

Due to space limitation and the similarities between these excerpts, we only focus on one excerpt in what follows. Excerpt 4 showcases how a FI student constructs a positive identity for the group. After a short moment of 'house-keeping', the students start to introduce themselves. After self-disclosing his current study situation in Finland, his former job and personal information (family, country and personality) FId explains:

Excerpt 4 (Group 5)
FId: (…) Ghana is one of the peaceful countries in Africa. Because since 1992, we've not had any major conflict or any other democracy as a democratic country, so our democracy has been going. That's a bit about Ghana. And Ghanaians are known to be very hospitable and everybody says they're very open to foreigners. My personality. I don't know myself too well, but I think I'm easygoing. I think I make friends easily. I think I'm honest. I really don't care about barriers, whether its language or culture or something. I really want to understand people and to work with people. So that's who I am.

After mentioning basic information about his nation, FId starts to praise his own country for its peaceful and democratic as well as hospitable characteristics to construct a good image of Ghana. This could be evidenced in '*they're very open to foreigners*'. Interestingly, he switches pronouns at the beginning of the excerpt, using first 'we' to talk about how democratic Ghana is and then 'they' to refer to Ghanaians' positive identity – placing himself outside of this voice, indicating that he might want to appear modest. Then he mentions his own personality, maintaining that '*I don't know myself too well*' – with the use of I, he operates a third voice shift in the excerpt (see Grossen, 2010). This could serve the purpose of acting (again?) in a modest manner in front of others, leaving space for a 'friendly' kind of interculturality. He concludes by sharing his philosophy of meeting others: '*I really don't care about barriers, whether its language or culture or something. I really want to understand people and to work with people*' – which could actually refer to interculturality here: the ability to reach out to the other (see Byram, 1997). Following his turn, the Chinese students do not react to this positive identity making but, instead, move on to construct (amongst others) a positive identity for themselves related to their hometown and to their Minzu group. Here interculturality is stated by one student – or the contributions he claims to be able to make to it – in what appears to be separated monologues of identity construction rather than enacted and constructed between the students. It is impossible to predict what FId wished to provoke in other students with this positive identity construction in Excerpt 4. However, since his presentation is met with silence from the Chinese students who move forward with their own introductions, one could argue that the strategy potentially adopted here by FId seems to fail.

Another layer to promoting interculturality observed in the data has to do with empathy, i.e., building an apology-encouragement dialogue among the Chinese and Finland-based students about language abilities in the data. This is the focus of the next section. Empathy is important as, behind an apology, there might be a fear of not being understood in the English language and thus of affecting intercultural interactions.

4.2.2. Empathy

In human social interactions, empathy plays a major role as a motivational basis for cooperative behavior and as contributing to moral acts like *helping, caring*, and *justice* (Hoffman, 2000). Guthridge and Giummarra (2021) warn us against the conceptual diversity in the definition of empathy, which causes confusion as to what it could refer to. Using a content analysis of existing definitions of the concept, they determined nine overarching dimensions, including empathy as a catalyst, function, process, outcome, affective state, cognitive state involving self and other, leading to a behavior and occurring in a specific context (Guthridge and Giummarra, 2021). For Guthridge and Giummarra (2021, p. 1)

empathy is thus defined as 'the ability to experience affective and cognitive states of another person, while maintaining a distinct self, in order to understand the other.' In this paper, we focus only on the affective aspects of empathy, especially in relation to responses that appear to be more appropriate to someone else's situation than to one's own (Hoffman, 1996, p. 157). Like many interculturalists, we consider this aspect to be central in establishing a positive relationship and offering a favourable bridge for strangers to get acquainted with each other during intercultural initial interactions. In the SDs, seven occurrences all related to language use were found including different kinds of empathic moves such as sympathizing with peers' language abilities in English as a second language (T: 4), and simplifying Chinese names for the other to be able to pronounce them (T: 1).

Excerpt 5 from Group 1 focuses on sympathizing with peers' language abilities, which could show a good example of interaction moving towards interculturality. The sense of empathy demonstrated here appears to play an important role in building up interculturality, leading to an apology-encouragement dialogue. As the interaction takes place online (the students have never met before, for instance face-to-face), the words become important, as the students' faces are not always shown (see Table 1, where we indicated the use of camera in Zoom). Chinese students expressed their inability to speak English, leading to the Finland-based students comforting and reassuring them that they understand well.

Excerpt 5 (Group 1)
Cf: ….. Sorry My English is poor.
Ci: Yes, our English is very poor and it is not easy for us to communicate.
FIe: OK. You think that is very poor, but we understand you. XXXX (calls the name of FIf), are you understanding our friends?
FIf: Yes, I am.
FIe: We are understanding you. Everything is clear to us. What are you bothering yourself for? We understand you. Just take your time and talk to us. Okay?
Cf: Okay
FIe: We understand you. Just you just speak slowly in your times, you don't no need to worry.

As the Chinese students proceeded to introduce themselves, at the end of Cf's SD, he apologizes for his English. Interestingly, this is followed immediately by Cf's group peer Ci showing her approval and using '*yes, our English*' (a plural voice) rather than '*my English is very poor*'. It seems that she is trying to include her group to ask for empathy from the Finland-based group. FIe responds with encouragement and uses '*we understand you*' (another plural voice) rather than the first singular person pronoun and turns to his Finland-based colleague to confirm with her that she understands the Chinese. He then advises the Chinese students to take their time. Here FIe repeats three times the personal pronoun 'we', 'our', 'us' as a way of including others to strengthen the

effect of asking for and giving empathy, which could show great interaction, leading to interculturality (Angermuller, 2014). There is here some indirect but important dialogism with others (Grossen, 2010).

Another strategy taking place to promote interculturality has to do with creating rapport, i.e., doing togetherness with the other in meaningful ways. The next section focuses on this aspect.

4.2.3. Creating Rapport

We use the term 'rapport' to refer to people's perceptions of (dis)harmony in interpersonal relations (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009, p. 102). Creating rapport means building a sense of togetherness, which is an important way to get involved to promote interculturality during the students' initial interactions online. In total, we found three occurrences with different forms of creating rapport among the seven groups, including one occurrence of confirming names with others, which could be considered as a basic layer of interculturality and one occurrence expressing togetherness with each other as well as one occurrence of playing a game together. We focus on the former two types in what follows.

In Excerpt 6 from Group 3, after FIg takes the floor to self-disclose her information, Cg tries to confirm the pronunciation of her name, ensuring that she might be able to create rapport with Cg in future interactions:

Excerpt 6 (group 3)
Cg: Ok, can I say [call] you Theresa, it's right?
FIg: Yes.
Cg: Okay Theresa...

We notice that in the whole data, this is the only such occurrence among the students. Here Cg seems to pluck up the courage to check FIg's name, which appears to show that she has an interest in creating (future) rapport with FIg. Cg might also be trying to build a harmonious atmosphere to avoid awkwardness due to potential misnaming or non-naming of the Finland-based students. Creating rapport is happening but on a basic level, which could still contribute to interculturality in the sense that Cg shows a strong interest in the *inter-* of interculturality by 'moving closer' to Fig by ensuring correct naming. Later on in the interactions (after initial encounters) we noticed that Cg reused the first name Theresa to refer to Fig a couple of times.

In Excerpt 7 from Group 5, which we mentioned in Excerpt 3 when we discussed *showing curiosity*, Ce introduces her university by playing a two-minute video showing students with different Minzu 'ethnic' costumes dancing at a university event. FId seems to be interested and wants to learn more about the connotation behind the dance. FId then comments on the power of dance in the excerpt:

Excerpt 7 (group 5)

FId … I think dance is a powerful tool for bringing people together, so that's so good and it's good to know. It's really good. In Ghana, I mean, music and dances are common. Unfortunately, I cannot sing and I cannot dance. But it's very common to find children dancing on the street. So it's good that we are using music as a tool to bring people together. Thank you very much for sharing about you.

FId also discusses the importance of music and dance in his own country, Ghana, while evaluating his own lack of skills for both ('unfortunately, I … "). As an opening to the other, FId then makes a general comment about dance, which, again, relates to interculturality – moving across to the other: '*So it's good that we are using music as a tool to bring people together.*' The use of the pronoun 'we', which could refer to both China and Ghana, seems to create a sense of inclusion, leading to rapport-creation. Although China and Ghana may be different in terms of music and dance, the Finland-based student tries to create a connection with the other to build togetherness beyond difference, which could promote interculturality (see Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004).

To sum up the last analytical section, we note that, in excerpt 6, the students seem to stay at a basic level of 'doing' interculturality through confirming the name of the other to build a harmonious atmosphere towards togetherness. In Excerpt 7, where a Finland student reacts to a Chinese video showing students dancing together, commenting on the importance of dance for togetherness, interculturality is happening quite well considering the whole process of this specific initial interaction as discussed in Excerpt 3.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our study was anchored in and complemented Fred Dervin's decade-long research on interculturality in telecollaboration between students located in different parts of the world (China, Estonia, France, India, Latvia, Portugal, Rumania, USA). The paper explored what happened when Chinese and Finland-based university students, who were not acquainted with each other, met online for the very first time prior to cooperating on long-term tasks related to global educational issues. This attempt based on the under-researched context of initial encounters in such instances of interculturality, aimed to complement and contribute to previous analyses of interculturality in online telecollaboration (e.g., Dervin, 2014; Kern and Develotte, 2018; Ibnelkaid, 2018) and to provide important pedagogical reflections for projects like the one described here. A form of critical interculturality, focusing on fluid co-constructed identity-making and adjustments to the complexities of intercultural interactions, was adopted rather than for instance comparing cultural features of the students or trying to assess students' intercultural competence (Dervin and Jacobsson, 2021; Holliday, 2010). The paper contributes new knowledge to this perspective which

has not been systematically used and tested in the context of online educational encounters.

First we argue that focusing on and examining the SDs used by Chinese and Finland-based students during initial online encounters (how much they reveal about themselves, their feelings, etc.) represents an original, fine-grained and effective way to identify moments of interculturality, as fluid and changing, in the data. SDs show that interculturality is not necessarily occurring the same way for all the groups and that some groups seem to be for instance more prepared, eager and/or at ease with trying out and doing interculturality at the (potentially awkward) beginning of the project. We noticed that the students picked and behaved differently with their SDs. For example, some Chinese students tended to self-disclose more information compared to the Finland-based students when they introduced themselves but with very little effect on interculturality, or few interests in interacting with each other reciprocally. We maintain that this may have had to do with the English language education that they have received where a 'typical' model of introduction has to be followed (discussions of hometown, promotion of one's institution . . . , see Pan, 2015). What is more some of the Chinese students were not used to speaking English with international students and this seemed to have brought extra pressure on them, with some students having prepared a short introductory text to read to others. During the feedback session with the Finland-based students organized by one of the authors at the end of the project, they mentioned that the students from Beijing were often well prepared for the meetings whereas they felt that they had not worked hard enough for the online meetings. The dynamic diversity in the ways the students interacted using SDs reminded us that interculturality always occurs between individuals in specific contexts, which influences what they do together (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2004). As was also seen in the analysis, the presence of one particular participant having decided to introduce specific SDs might trigger special categories of doing interculturality, which impacted on what all the participants did (or not) together. This has consequences for both research and practice, whereby a focus on the (reciprocal) influences of individual characteristics, strategies and actions should be adopted, instead of for example generalizing (cultural) behaviours and attitudes in the context of interculturality (see Peng and Dervin, 2022).

The second contribution of this paper has to do with examining, promoting and evidencing the need for reciprocity in intercultural encounters. At times, we noticed that certain intercultural initiatives seemed to fail when other participants 'let it pass' by not responding and moving forward with their own presentations. Based on the dialogical analysis of the students' SDs during the initial interactions, we identified two main categories of doing interculturality, namely facilitating interculturality and promoting interculturality which were respectively embodied in different (changing) strategies. In the data, facilitating interculturality consisted in organizing, looking for and offering help, and showing curiosity while

promoting interculturality corresponded to four strategies including constructing positive identities, empathizing, signaling interest and creating rapport. While facilitating interculturality dominated in the data (important practicalities, mediation . . .), some snapshots of promoting interculturality were evidenced. For example, empathy as a strategy through dialogues based on apology-encouragement appeared to be working well interculturally between the students. Contrarily, constructing positive identity did not seem to help so much for interculturality since the students appeared to have delivered mere monologues introducing themselves, with very little response and reciprocity. Reciprocity and mutual influence between the participants would represent for critical interculturalists (e.g., Piller, 2017) a central aspect of interculturality. This has been often ignored in research on intercultural online interactions, when for instance the focus has been mostly on individuals' intercultural competence.

To conclude the article, we wish to propose the following questions and recommendations for researchers and lecturers interested in exploring further intercultural initial interactions in international educational contexts. When we set up the project, we did not frame the students' initial encounters, just suggesting that they might want to introduce each other before working on the cooperative tasks about education. As we have seen, the seven student groups behaved differently at the beginning of their interactions. Is this a problem? Could the lack of guidance and preparation for initial interactions lead to unequal ways of encountering the other or does this open up different (more 'natural' and less 'artificial') intercultural opportunities? In higher education, how much teachers should guide students' encounters is an issue to be considered carefully and negotiated with colleagues and the students themselves. Before the students met, we did not provide them with any information about their international peers – just the fact that they were all studying education at a Finnish university. Interestingly, since the Chinese students did not know that some of the Finland-based students were not located in Finland or had never been there because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this led to instances of miscommunication whereby the Chinese wanted to create a bridge between their hometown and (only) Finland with the international students. However, this failed. This thus leads us to the important questions of how much information about others should be provided by teachers beforehand or if students should freely explore their identities and accept to 'make mistakes'. As claimed repeatedly in this article and in accordance with Ferri (2016) interculturality is neither 'programmed' nor 'programmable'. From the data, it is easy to see that many SDs do not lead to reactions from partners but, instead, to a 'patchwork' of discourses and monologues. Lecturers could guide students in this matter by helping them develop for instance observation and interaction skills leading to further dialogue. As such the students could be asked to watch again a recording of their interactions during the project period (and after) and to self-observe their own behaviours and interactive patterns, identifying and reflecting on ways of emphasizing the *inter-* of interculturality and thus pushing for reciprocity. Finally, the fear of not being able to speak correctly or not being understood in English as a global

language may affect initial encounters. In this study the students were supportive, but are there ways in which the students could be guided to create even safer and more empathic (virtual) spaces in telecollaboration, making use of multilingualism in a more resourceful manner (Arno *et al.*, 2019)?

In a future study, it would be interesting to compare initial encounters and what the students do and say throughout an entire telecollaborative project, and at different moments. This could allow us to see the varying degrees or layers of interculturality occurring among the students as they get to know each other. How do they use different strategies qualitatively and quantitatively over longer periods of interaction? How do they change in contact with each other overtime, influencing each other in doing interculturality potentially otherwise? For example, a student who appears to be a bit reserved in initial encounters might open up in other discursive contexts, when the students discuss a specific aspect of education but do not talk about themselves personally.

6. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

7. NOTE

[1]   Students appear as Ca, b, c, d … and FIa, b, c … in the rest of the paper.

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