

Building Cultural Bridges Through Social Media Networks: A Case Study

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Abstract

An English teacher uses Skype to connect his high school students in an Indian village with international teachers to help them interact and converse with them in English. Each international teacher interacts with the students in English once for 40 minutes. The teacher does that daily, and each day an international guest teacher is from a different country. The aims of this study are to report the effects of this kind of intercultural exchange on students' English language skill development and cultural and global awareness. Results showed many benefits for the students: Listening and speaking skill enhancement, getting used to different native and non-native accents, improved pronunciation, and learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures. The students also learn names of countries, their location, flags, currency, cities, people, and exchange information and pictures about the local and target cultures. They learn about the foreign country's educational system, history, antiquities, food, art, traditions, and costumes. They are taken on virtual field trips to some historical places and museums. They learn about natural phenomena such as the northern lights. Sometimes they receive books, T-shirts and pens as gifts from foreign teachers. Shortcomings of such intercultural exchange and suggestions for improvement are given.

Keywords: *intercultural exchange, intercultural collaboration, intercultural partnership, social media, Indian Skype classroom, Facebook, online communication, online collaboration, student exchange.*

1. INTRODUCTION

International partnerships, telecollaborations, intercultural interaction, student exchange, global education, reciprocal learning, sister schools, and twinning programs have been common at schools and universities in many countries around the world for a very long time. The most well-known pioneer program is the International Student Exchange Program in the USA, in which secondary and college students between the ages of 14 and 18 can study abroad at one of the partner institutions. They can attend an accredited boarding school or live with a host family, in a hostel, apartment, or a student lodging. Those Exchange Programs became popular after World War II. According to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Office of Private Sector Exchange, in 2018 there were 23,527 new secondary exchange students, with the top three USA destination being Michigan, Texas and California. Most exchange students came from Spain, Germany, Italy, Brazil, and Thailand. The program cost varies according to the country and institution. Exchange students can get sponsorships for their participation via self-funding, scholarships, or loans. Some Student Exchange Programs involve travel but do not necessarily require the student to study abroad. An exchange student typically stays in the host country for 6 to 12 months and those on study abroad programs may even stay in the host country for several years. Some exchange programs offer academic credit. Students Exchange Programs have many benefits for participating students: Students have the opportunity to study in a foreign country and in a different teaching and learning environment, improve their language skills, experience the history and culture of the foreign country where

they are studying, meet new friends who contribute to their personal growth, develop a global perspective, increase their understanding and tolerance of foreign cultures, systems, values and traditions, and broaden their social horizons.

Another large-scale example is the Fulbright Programⁱⁱ, one of several United States Cultural Exchange Programs, that was created in 1946. It is the largest U.S. exchange program offering opportunities for students and young professionals to undertake international graduate study, advanced research, and teaching at university, primary and secondary schools worldwide. Since 1946, more than 390,000 Fulbrighters from the USA and other countries have participated in the Program. The Fulbright Program awards about 8,000 grants annually in all areas of study to U.S. students and scholars, foreign students and visiting scholars, and hundreds of teachers and professionals, in more than 160 countries worldwide. It has a network of more than 1,650 volunteer Advisers on campuses throughout the USA, who assist in recruiting and advising applicants.

A more recent on-line school linkage organization is the International Education and Resource Network (iEARNⁱⁱⁱ). It was established in 1988 and is based in Callus, Spain. iEARN has empowered 50,000 educators and two million students, in 30,000 schools and youth organizations, in more than 140 countries, using 30 languages, to work together online using a variety of new communications technologies. Each day more than two million students connect in meaningful, global collaborative project-based learning and virtual exchange activities. iEARN has 150 projects that are designed and facilitated by teachers and students to fit their school curriculum and classroom needs and schedules. Participating teachers and students enter online forums, meet one another, and work on a project with classrooms around the world. All iEARN school projects must answer the following question, "*How can this project improve the quality of life on this planet?*" Thus, participating teachers and students become global citizens who make a difference by collaborating with their peers in other countries around the world.

In addition to organizations and grand-scale programs such as the International Student Exchange Program, the Fulbright Program and iEARN collaborative projects and the like, there are single programs where teachers and students at a local school or university collaborates with a school or university in one or more foreign countries to develop teachers and students' foreign language skills, intercultural knowledge, and deepen their knowledge in a specific area of specialty. A review of the literature has shown a multitude of studies that have investigated international partnerships, telecollaborations, intercultural interaction, student exchange, and twinning programs between schools and universities worldwide. The first line of research focused on exchange programs between teachers and educators in two or more countries such as an EU-funded project that involves teachers from Britain, Germany and Spain and teachers from Gambia and Kenya in Africa to promote teachers' understanding of poverty and hunger, environmental sustainability, and encourage a global partnership for development (Uhlenwinkel, 2017). Other programs are a voice-based telecollaboration between a group of pre-service teachers taking an intercultural course for English teachers at a Russian University and those pursuing an MA degree in foreign language education in the U.S. (Dugartsyrenova and Sardegna, 2019); an international and intercultural partnership between U.S. and Bolivian teachers to develop intercultural sensitivity and knowledge through exchange of information about their educational systems, philosophies, and pedagogical practices (Gonzales and Szecsi, 2006); and an Internet-mediated, German-American language learning partnership which mainly uses appropriate questioning to develop impressions of and attitudes towards one another (Belz, 2005).

In the U.S.A. and Mexico, two large public universities collaborated in faculty exchange program, teacher development, student mentoring, joint research in foreign/second language teaching, and graduate student/teacher field experiences (Thomas-Ruzic and Prudencio, 2015). In Australia and Malaysia, higher education institutions participated in a

transnational education partnership (Keevers, Price, Leask, Sultan, Lim and Loh, 2019). In Hong Kong and Singapore, a joint venture on collaborative online learning between two partner universities provided teaching assistants with key teaching and learning concepts and related pedagogies for teaching undergraduate students (Law, Hafiz, Kwong and Wong, 2019).

A second line of research focused on intercultural exchange programs and experiences at the university level which aim to develop the foreign language skills and intercultural communicative competence of participating students. Some of those collaborations focus on language learning as in Villalobos-Buehner's (2019) study of a group of US students in their third semester Spanish course discussing a variety of cultural topics such as health care and gastronomy via Skype with a group of English language learners from a Colombian University; and an EU-funded tandem language exchanges among seven European partner universities which offered participating students valuable opportunities for autonomous learning and authentic intercultural communication encounters (Cunico, 2019). Further studies include class-to-class videoconferences and email writing by a third-year German class at a US university and an advanced English class at a German high school by Schenker (2012), and an English language collaboration between a two Russian and Norwegian Universities (Bjørn, 2015). In addition, EFL students from Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics in China and Anadolu University in Turkey analysed and compared Turkish and Chinese cultures and produced a cultural piece of work using text messaging, emails, and voice and video calls synchronously and asynchronously (Taskiran, 2019).

Collaborations between students studying the same major and focusing on the same research projects were the subject of some studies. For instance, students majoring in food science at Kansas State University and Tallin University of Technology in Estonia worked on an international research project together (Adriana, Mauricio, Delores, Loreida, Kadri, Edgar and Yu (2019). Social work students in policy courses and international students in English courses from six countries collaborated on projects promoting social justice and international diplomacy (Moore and Mann, 2020). Likewise, students at two Canadian and Chinese Universities collaborated in a Sister School Project and a Reciprocal Learning Programme through preservice programs to help students reflect on practice of course content, pedagogical, cultural and societal learning, and globalisation, emotional and social impact (Howitt, 2019). Saudi, Ukrainian, and Russian students learning English as a foreign language collaborated in an online writing course using the Nicenet Learning Managements System (Al-Jarf, 2006a). Similarly, Al-Jarf (2006b) integrated an online course to introduce students enrolled in a Language and Culture course to British and American culture.

Further partnerships that promote intercultural communication and online course support, understanding and comparisons of cultural values across national groups were carried out at the University of New Brunswick's online Master of Education program in Trinidad and Tobago (Bragdon, 2018). Similarly, four universities in Canada, the United States, and Mexico participated in an innovative course that focused on broadening students' understanding of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples (Bruguier and Greathouse Amador, 2012).

Since it is increasingly common for schools to form partnerships with schools in the countries of languages learned in the classroom, numerous studies in the literature have researched intercultural communication programs at the elementary and high school levels through a variety of projects and activities. A study by Okumura (2020) described a telecollaboration project between Japanese and Australian elementary school students. This long-term project integrated the contents of Social Studies and foreign language study, to promote elementary students' interest in learning their own language, in addition to a foreign language and a foreign culture, using the Edmodo platform. In Moloney and Genua-Petrovic's (2012) study, young exchange travellers were exposed to pedagogical interventions to support and extend their intercultural language learning before, during and after two exchange trips to

China and Europe. In Australia, students in year 5 and 6 were engaged in an intercultural school partnership initiative through on-line classroom exchanges with Korean students over a two-year period. The program aimed to foster intercultural understanding in children through perceiving racial and cultural differences as part of their involvement in partnership activities (Walton, 2019).

In Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, a school-based Information and Communications Technology (ICT) initiative, called Dissolving Boundaries, linked elementary students aged 5-11, post-elementary students aged 12-18, and special school students aged 5-18 in one part of Ireland with their peers in the other part (Rickard, Grace, Austin and Smyth, 2014). There are also school-based virtual field trips for early childhood students to deepen their awareness and understanding of the world (Delacruz, 2019).

Based on an analysis of 694 student surveys from 66 schools across 12 countries, Edge and Khamsi (2012) reported that International School Partnerships, such as the British Council's Connecting Classrooms-Sub Saharan Africa programme, have many benefits such as linking school-based learning to international partners; creating opportunities for students in different countries to engage in activity-based and communication-driven learning partnerships; and encouraging students to discuss their collaborative work with friends and family.

In most partnership programs mentioned above, students in one school or university collaborated and interacted mainly with students in one or more foreign school or university for a time periods that ranged between several times a week, few weeks, and a year or more. The exchange focused on learning and practicing a language, a specific subject, cultural knowledge or working on a project of interest to participating groups.

Unlike prior exchange programs in prior studies, the present study is going to report on an English teacher, Harikrishna Patcharu, who uses Skype to connect his students who are studying at a government high school in a small village in India, on a daily basis, with guest teachers from different countries to help them interact and converse in English. Each international guest teacher is hosted only once for 40 minutes. Each day, Harikrishna connects with an international guest teacher from a different country. Therefore, the aims of the present study are to explore the effects of Harikrishna's kind of intercultural exchange on rural Indian students' English language skill enhancement and their cultural and global awareness. The study will also describe the Indian classroom environment, technical requirements, and procedures for connecting Indian rural students with international guest teachers. It will report some international guest teachers views on this intercultural exchange and will report some of the challenges faced as well.

Findings of the present study will serve as a guide for teachers and students, especially those in rural areas or teaching and learning environments with limited resources to show them how they can create partnerships and international collaborations with free web-conferencing technologies and tools such as Skype and Zoom.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Participants

2.1.1 The Class Teacher

Harikrishna Patcharu is a teacher from India. He teaches English and communication at Zilla Parishad (ZP) High School in Bhattiporu mandal's Illavaram village, Guntur, India. He teaches students aged 12-15 years. He teaches 5 classes a day, in addition to an extra hour for his intercultural exchange activity with international guest teachers via Skype.

2.1.2 Participating students

More than 300 students in grades 6-12 have participated in video interactions via Skype with international guest teachers from different countries. The students go to ZP High School in Bhattiporu mandal's Illavaram village, Guntur, India. They study English, Hindi and Telugu (their local language). The Chief Minister introduced English as a medium of instruction in all government schools of the Guntur State including ZP High School. The Students have the choice to study content courses such as math, science and social studies in English or their native language, Telugu. 75% study content subjects in English as their parents prefer that. The students study from 9:30 a.m. until 4:45 p.m. with a lunch break at 1:15 p.m. They take 4 classes before lunch and 4 classes after lunch, each of which is between 30 and 45 minutes.

2.1.3 The International Guest Teachers

The international guest teachers who participated in the intercultural exchange program under study come from 75 countries: USA, *Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, UK, Spain, Germany, Latvia, Italy, Greece, Sweden, Finland, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Nepal, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Australia, New Zealand and others.* Some of the international guest teachers are schoolteachers who teach English, math, or science; others are college professors, and some are artists or musicians.

2.2 The Classroom Setting

The ZP High School has a Skype classroom that is equipped with a smart board, an LCD projector, desktop computer with fast internet. The classroom also has a globe, a small bookcase in front, with some books and souvenirs. Being a government school in a rural area, ZP High school gets financial support from the local community. The computer and other accessories were procured by the government of the Guntur State in India. Upon request from Harikrishna, some locals and philanthropists renovated and modernised the school's computer room, and school alumni donated modern chairs.

The Skype classroom is a spacious room with pink and blue chairs. The walls are decorated with big posters representing Indian culture such as pictures of Gandhi, Taj Mahal, an Indian dancer, a poet, a peacock, and the like. Small flags of all countries in the world are strung along the walls below the ceiling.

2.3 The Intercultural Exchange Sessions

Harikrishna started his cross-cultural exchange in August 2018. In his Facebook account, he has about 2000 friends, 1275 photos, 850 video clips. Hari searches for international teachers on Facebook. He adds them as friends. At first, he built a social media network of international teachers and professors from different universities in the US, Canada, Russia, and France to sharpen his own teaching skills. Then, he thought of using this network with his students. He sent out proposals to teachers and leaders of student organisations at various foreign universities and schools and got permission from the ZP school principal to start his intercultural, interactive exchange sessions. At first, sessions were held twice or three times a week depending on the availability of the guests on call. The aim of Hari's intercultural exchange sessions is to enable students at the ZP High School to interact and converse with international teachers and students in English. Students in grades 9 and 10 were encouraged to interact with foreign students via Skype.

To connect with an international guest teacher, Hari would contact him/her via Facebook Messenger and gives him/her an idea about his project. He asks for his/her consent to participate in an intercultural exchange session. He schedules a meeting and sets time that is appropriate for both, taking into consideration the difference in time zone. Before the scheduled

meeting, he connects with the guest teacher via Skype to check if there are any technical problems. On the day of scheduled meeting, he uses the Skype app on his smart phone, which is connected with a desktop computer and a smart board, to connect his students with the guest teachers and their students. During the meeting, the students can watch the guest teacher on the desktop computer and smart board, and they take turns, in a polite and orderly manner, to talk to the guest teacher using a microphone with a long cord. Each international guest teacher meets with the students online and interacts with them in English for 40 minutes. Hari does that daily. Each guest teacher meets with the students only once and each day the guest teacher is from a different country.

With the help of their teacher, Hari's students sometimes prepare questions in advance to ask the guest teacher. When I was the guest, young students asked me how they could improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. At the end of the session, the students gathered around their teacher and sang for me. Some guest teachers and their students talk about their own culture or some course-related topic. A Turkish student talked about Turkish culture. With the help of Skype, the students are also exchanging letters, drawings, pictures and postcards with 'penpal' friends in 15 foreign countries such as the USA, Canada, Mexico, Chile, France, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Croatia, Tunisia, South Korea, Japan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Turkey, in an attempt to practice their writing skills in English and improve their ability to describe an incident or an experience in writing. Hari has been bearing all the postage expenses of the letters written by the students.

Following each session, Hari posts pictures and video clips of the session with the international guest teacher on his Facebook page. He writes compliments and positive feedback about the session and video. The following are exact citations of some of Harikrishna's comments:

Hari wrote on Brian McDaniel, Director of Bands and Instrumental Music at Rancho Mirage High School, Palm Springs, California:

You have done exceptional job in collaborating with my students back last December. My students were inspired by your presence. They learnt a lot from your session. We look forward to connecting you again.

Hari said about Tamara Taylor:

What a thrilling session it was! My students and me had a spectacular zoom session with an excellent teacher from Canada. Her way of presentation and energetic voice complemented the session. We felt as we were in Canada during the entire session. It was a memorable session. Thanks to Tamara Taylor for staying up late for this session. We are so grateful to her for providing us this golden opportunity.

Hari commented on Milla Hewiidf from Finland:

It's undoubtedly a rare phenomenon of having sun light during the night. We were completely amazed looking at it. We have to extend our heartfelt thanks to Milla Hewiidf from Finland for staying awake at your 11 p.m. for the sake of my students. We would love to collaborate with her in exchange of culture and traditions.

2.4 During Covid-19 Pandemic

Due to the coronavirus lockdown, and like many students across the globe, Indian students are also studying online from home. Back in April, Hari told me that the students are disappointed as their exams have been postponed to July instead of March, so he contacted some international teachers and asked them to make a short motivational video in which they encourage his students to study hard and be focused. He has been posting the motivational

videos that some international teachers sent him on his Facebook page together with comments such as:

Teresia Mwema is a gifted student from Kenya. She has been phenomenal in her region by taking up some virtually impossible tasks possible by her sheer determination and perseverance. She has become a role model to many students. We are so thankful to her for giving an inspirational message.

In addition, Hari is teaching online via WhatsApp and Zoom. He is inviting some guest teachers from the USA and Europe to teach some online lessons in English, science, and mathematics to the students. He even used some YouTube videos to educate his students. Here is Harikrishna's comment on one of the guest teachers' Zoom sessions:

We had a fabulous zoom session with an inspirational teacher from Pennsylvania. She did a great job in answering to my student's curious questions. we are so thankful to Jennifer Leigh. We would love to have a session with her very soon.

Since only 60% of his students have access to a smart phone in the initial days of the Covid-19 lockdown, he asked local elderly people and parents to help those students who do not have access to a smart phone by lending their phones to some students for few hours to enable them to access the online lessons.

2.5 Data collection

I interviewed Hari Krishna on Facebook Messenger and asked him open-ended questions about his intercultural exchange sessions and about their benefits to students. I also conducted a content analysis of his Facebook posts, videos, pictures, and comments. In addition, I checked the following Indian newspaper reports on Harikrishna's experience: *Times of India*^{iv}, *Pune Mirror*^v, *the Guntur Guide*^{vi}, *The New Indian Express*^{vii}, and *The Hindu*^{viii} and cited some relevant information from them. Finally, I am including my own impressions as a participant in a Skype session with Hari's students and as I prepared a motivational video for them.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Effect on Students' Language Skill Development

In the intercultural exchange sessions with guest teachers and students from different countries, students at ZP high school have a chance to converse with foreign students their age and practice their English with them. This activity enhances Indian students' English language, specifically listening and speaking skills. It improves their pronunciation. They get used to different native and non-native English accents. Some students pick up different native English accents. Through the short communication sessions with native speakers, the students learn new vocabulary, language functions and grammatical structures, and consolidate what they already know. Exchanging letters with their peers and teachers from 15 countries has improved their writing skills tremendously. In one of his comments on Facebook, Harikrishna indicated:

My students had a wonderful collaborative session with an excellent English teacher from Argentina. Students from both sides shared their life ambitions and many more. We are so thankful to Soledad Gómez Saá for her initiative.

The students also benefit from advice on language skill development they get from guest teachers. A music teacher from England advised participating students to sing English songs to improve their language skills. Some guest teachers taught the students some grammatical structures, vocabulary items and functions such as: Showing them how to use and

pronounce *either ... or, neither ... nor, and if +past*. Others showed them posters with tips for *improving fluency in English, 10 ways to encourage someone, ways to say thank you, the simple Past Tense, idioms with some verbs* and others.

In addition to skill development in English, the intercultural exchange sessions help the students gain new knowledge in science, geography, history, science and so on. A science teacher from the USA mesmerised the students through a science demonstration. They are taken on virtual field trips of historical places around the world such as the Colosseum in Rome, the Ancient Corinth in Greece, and Elche world heritage city in Spain. They learn about natural phenomena viz, northern lights in Norway and Finland, and palm trees in a city in Spain. Hrikrishna said in a comment:

My students were fascinated by Elche Spain, world heritage city. Though palm trees are not strange to us but witnessing this variety in large number in a city is unusual for us. We even like the message given by an excellent teacher from this city. We are so thankful to Pili García for her wonderful videos.

The benefits of such intercultural exchange sessions were highlighted by some of Hari's students as reported by the Indian newspapers mentioned earlier:

G Pujitha said:

"Initially we were not confident to interact with foreigners because we can't speak English fluently. Our teacher encouraged us to speak whatever we can. Slowly, we gained confidence and now are happy to interact with people from so many countries."

P Phani Kumar said:

We are now being able to speak without fumbling.

N Mukhesh, a grade 9 student commented:

We are getting good marks in English. Thanks to regular letter-writing.

3.2 Effect on Students' Cultural and Global Awareness

The intercultural exchange sessions help the students learn names of countries, their location, flags, currency, cities, continents, and people. They learn about the educational systems of various countries and get to know how other students in other countries study, what they study, their school uniform, and classroom, library, and playground settings. Students in grades 8, 9, 10 discuss food habits, education, hobbies, future ambitions, and culture with foreign students in 15 countries. They exchange information and pictures about their own culture and traditions with foreign students and see pictures about other countries through which they learn about foreign countries' history, antiquities, food, art, traditions, costumes, music, such as the Moroccan green mint tea tradition, Japanese artwork, Indonesian costumes and others.

Through Skype, Indian students have experienced a variety of cultural aspects. They had a taste of the Turkish culture when they were connected with grade 9 students in a Turkish public school, who gave a presentation about their culture and development in their country and how their government is giving top priority to education by allocating a large portion of their national budget to education. They exchanged views with Italian students from Middle School IC Don Milani, Carbonia, Sardinia on a variety of topics like hobbies, food, culture, and national monuments. Indian students shared their traditional symbols like bringing the palms together before the face or chest, bowing and saying 'Namaste' when greeting others, donning their traditional Indian attire, and celebrating Indian festivals like Deepavali. Italian students were surprised when an Indian student told them that India has 21 official languages and when Indian students shared stories of diversity in India. While teaching a lesson about

Wangari Maathai of Kenya, the first African woman and first environmentalist to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, the students were connected with a guest teacher from Kenya who is a member of the Greenbelt Movement, who told to the students about Maathai's activities in detail and helped them understand the lesson better.

Such learning experiences make the learning environment fun and exciting. The students become enthusiastic about learning. It gives them inspiration and motivation to learn. They learn to respect other cultures and practice tolerance. The sessions have enabled students in grades 8, 9, 10 to interact with students, teachers, and principals from foreign countries in English confidently. They could overcome their fear, anxiety, and xenophobia. They are exposed to the world at a young age without having to leave their home village. The students feel happy and excited when they receive gifts like books, T-shirts, pens, food items, toys, and accolades from pen-pal countries.

Indian students in the ZP government school in a rural area in India proved that it is possible for them to understand and communicate with students in foreign countries with ease. Commenting on this, Harikrishna says:

I can't forget the joy in my students' eyes after the first interactive session.

3.3 Guest Teachers' Views

Guest teachers' comments on their experience with Harikrishna's intercultural exchange show appreciation of being invited to such sessions and for the time and effort Hari puts to bring the world to his students' classroom. They described Hari's intercultural exchange sessions as fabulous, awesome, amazing, inspiring, valuable, fantastic, and fun. The following are exact citations of some international guest teachers' comments on their videos and pictures Hari posted Facebook page:

Ryan Caswell:

Thank you for the time, I appreciate all you are doing to bring new perspectives to your students using technology. Your questions were well thought through, you have a gift for exploration. As we discussed, I know they will remember this long after they leave their respective grades. Looking forward to the next time!

Rita Dick:

What a great idea to provide fabulous and valuable videos for your students from inspiring teachers. A wonderful way to have a breath-taking tour around the world and learn about their countries.

Samantha Oliveira:

That's amazing!! Congratulations!! Are these paintings in your room? Sooo beautiful!!

Charles Derrick Snr from Kenya:

I'm so impressed by the great work you're doing. Thanks for the opportunity to be part of that journey you have undertaken to reach out to your learners with motivational messages from great Educators across the globe. It's so inspirational. I'm humbled by the opportunity you offered me to journey with you. I really appreciate and wish you the very best of luck in what you're doing. I'm looking forward to many more successful learning engagements.

Έφη Μπαχτσεβάνα (Έfi Bachtsevána) from Greece:

You are such an inspiring educator. You give your students the opportunity to connect with diverse teachers from all over the world. I was so honored to collaborate with you and your students. Thank you

Karanja Kim:

Waoh thanks soo much for this opportunity to speak a word of encouragement to your learners. Special gratitude to Maina Gathinjaga WaGîokô maina.

Charles Derrick Snr:

This is so amazing. Keep up the zeal.

Queency Naomi:

Wow!....privileged to whisper a word to your students!....Grateful to Maina Gathinjaga WaGîokô

Catrina McDonald:

Would you like a video from myself here in northern Spain? I have 2 more weeks of vacation and would be happy to connect with your students...

Thomas Whisinnand:

1000% blessed to spend some of my Sunday morning with Hari Krishna Patcharu, and his OUTSTANDING students from Zp High School, in India!! Thank you for the AMAZING collaboration!!

Tamara Taylor:

This man, Hari Krishna Patcharu has asked me to speak to his students in India over zoom this Friday (night with the time difference)! I am putting together a Canadian/Island series featuring wildlife, landmarks ect... I AM SUPER EXCITED!!

Abhilasha Singh:

Awesome. You are an inspiring teacher n leader. Your students are very fortunate to have u as their friend philosopher n guide.

Elisabeth Skovrup Hansen:

It is so good and fantastic. You make a big difference for your students. You deserve all the credit.

Tina Banks:

You do an amazing job connecting your students to the world. Well-deserved congratulations.

Prinavin Govender:

Congratulations and well done. You are an inspiration. I am an IT lecturer at a university of Technology in Durban South Africa. I can assist by sharing resources esp IT. Also have a YouTube channel search Prinavin Govender on YouTube. Well done. You are an inspiration keep IT up. If necessary feel free to contact me on Zoom or MSTEAMS.

Donna Shrum from the USA has commented on Harkrishna's recent winning of a Fulbright scholarship:

Congratulations to my teacher friend in India, Hari Krishna Patcharu. He has been awarded a place in the Fulbright exchange program and will be visiting America in January. He has brought the world to his rural class on the Bay of Bengal through Skype. He is an amazing teacher!

3.5 Shortcomings

Although the intercultural exchange sessions that Harikrishna conducted with international guest teachers from 200 schools in 75 countries have been a great experience for Indian students at the ZP High School in Bhattiporu mandal's Illavaram village, Guntur, India there are few shortcomings such as: During the meeting with me, there was an echo in the classroom which made it difficult for me to understand what the students and the teacher were saying. I also had difficulty understanding the students' Indian accent of English, which means that the students need to improve their pronunciation with additional practice in their normal classes. While I was giving them advice, in response to their questions on how they could improve their listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar, the students were not taking notes and I wonder how much they could grasp especially that students who asked those questions were in the elementary grades.

One of the limitations of this study is that I could not interview or contact a sample of students who have participated in Harikrishna's intercultural exchange sessions to learn about their views of this activity directly from them. It was not possible to have some students' names, emails, or Facebook pages. Therefore, all impressions were based on the interview with the teacher, what was reported in the newspapers mentioned above and a content analysis of the videos, pictures and comments posted on the teacher's Facebook page.

Another limitation is that there is no way to measure actual improvement in students' English language skills and amount and type of knowledge acquired as a result of communicating with the international guest teachers and their students. To assess gains in students' language and knowledge, a comparison with a comparable group of students who have not been exposed to any intercultural exchange sessions using a pretest before the start of the sessions at the beginning of the semester or course and a posttest at the end of the semester or course. There is no way to assess the differential effects of such an exchange on different grade levels and individual students exposed to the intercultural exchange.

While browsing the teacher's Facebook page, no interaction was noted between participating students and the guest teachers after the meeting, and none of the students has made any comment on a guest teacher's video, or pictures posted after each session. In addition, comments from guest teachers on what Hari posted about them on his Facebook page were very few as well. Some guest teachers did not even make any comments on what Hari has posted about them.

Moreover, the teacher's Facebook page shows that no follow-up activities for the students were posted after meeting with the guest teachers such as asking the students to summarize, or write a report or their impressions about a particular session, or what they learnt from it.

Another difficulty in such an intercultural activity with guest teachers from different parts of the world is coordinating the time differences with teachers from Canada, USA, and South America. In one of his comments Harikrishna indicated:

It's a memorable collaboration with the students of Tonya Smith. It was virtually impossible due to massive time differences between India and U.S.A but Tony made it possible. We look forward to collaborating with her and her amazing students in the future. My students had a wonderful experience.

During Covid-19, many students could not benefit from the distance learning activities as only 60% of the students had access to a mobile phone, an Internet, and a computer. So, the teacher reported that those students who have no access to a smart phone, computer or Wi Fi did not participate in the Zoom and WhatsApp sessions.

4. CONCLUSION

The revolution in information and communication technology has made the world a small village. People all over the world can now communicate through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, Telegram, WhatsApp, and others using their smart phones, tablet, or laptop. Some teachers are using social media for instructional purposes, for extracurricular activities and for telecollaborations with other teachers, students and schools. In this study, I reported on an Indian teacher teaching at a government school in a remote village and his students' experience in telecollaborating with foreign teachers across the globe via Skype, and the benefits of such an intercultural exchange on the students' English language skill development and cultural and global awareness.

The benefits that Indian students in the present study have gained from those telecollaborations are consistent with benefits found by other prior studies in the literature in which students in primary and secondary school in one country interacted with students in one or more countries such as Okumura (2020), Moloney and Genua-Petrovic (2012), Moloney and Genua-Petrovic (2012), Walton (2019), Delacruz, 2019), and Edge and Khamsi (2012). They are also consistent with findings of other prior studies in which university students in one country collaborated with another group of students in another country to develop their foreign language skills as in Villalobos-Buehner (2019), Cunico (2019), Schenker (2012), Bjøru, 2015), and Taskiran (2019).

To make these kinds of telecollaborations and intercultural exchange sessions more effective and more beneficial, this study recommends that instead of conducting the sessions with guest teachers only once and with a different teacher every day, i.e., 5 to 6 different guest teachers a week, it would be better to conduct few sessions a week only with the same guest teacher and his/her students, so that the students get to know the teacher better, overcome their shyness and hesitation, get used to her/his accent and teaching style, go into the topic under study or discussion in more detail, and collaborate on some kind of project with the foreign students. This will also save the class teacher time and effort in searching for a new guest teacher, contacting the teacher and making new arrangements for a new session every day. The teacher will have more time to spend on the quality, diversity and depth of the content rather than a bird's eye of this and that, here and there.

To have more focus on what the students will be learning or need to learn in the intercultural exchange sessions, the teacher can prepare a pre-plan that outlines the topics in language learning, math, science, geography, or history to be discussed in the telecollaboration sessions for at least a month. Since the teacher is having more than two years of experience conducting the intercultural exchange sessions, he is better able to make a list of topics that are relevant and of interest to the students. Telecollaborative projects on different topics, and from different subject areas can be specified in advance as well (Al-Jarf, 2016, 2015).

Following each session with an international teacher's session, it would be better to give the students a follow-up activity that requires the students to reflect on the session or write a report or summary of it. Students can be also encouraged to comment on each session on the teacher's Facebook page or on a special Facebook page dedicated to the students. Links to penpal groups the students are participating in can be added on the teacher's Facebook page or in a special Facebook page (Al-Jarf, 2014; 2007).

Furthermore, the teacher, his students and school may join the iEARN school linkage programs where each grade level can participate in a project of interest to them with a partner school in a foreign country and work on it for a longer period of time.

Finally, telecollaborations with a fewer number of guest teachers, students, and schools in fewer countries for longer periods of times can be tried out. Comparisons of participating students in intercultural exchange sessions and non-participating students to assess the

linguistic and cultural gains in the students using pre and posttest or questionnaires are still open for further investigations by researchers in the future.

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5. ENDNOTES

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