

# Facebook for Engagement: Telecollaboration Between Finland and New Zealand in German Language Learning

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## ABSTRACT

This research presents a virtual exchange project between two tertiary institutions in New Zealand and Finland with 26 participants who were intermediate German language students. During the project, the students used a closed Facebook group to post about given topics; the posts combined video, audio, and text that adhered to multimodal meaning-making theory. The theoretical framework was task-based language teaching underpinned by the notion of engagement, social media in language learning, and telecollaboration. Language learning was viewed through a socio-cultural lens. A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data including questionnaires, interviews, and FB-logs. The qualitative data was analysed by content analysis method. The results indicate that the students perceived FB as an applicable tool for community building and they enjoyed the variation it brought to the course. Collaboration, use of communication tools, authenticity, and teachers' support fostered student engagement.

## KEYWORDS

Facebook, German, Higher Education, Student Engagement, Telecollaboration

## INTRODUCTION

Technology-mediated social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook (FB), have become an integral part of students' social and educational lives (Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Espinosa, 2015; Leier, 2017; Picciano, 2009). They are virtual spaces where students can join groups of learners from different countries and backgrounds, thus developing into new global contact zones that have led to the creation of online communities (Kulavuz-Onal & Vasquez, 2018; Oskoz & Gimeno-Sanz, 2020).

These spaces can develop into learning communities that foster engagement when teachers carefully design the learning activities and assignments. The notion of community and learning refers to Dewey's concepts of student-driven learning via engagement, active learning, and collaboration (Fink & Inkela, 2015). Online communities and interactivity that Web 2.0 facilitates draws attention as discussed by Palloff and Pratt: "Without the support and participation of learning communities, there is no online course" (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 29). Kopp and Hill (2008) continued this line of thinking: "Learning occurs when knowledge is actuated through the process of a learner connecting

DOI: 10.4018/IJCALLT.2021010101

to and feeding information into a learning community” (p. 1). In this study the instructors created a Facebook group as a learning environment. Two groups of tertiary students of German who live in two opposite parts of the world meet on this platform and work on teacher-designed tasks. The students who knew only little about each other’s cultures build a community of learners by conducting tasks which were designed applying the three-layer task design (Ware & O’Dowd, 2008). The final task creating a joint product was the most challenging. The type of telecollaboration between two groups of non-native speakers from remote parts of the world using Facebook as a platform are first getting to know each other and finally creating a joint product is a new and innovative study and a contribution to the CALL literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to developments in network communication technologies, foreign language learners can extend their face-to-face classroom learning and gain access to other learners globally to learn a target language together, leading to intercultural communication and, consequently, intercultural competency (Byram, 1997). The extant literature references this approach to language learning as telecollaboration (Belz, 2003; Goodwin-Jones, 2019; Hauck & Young, 2008; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019; O’Dowd, 2011) or virtual exchanges (O’Dowd, 2018; The EVALUATE Group, 2019)

Traditionally, telecollaborations were email exchanges or situated on an institution’s learning platform (Belz, 2003; O’Dowd, 2011; Sadler & Dooley, 2016) since technology afforded easier and more affordable communication telecollaboration gained a lot of interest in recent years with studies reporting on telecollaboration initiatives between language students (Oskoz & Gimeno-Sanz, 2020), between language teacher students (Ryshina-Pankova, 2018), but also studies about practices and attitudes towards telecollaboration both of teachers and students (Helm, 2015). Telecollaboration projects are predominantly concerned about intercultural competence, either synchronous communication (Ryshina-Pankova, 2018; van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2019) or asynchronous communication using different social Web-tools (Lee, 2018; Oskoz & Gimeno-Sanz, 2020; Ryshina-Pankova, 2018; van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2019). Oskoz & Gimeno-Sanz studied 24 second language learners in the US and Spain over a period of one semester. The students completed collaborative tasks in groups of 3 or 4 using online tools such as Google +, online forums and Skype. Applying the appraisal framework, Martin & White’s (2005) results indicated that students enjoyed creating a close and safe learning environment. Lee (2018) established a Spanish American exchange over one semester using Voicethread, blogs and video chats. The communication was in Spanish and the US learners of Spanish profited of this exchange in particular gaining pragmatic knowledge. Ryshina-Pankova (2018) formed a telecollaboration with 13 teacher students in the US and 13 foreign language teacher students in Germany who communicated via online chat for a period of seven weeks. The topic of their chats was videos on soccer the students had to watch and subsequently discuss with their partners. Van der Zwaard & Bannink (2019) reported on a study between 60 Dutch and Australian students who collaborated for eight weeks on making a digital theatre play using synchronous computer-mediated communication, Skype and instant chat.

The community in a telecollaboration does not form naturally, as in a classroom; the course design is based on communication cues to influence community formation. Language teachers become designers and acquire the necessary skills and competencies themselves before being able to support learner autonomy in Web 2.0 contexts (Fuchs, Snyder, Tung, & Han, 2018; Hauck & Young, 2008; Palfreyman, 2018).

Task design enhances not only intercultural competence but also a sense of community. Beneficial tasks allow discourse to develop interactivity, reciprocity, and interactional balance (Chun, 2011; Ware & O’Dowd, 2008). Chun (2011) explored how online exchanges can play a role in second language learners’ development of pragmatic and intercultural competence. She studied the discourse style of advanced learners of the German language and learners of the English language. The exchanges

occurred over a period of 10 weeks via an online discussion forum. The task was to discuss specific vocabulary that the instructor had provided. The students wrote about the terms, and then they discussed the vocabulary in a synchronous final chat session. The exchange was mostly successful, with some students failing to contribute. Ware and O'Dowd (2008) conducted a study in which they connected English language students in Chile and Spanish language students in the US to communicate during two 8-week sessions about tasks that the researchers designed. The focus was on giving each other feedback. This asynchronous exchange was partially successful, but the researchers highlighted that tasks are to be designed carefully and adapted to both student groups.

Telecollaboration tasks situated on an SNS are a new and under-researched topic (Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Fuchs, Hauck, & Müller-Hartmann, 2012; Ziegler, 2016). Utilisation of widely accessible and user-friendly SNSs, such as FB, has allowed students to connect with friends worldwide and develop international networks. Furthermore, language learners perceive SNSs as authentic communication platforms. Thus, bringing an SNS into the language classroom to connect German language learners from different parts of the world, creating a collaborative learning environment within the principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Ellis, 2003) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), seems to be a logical continuation of students' online lives (Boyd, 2014).

A few researchers have used tasks as in TBLT situated on FB in their language classes (Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Leier, 2017; Foogooa & Ferdinand-James, 2017), with one of the first studies using it in a language class and as a part of the overall assessment conducted by Blattner and Fiori (2011). Spanish language learners in the US accessed FB to observe appropriate language usage, especially greetings in specific contexts. The students found that understanding the authentic language was challenging, but the task increased their sociopragmatic awareness. Blattner and Fiori also focused on raising awareness of speech acts on FB to trigger future production: "This sociopragmatic task was chosen to develop communicative competence, which would lead to production" (p. 37). Likewise, Leier (2017) integrated tasks in an FB group as part of the assessment. Her German language students communicated with each other over a period of 12 weeks. The platform enhanced developing a stronger class community and cultivating writing skills in the target language, particularly when applying informal language. Moreover, Foogooa and Ferdinand-James (2017) researched English as a Second Language (ESL) student engagement through two online communication tools: a learning-management system (LMS) and an FB group. Indeed, these tools engaged the students, as they enjoyed the combination more than merely using an LMS.

## **Engagement Model as a Theoretical Framework**

The digital era provides educators with various means to engage students who are studying at institutions of higher education and who have grown up with digital technology. Educational technology and use of socio-digital technologies in learning seem to foster student engagement (Korkealehto & Siklander, 2018). Several studies have researched the relationship between engagement and SNS usage for learning activities in higher education.

A plethora of literature define student engagement from different viewpoints. As we are interested in tasks which lead to engagement, we build our interpretation on the model presented by Lay-Hwa Bowden, Tickle and Naumann (2019). Their model comprises four pillars: behavioural, affective, social and cognitive engagement; they added social engagement to the widely agreed three-part typology (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Ryu & Lombardi, 2015) in which student engagement includes behavioural, affective, and cognitive components. Behavioural engagement entails participation and involvement in academic activities through time and effort spent on learning activities and interactions with peers and teachers (Kahu, 2013; Kuh, 2009). Affective engagement entails students' emotional reactions to learning (Fredricks et al., 2004), including reactions and attitudes that students have related to teachers, peers, studying, subjects, and school in general. Social engagement relates to the sense of belonging to the learning community (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). In class, social engagement is shown as collaboration and listening to the others. Finally, cognitive engagement

entails willingness and motivation to invest effort in comprehending complex ideas and mastering high-level skills (Fredricks et al., 2004). In this study, we address student engagement as a holistic phenomenon including the four abovementioned aspects.

Results of studies on engagement in combination with SNS use are ambivalent. Some studies show that FB, as an SNS, positively affects engagement and learning results (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Mbodila, Ndebele, & Muhandji, 2014), while others indicate that FB fosters social, rather than cognitive engagement (Wise, Skues, & Williams, 2011) or that it both positively and negatively affects engagement and learning results (Junco, 2012).

In this article, we present findings from a study that involved two groups of German language students: one in Finland, one in New Zealand. The objectives were to offer the students opportunities to connect and to use their target language in an informal environment and get to know students on the other side of the world. Connecting learners studying the same target language enhanced the students' ability to make their German language learning more relevant and to extend their language skills by providing different tasks starting from simple tasks of introduction and ending with the most complex task type to create a shared product with participants from both countries. This final product was presented and it included a comparison of cultural artefacts which enhanced the learners' knowledge base as the students did not know much about each other's countries. The aim of our study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how telecollaboration designed using TBLT principles and situated on a closed FB group as a learning environment can influence student engagement in a German language course. We proposed the following research questions:

*RQ1: How do students perceive the implementation of the tasks in a FB-group?*

*RQ2: Does task-based language teaching applied in a technology-enhanced environment lead to student engagement in foreign language learning?*

## **METHODS**

### **Project and Participants**

This study investigates a telecollaboration project between two German language classes at institutions of higher education in two countries: Finland and New Zealand. The participants in Finland comprised 12 business administration students at the University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, the students who were conducting their degree programme in the English language (aged 20–25 years). The telecollaboration project was one part of a five-credit German course, which was the students' second German language course at the University of Applied Sciences. In New Zealand, a group of 14 tertiary students (aged 18–24 years) participated in an intermediate course in the German language. They studied German in addition to their core subjects, which included diverse fields, such as law and engineering. Students' language levels in both countries were B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The telecollaboration occurred over a period of six weeks, and it was integral to the German language course curricula in both countries and was part of the course assessment. The 26 students conducted five tasks based on the three-layer task design (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009) and posted them on the closed FB group.

The task design included tasks organized into three principal categories (Table 1). The task type one included information exchange tasks, in which the students created videos to introduce themselves and had to find a student with similar interests and comment on their post. In the second post, the students were asked to write about their hometowns, and their families supporting their posts with photos. The task type two entailed comparison and analysis tasks. The students wrote about their mealtimes and favourite foods, using photos to support their posts, and in the fourth post, they presented their favourite clothes shops, using external weblinks and photos. The students

**Table 1. Tasks and Topics of the Exchange**

Tasks	Topics
<b>Task type 1: Information exchange</b>	
1. Video: Individual introductions	Make a video that is not longer than three minutes in which you introduce yourself and your hobbies.
2. Photos, weblinks: Local culture and people	Present your hometown and family. The distance partners are required to comment on at least two of the posts.
<b>Task type 2: Comparison and analysis</b>	
3. Photos: Food and eating habits	Write about food in your country, using photos to support your writing. The distance partners are required to compare the information with topics from their own country.
4. Photos, weblinks: clothes and shopping	Present your favourite clothes shop, using external weblinks and photos to support your writing. The distance partners are required to compare the information with topics from their own country.
<b>Task type 3: Collaboration</b>	
5. PowerPoint or video: Present on a given topic in groups of three or four students from both classes.	Compare Christmas, summer holidays, or national holidays between the two countries.

from the other country were asked to find similarities and differences before commenting on the FB group. The task type three was a collaborative task i.e., a joint project for both groups. The teachers assigned the students in groups of three or four people from both classes. The students chose their own topics, comparing relevant phenomena from each country. The multimodal meaning-making theory, a model for designing instruction grounded in multiliteracy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Pegrum, 2009) supported our task design.

The pedagogical tasks were in line with the framework introduced earlier in this study. The tasks prepared for the students focused on meaning and learners were asked to include semantic and pragmatic meaning rather than form. The purpose and goal of the tasks was authentic communication modelled by the real world.

### **Data and Data Analysis**

This research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The total number of the students participating in the telecollaboration project was 26; but only part of the students answered the questionnaires and volunteered to be interviewed. The data comprised 11 participants who completed pre-study questionnaires, 12 who completed post-study questionnaires, and 11 who volunteered to semi-structured interviews, which varied from 10–20 minutes each. The FB log data comprised 138 posts, totalling 4,607 words. The questionnaires were anonymous and not subjected to ethical consent whereas the interviews needed a written consent by the volunteering students.

The quantitative data were collected through Google Forms online questionnaires, which were conducted at the beginning and end of the project. The pre-project questionnaire comprised 14 multiple-choice questions, mapping out students' preferences and activities on social media. The post-project questionnaire contained 11 multiple-choice questions and 9 open-ended questions on students' perceptions of the project. In both questionnaires, the multiple-choice questions used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The qualitative data included the answers to the semi-structured interview questions conducted after the project and the answers to the open-ended questions in the post-project questionnaire. Five students from Finland and six from New Zealand were interviewed; the Finns by their teacher and the New Zealand students' interviews were conducted by a student teacher. The interviews were done individually face-to-face, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interview responses and the open-ended post-project questionnaire answers were analysed using content analysis method, which provides procedures for rigorous analysis of written data (Flick, 1998; Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2012). Applying qualitative content analysis facilitates describing qualitative data in a systematic way.

Both researchers in this study worked independently, one in Finland and the other in New Zealand; they read and identified common phrases, key themes, and patterns concerning students' perceptions on the FB collaboration and their views on how the online collaboration led to student engagement in foreign language learning. Both researchers analysed independently the data several times for reliability, they identified categories and subcategories which were then discussed and refined. A coding frame was developed, resulting in the following themes:

- Collaboration
- Use of communication tools on FB
- Authentic learning
- Teachers' activities
- Enjoyment

## RESULTS

The telecollaboration project in the German language course regarding students' perceptions on collaboration in an online community and the community's ability to foster student engagement showed that the students were engaged in the activity and interested in their group members' posts. In this section, we will describe the activity in the FB group during the study period and then answer the research questions.

### Facebook Activity

The students participating in the telecollaboration posted regularly during the six-week period, particularly when they were required to add artefacts. Figure 1 shows the activity for the four tasks applying task type one and two. The final task (task type three) was not included on the chart because the presentations were not required to be posted in the FB group. The FB activity in Figure 1 shows posts, comments, "likes," and "seens" for each post. The "seen" reactions drew the highest numbers for each post. "Seen" is a function only available in a FB group, listing each viewer by name.

The posts, 138 in total, triggered comments Figure 1 such as "*Tolles Video, das Mädchen ist so hübsch*" ("Great video; the girls are so pretty") or questions about the group members' culture: "*Was ist das für eine Mütze?*" ("What type of a hat is that?"). Occasionally, students used the FB group to exchange information about the target language (e.g., "Hey, guys—grammar tips," as illustrated in Figure 2.

The posts that referred to topics other than the assigned tasks showed that the students perceived the platform as an authentic communication place which was also observed in the way students communicated on FB using a variety of emoticons to enhance their posted content. The students used several emoticons (e.g., smiley face, wave, smiley face with sunglasses, sad face, and surprised face) to create a more emotionally charged environment.

The students perceived FB as a platform to communicate with fellow students they had just met online; the results show that most students (80%) perceived the tasks and experiences on the FB site

Figure 1. Facebook (FB) activity

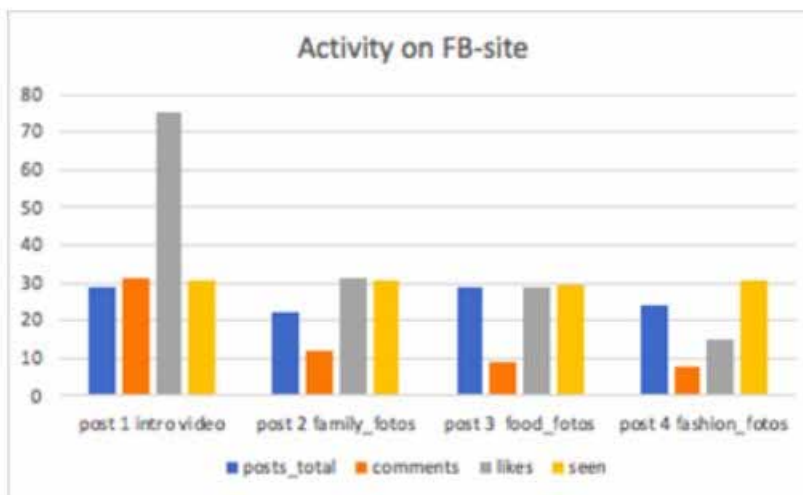
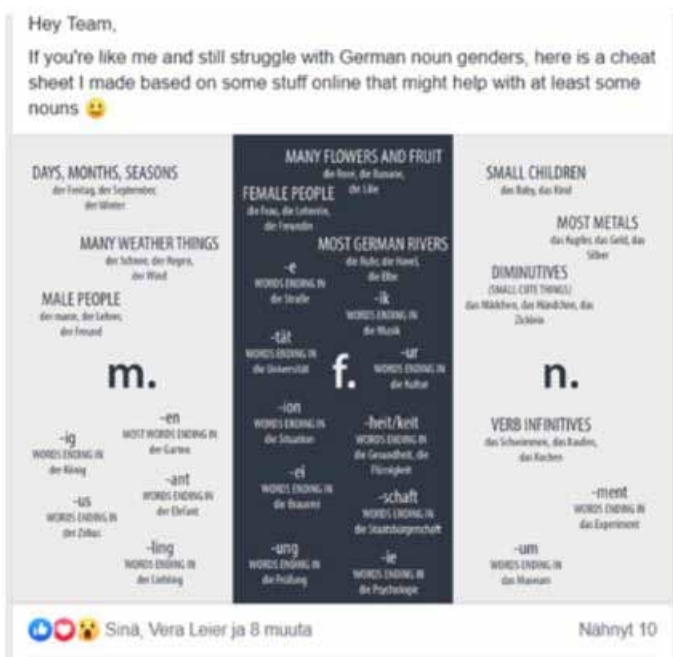


Figure 2. The students' shared information on the target language in FB

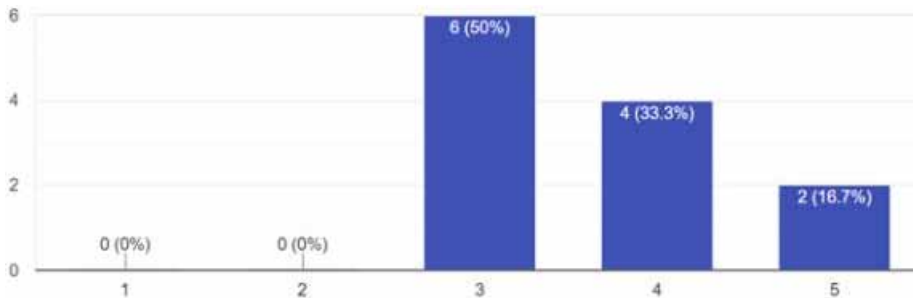


favourably and as meaningful. As shown in the following example one student commented in an interview: “I have learned more about both of our cultures while improving my German”. Several students also stated that they gained confidence and found the course content interesting.

**Engagement**

According to the results, collaboration, use of communication tools, authentic learning, teachers’ activity and enjoyment fostered student engagement during the telecollaboration project.

Figure 3. Collaboration fostered engagement



*Collaboration.* As evident in Figure 3, collaboration fostered engagement. The results ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

In the following the examples are taken from the interviews and the post-study questionnaire.

*Use of communication tools on Facebook.* The students were required to comment on each other's posts in all five assignments. According to the FB logs, commenting was used less frequently to develop collaboration compared with the usage of the 'like' function. Nevertheless, one student explained that comments led to a short conversation: "There were, like, some really nice comments. I was actually surprised people were [...] because I first thought I am not going to comment, but then people were commenting, and I was answering back... [Laughter]". The student continued: "It motivated, and it was nice that somebody commented and maybe asked something. And you could ask about some other person's life who lives really far away". Hence, the comments sparked real conversation, even if students were initially reluctant to comment or respond to the comments. The students from different countries also noticed that they had common interests, which resulted in genuine conversation: "The girl who's vegan because, like, I'm vegan as well, so we might bond over something". The students were able to communicate meaningfully without being penalized when not applying the correct forms. Therefore, the common ground built with communication tools contributed to engagement, as the students from different countries discovered that they could interrelate. Furthermore, as stated in the previous example, students perceived commenting as a motivator for learning about habits and people from the other side of the world and as a conversation starter. Figure 4 shows how the students had a conversation about their favourite dishes.

Regardless of the number of comments, the students considered themselves engaged. The tasks were designed to be learner-centred which triggered communication and a feeling of belonging to the group. One student noticed that his posts did not trigger any comments, but he still regarded himself as motivated, and the lack of comments did not discourage him. Furthermore, instead of commenting, students simply "liked" each other's posts. They used this feature more frequently than the commenting function. Some students stated that when they noticed that the FB group members liked their posts, it motivated them to communicate more often on FB, especially with the "like" function.

The students particularly liked and commented on posts with appealing information, such as photos of pets. When asked why so many comments were added to such a post, one student replied: "Must have been the dog".

On FB, the "seen" feature shows the usernames of those who view a post. Thus, this feature revealed the students who had seen any post in the group. The students stated that it contributed to their feelings of belonging, being noticed by other FB group members, even if those members did not leave a comment or push the "like" button. Digital natives perceive this as a way to communicate and receive acknowledgment.



Figure 4. FB conversation on favourite dishes



Generally, the data analysis revealed that comments and likes contributed strongly to student engagement in this German language course, even though some students complained that comments on FB can disappear in the stream, and some students forgot to read and respond to their comments.

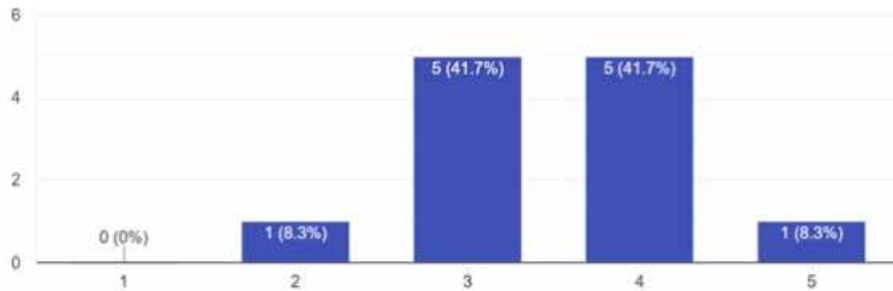
*Authentic learning.* Designing age-relevant and appealing topics for the FB tasks initiated to authentic learning. The students enjoyed sharing details and information about their everyday lives, such as hobbies, mealtimes and eating habits, shopping, and the clothes they wear, as can be seen in Figure 5, with a post on eating habits.

The topics stimulated exchanges of authentic personal information because students' questions and comments led to genuine interest and authentic learning about other cultures and students'

Figure 5. Eating habits



Figure 6. Enjoyment



personal lives. The differences and similarities between the cultural environments of Finland and New Zealand surprised the participants.

Realizing that the German language is an authentic tool for communication fostered engagement and contributed to students' eagerness to learn the language. They appreciated the opportunity to describe and reflect on their everyday lives in multiliteracy ways, a task not often done. One student considered these tasks to be valuable practice for his upcoming student exchange period in Berlin. He praised the FB communication as being more practical compared with traditional face-to-face classes: "I don't know if you can really compare it, if you studied those things in class; it was more practical". The student continued: "Someone asked me about what basketball teams I support; I mean, we had quite a good conversation on that".

As seen in the two examples above, students noticed that they could have real life conversations. Using German as a common language with students from another country inspired them, helping to engage them with the course content and motivated them to learn more.

*Teachers' activities.* The two teachers—one in Finland, the other in New Zealand—were also members of the closed FB group. They were flexible, as evident in the following example: "It was good that you gave us a little bit more time". They also contributed to the group when necessary to maintain the flow of conversation or to inform the students about an upcoming deadline. The students perceived the teachers' availability as positive and necessary, but some would have valued more feedback, especially corrective feedback for their German language production. When asked about potential improvements, one student responded: "Maybe mistakes to point out what we have written, not just ticking off what we've done. If we keep making mistakes, we keep making them". However, students appreciated it when the teachers contributed to the tasks with their own posts or comments. The students mentioned that it was beneficial if the teachers intervened when the students had difficulties in starting the tasks.

*Enjoyment.* Enjoyment is a vital aspect when stimulating student engagement. The students claimed that the FB tasks added value to the course design and continued that the closed FB group, as a shared platform, provided an enjoyable and safe learning environment that fostered engagement, and contributed positively to their learning experiences.

Figure 6 indicates that the students found the telecollaboration project to be fun, at least to some extent; none of them judged the project as being no fun at all. One student appreciated the cultural comparisons: "I've quite enjoyed it because it is quite interesting to see the different cultures between Helsinki and Christchurch". Another student reflected on the novelty that the FB collaboration brought to the language course: "It was definitely different, but I think that was good". Furthermore, some students had not previously used FB as a frequent platform for studying, but they soon became used to it and valued its benefits when compared with traditional teaching. They mentioned that conducting weekly tasks as well as reading and commenting on the posts became a routine for them. According to the results, over 91% of the students considered all five tasks fun. Moreover, the students generally preferred assignments that included photos and written text rather than video recordings. They also

viewed the fifth task (the group presentations) as contributing to their enjoyment, even though some of the groups found it challenging to create a group and start the collaborative task.

## DISCUSSION

The first research question investigated how the students perceive the implementation of the tasks in a FB-group. According to the results, the students perceived the tasks on the site as meaningful and learner-centred. The students' shared the interest in learning the German language and the interest in each other's cultures, leading to social presence. They enjoyed sharing the photos, which contributed to a deeper understanding of a foreign culture. Despite some reluctance at the beginning to share personal photos and videos, the students gradually developed a feeling of belonging to the group, which coincided with the results from Zepke and Leach (2010).

In our study, the first task was to create a personal video. Considering previous usage of the FB platform it would have been ideal to start with a less revealing task, because videos are authentic but can be intimidating for participants who do not know each other. FB is an extension of users' offline social life. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) concluded that "SNSs help maintain relationships as people move from one offline community to another" (p. 1164). The participants of this study experienced FB as a suitable platform for language learning. De facto, being asked to meet strangers violates the code of the platform and can cause disruptions, but in contrary to previous studies, in our research, the students perceived it motivating to contact strangers. The eagerness to communicate with unknown students from different part of the world triggered a more engaged approach enhancing students' performance in the target language.

In addition to language learning, the students enjoyed gaining authentic and meaningful cultural knowledge as well as connecting with students of German language on the other side of the world. This unique exchange was useful because both learner groups studied the same target language at the same level, and they both experienced the same feelings of limitation. This novel experience of negotiating tasks, talking about and comparing cultural issues required practice and training in the target language and led to reflecting learning.

Research question two was answered by investigating the task design in relation to the engagement of the students. Instead of measuring student engagement objectively, we chose to use students' self-evaluation and subjective feedback. In our opinion, the students' perceptions provided more valuable information on FB's ability to foster engagement. According to the results the telecollaboration in FB led to engagement in terms of five components: collaboration, use of communication tools, enjoyment, authentic learning, and teachers' activities. The students praised FB's ability to promote communication and collaboration which is in line with Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, and Leveritt's (2012) results. FB used as an educational tool offers technology which supports collaboration and communication. In a private FB group, communication is stress free, allowing participants to concentrate on the message without concerns about the correctness of their writing or speaking. In addition, interaction with the teachers and their support contributed not only to behavioural engagement but also to affective and social engagement, as the students experienced a feeling of belonging with the teachers and peers. The students perceived the teachers' actions in the platform as positive, which is consistent with the study by Richardson, Besser, Koehler, Lim, and Strait (2016), who found that instructor presence was important for student success when connecting with foreign students, making each other more approachable, showing concern for their success, and demonstrating expertise. In the present study teachers' comments triggered enhanced participation and helped clarifying assignment guidelines.

Furthermore, the teachers' activities and enhanced engagement sparked by the affordances of the platform demonstrate that the course design was successful. Thus, engagement was reciprocal between the students and teachers. The students constructed collaboratively an authentic learning environment that motivated them to learn and participate more. For example, the students made several attempts making video or audio recordings, trying to produce the perfect version. This indicates persistence and

a willingness to focus on quality in learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kuh, 2009; Schindler et al., 2017). In online learning, enjoyment fosters student engagement (Korkealahto & Siklander, 2018). Similarly, the telecollaboration through the closed FB group added pleasure to the German language course, as the students enjoyed creating their own recordings, videos and written tasks, and they had pleasure in reading, watching, and listening to their peers' products. The students' positive attitude toward the assignments fostered their affective engagement (Schindler et al., 2017).

Contrary to many telecollaboration studies, even though we as teachers are novices to telecollaboration, we managed to include the demanding task type 3 – a joint presentation (Helm, 2015). Unanticipated, the students perceived it enjoyable yet challenging. Being challenged promotes engagement and creates the feeling of progress. In addition, given that the target language in this study was for both groups not the mother tongue German - which is seldomly used in telecollaboration - increases the value of this research. The results encourage language teachers to use telecollaboration with other lingua franca than English. Further, the use of FB as the learning platform for telecollaboration is a novelty. In addition, previous research report difficulties in teacher collaboration, but in our case the teachers collaborated without friction, regardless of the time difference and long distance (Helm, 2015).

According to the students, the five factors, *collaboration*, *the use of communication tools on FB*, *authentic learning*, *teachers' activities*, and *enjoyment* contributed positively to student engagement. These five factors were interdependent; consequently, their combined effect was stronger than one factor would have been on its own. The students perceived the tasks in the closed FB group added value to the course and to their overall learning experiences. The fact that the FB group was closed enhanced students' willingness to share details about their lives. These findings are in line with extant research on student engagement in technologically enhanced learning (Lay-Hwa Bowden et al., 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This study described how students from the opposite sides of the globe connected with each other using technology and the common medium of the German language. Although we conducted the project on a small scale, with 26 participants over a short period of time, it was rewarding for students to gain insights into new cultures. Regardless of Finland and New Zealand being in opposite hemispheres with different university schedules and time zones, we found an open six-week block in our teaching schedules that suited both countries. The problems with the time difference were minimized by creating telecollaboration on an asynchronous communication platform.

The time difference and distance created challenges for the teachers, but with flexibility on both sides, a shared understanding developed for this fruitful collaboration. Moreover, the teachers developed their digital and pedagogical knowledge and the ability to facilitate the learning process, providing timely support and feedback. By cooperating the teachers created a comfortable and safe learning environment for their students to learn the language.

In future studies, our objective is to implement online exchange possibilities over an extended duration, preferably with more opportunities for the students to communicate with each other. The students should be offered the opportunity to become acquainted with each other through individual dialogues before advancing to more public SNS platforms.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank all the students and student teachers who participated in this study. The New Zealand and the Finnish students who volunteered to take part in this study gave written ethical consent.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally to the writing and conceptual structure of this manuscript.

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## APPENDIX A

### Telecollaboration, Preliminary Questionnaire

This questionnaire focuses on students' experiences and opinions on telecollaboration. Please answer truthfully and carefully to all the questions. The answers will be analysed and the results of this study will be presented at a conference and published as an article. This questionnaire is confidential and anonymous.

1. Your organisation  
Haaga-Helia  
UC
2. Your age  
under 20  
21 - 25  
26 - 30  
30 -
3. Your gender  
male  
female  
other  
prefer not to say
4. Social networks Which of the following (if any) social working sites are you a member?  
Facebook  
Instagram  
WhatsApp
5. If you answered 'other', which ones?

### Facebook

6. How many Facebook friends do you have?  
20-60  
60-100  
100-150  
more than 150
7. Do you have FB-friends from other countries than your native country?  
yes  
no
8. If you answered 'yes', how many foreign FB-friends have you got and from which countries do they come from?
9. How do you know your online friends?  
most of them are friends from my real-life  
most of them are friends I have never met in person  
most of my friends I know in real-life and some of them I never met before
10. How often do you check your personal Facebook?  
several times a day  
once a day  
several times a week  
once a week or less frequently



11. Do you post items on you FB wall?  
yes, regularly- almost every day  
yes, sometimes – maybe once a week  
not very often, maybe once a month or less  
never, but I follow the entries of my friends
12. Do you use the ‘like’ (‘gefällt mir’) function on FB?  
yes, every time  
yes, sometimes  
no, never
13. Do you use the ‘comment’ (‘kommentieren’) function on FB?  
yes, every time  
yes, sometimes  
no, not actively, but I read the comments  
no, and I never read the comments

### **Facebook Groups**

14. Do you work with Facebook group feature in other courses at your university?  
yes  
no
15. If you answered ‘yes’, which course is it? And is it part of the assessment in the course/courses.  
Please explain
16. Do you feel that Facebook group used as a platform of your class assessment is:  
intruding into your personal FB life  
doesn’t intrude into your personal FB life
17. Do you belong to FB-groups?  
yes  
no
18. If ‘yes’, how many?
19. If you belong to FB-groups, what type of groups are they?  
hobbies, leisure  
professional  
educational  
other
20. Please, indicate if you answered ‘other’

## APPENDIX B

### Telecollaboration, Post -Questionnaire

Please, fill in after the telecollaboration project

#### 1. Your organisation

Haaga-Helia

UC

#### 2. Task 1, video introduction

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

fostered engagement
fostered oral language skills
fostered written language skills
was fun

#### 3. Other comments on Task 1

#### 4. Task 2, photos and text on your family and hometown

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

fostered engagement
fostered oral language skills
fostered written language skills
was fun

#### 5. Other comments on Task 2

#### 6. Task 3, food & mealtimes

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

fostered engagement
fostered oral language skills
fostered written language skills
was fun

#### 7. Other comments on Task 3

#### 8. Task 4, fashion and shopping

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

fostered engagement
fostered oral language skills
fostered written language skills
was fun

#### 9. Other comments on Task 4

10.Task 5, joint product

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

fostered engagement
fostered oral language skills
fostered written language skills
was fun

11.Other comments on Task 5

12.Collaboration

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

fostered engagement
fostered oral language skills
fostered written language skills
was fun

13.Other comments on collaboration

14.Facebook

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

The teachers were present on Facebook
Your privacy was disturbed

15.What would you say you have learned from this exchange?

16.How did you find the tasks?

17.Did you find any of them difficult?

18.Did you find it difficult to create groups with students in the other country?

19.Did you find it difficult to describe your home culture?

20.Which medium did you prefer to create your own post?

video

audio

written

photo

21.What did you enjoy most about this project?

22.What did you enjoy the least about working in this project?

23.Did you feel that you became part of an online community?

24.Which factors do you think contributed to this feeling?

25.How did you feel about the others' comments on your posts?

26.Do you have any other comments or feedback on this project?

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## APPENDIX C

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Could you explain how you perceived this assignment task. Tell us all about it.
2. What are the benefits?
3. What are the drawbacks?
4. Was this project beneficial for learning more German?
5. Did this project motivate you to be interested in the target language?
6. What effect did the comments on your posts have? Did it motivate you or discourage you?
7. Was this project a good tool to connect with another culture?
8. Did you learn about another culture?
9. Did you get more awareness about your own culture?
10. Did you have technical issues, did you have problems?
11. Any issues about Facebook. Did you find it uncomfortable that you did not know the students in the other class in person?
12. How did you find the structure of the assignments?
  - a) Did the assignment include too many / not enough tasks?
  - b) Were the required lengths of writing or speaking tasks according to your proficiency level?
  - c) How did you find the topics?
13. Could you give us feedback? Could you recommend topics for future use? Would you change something about the project or assignments?

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