A GLANCE BEYOND FIXED CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN TELECOLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

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▪ ABSTRACT: Cultural representations, in Risager's words (2007, p. 180), "convey images or narratives of culture and society in particular contexts", enabling people to exchange ideas about preconstructed images related to other cultures. In telecollaboration (which is defined by O'Dowd (2013, 2016) as the use of digital technologies in the context of distant foreign language classes), cultural representations come into play when individuals meet. Drawing on scholars such as Byram (1997), Kramsch (1993, 2014), Risager (2007), Lopes and Freschi (2016) and O'Dowd (2019), this qualitative study (PATTON, 1985) aimed at discussing the way in which a glance beyond fixed cultural representations was made possible in telecollaborative activities. For the analysis, data from telecollaborative sessions and from an interview were included. The excerpts analyzed in this study represent three interactive episodes where the following cultural topic was discussed: "*Programa Bolsa Família*". The outcomes showed that a look beyond fixed cultural representations was accomplished through pedagogical mediation, in the sense that questions subsequently to the telecollaborative session were needed for this look. It can be claimed that there is an evident need for the discussion about fixed cultural representations in telecollaborative activities, bearing in mind that such discussion was of paramount importance for a look beyond cultural essentialism.

▪ KEYWORDS: cultural representations; telecollaboration; telecollaborative exchanges; interculturality; pedagogical mediation.

Introduction

The internet has produced general changes in education and particularly in foreign language classrooms, as it has expanded the opportunities to practice and learn languages. In this regard, O'Dowd (2013, p. 123) underlines that "one of the major contributions of the internet to foreign language (FL) education has been its potential

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to bring language learners into virtual contact with members of other cultures and speakers of other languages". Similarly, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013, p. 119) claim that digital technologies "have the potential to place learners in a situation of intercultural communication where they can explore the language and culture they are learning in real world interactions".

Telecollaborative exchanges have arisen due to the possibilities given by digital technologies. O'Dowd (2019) defines telecollaboration as a pedagogical approach in which groups of students participate, over a given period, in intercultural online interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts, for example, other countries or regions of the same country.

Cultural representations emerge when people from different cultures interact. According to Risager (2007, p. 180), these representations "convey images or narratives of culture and society in particular contexts". Taking into consideration that telecollaboration provides the contact among individuals from different countries and cultures (O'DOWD, 2013, 2019), this study aimed at discussing the way in which a glance beyond fixed cultural representations was made possible in the telecollaborative activities conducted. To achieve this objective, we outlined the following research question: how did a glance beyond fixed cultural representations take place in the telecollaborative activities conducted?

This text is divided into five sections. The first focused on the purpose of this investigation and, in addition, presented a brief contextualization of the object of study. In the second section, we deal with the relevant literature to ground this study, while in the third we address the method used. Then, in the fourth section we present the data analysis. Furthermore, on the basis of the data analysis, we show the way in which a glance beyond fixed cultural representations was made possible. After that, in the fifth section final considerations are made and some suggestions for further research are offered.

Telecollaboration and pedagogical mediation

Kramsch (2014) points out that, recently, the context of language teaching and learning has drastically changed, and this is an outcome of the globalized world. To define the concept of globalization, the author cites Blommaert (2010, p. 13), for whom it refers to a "shorthand for the intensified flows of capital, goods, people, images and discourses around the globe, driven by technological innovations mainly in the field of media and information and communication technology". In the wake of that change, the internet has been facilitating "authentic materials available as never before" (KRAMSCH, 2014, p. 296) and, by extension, telecollaborative exchanges "have increased students' access to real native speakers in real cultural environments" (KRAMSCH, 2014, p. 296).

Telecollaboration is defined by O'Dowd (2013) as the use of online technologies to develop foreign language skills and intercultural competence with students who are geographically dispersed. In turn, Thorne (2006) makes clear that telecollaboration, facilitated by the use of technologies, such as e-mail, videoconferencing and online platforms, offers a variety of opportunities for interaction and dialogue, including small-group work, whole class exchanges and pair work.

One example of telecollaboration is teletandem (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006; VASSALLO; TELLES, 2006; TELLES, 2011, 2015a, 2015b). Telles (2015a, p. 604) summarizes teletandem as follows:

> A mode of telecollaboration - a virtual, collaborative and autonomous context for learning foreign languages in which two students help each other to learn their own languages (or language of proficiency). They do so by using the text, voice and webcam image resources of VOIP technology (such as Skype).

Teletandem has three guiding principles: reciprocity, autonomy and separate use of languages (TELLES, 2015b). Reciprocity, as Brammerts (1996) puts it, concerns a mutual support and interdependence between the two language learners, whereas autonomy refers to the commitment of both interactants[1] regarding their own learning process. Lastly, separate use of languages means that the two languages cannot be mixed (TELLES, 2015b).

The thematic project *Teletandem Brasil: foreign languages for all* (henceforward TTB), the specific telecollaborative context in this study, was created in 2006 (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006; VASSALLO; TELLES, 2006). It is run at a state university in São Paulo's countryside by researchers, practitioners and teachers with the purpose of enabling college students from Brazil to interact with college students from other countries.

In most telecollaborative projects reported in research "teachers organize the communication and tasks, motivate students, monitor activities and provide feedback and support for learners, but the communication between learners is not usually moderated" (HELM, 2016, p. 151). Specifically concerning the teletandem context, the online sessions themselves are not moderated by a teacher-mediator either. As an alternative, in mediation sessions (ROCHA; LIMA, 2009; ANDREU-FUNO, 2015; TELLES, 2015b, LEONE; TELLES, 2016; LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016), that is, moments that happen after the online sessions (LEONE; TELLES, 2016), teacher-mediators can facilitate, according to Lopes and Freschi (2016), instances of further reflection and the questioning of essentialist views. Leone and Telles (2016, p. 244) make clear that through teacher's mediation:

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[1] "Interactants" is the name given to the two partners who are learning each other's language in teletandem sessions. Sometimes we will make use of "interactant(s)" instead of "participant(s)", even though most of times we use the latter.

Students have the opportunity to dialogue and exchange experiences with a mediator - a teacher of foreign languages. These discussions focus on (a) aspects of language, (b) culture and (c) partners' relationship. The mediation activity aims at giving students a teacher supported context (scaffolding) to reflect on the teaching and the learning experiences during the teletandem session.

Andreu-Funo (2015) notes that mediation sessions can occur both in virtual and offline moments, and either in groups, which is most common, or between the teacher-mediator and the participant. Also, they can be arranged in advance or even without prior scheduling. During these meetings, "the teacher-mediator must be, above all, a guide for the partners" (ROCHA; LIMA, 2009, p. 234, our translation).[2]

In what follows, we will present a review of two studies whose focus was placed on mediation sessions in the teletandem context.

Telles's (2015b, p.5) study aimed at showing how Performative Theory[3] can help to understand the way in which the constitution of national identities occurs. The author argues that "teletandem discourse is basically characterized by performances of differences". Furthermore, he alerts that teletandem sessions "may fall into shallow performances of sedimented and pre-given representations of self and other" (TELLES, 2015b, p. 1), meaning that the discussions in teletandem "involve common sense, and are essentialist in nature" (TELLES, 2015b, p. 4). The analysis showed that teletandem is a context where participants can express ideologies and their subjectivities. Telles points out that pedagogical mediation can play a role in promoting critical thinking as well as "critical appreciation of identity and difference" (TELLES, 2015b, p. 25).

Lopes and Freschi's (2016) study sought to discuss the relevance of the identification of potential sequences for intercultural learning (BORGHETTI; BEAVEN; PUGLIESE, 2015)[4]. Through the analysis, Lopes and Freschi's (2016) identified potential sequences, e.g. prejudice and essentialized worldviews, for intercultural learning. They contend that "what an interactant says about herself/himself, about her/his culture and her/his people is not usually questioned by her/his partner" (LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016, p. 55, our translation)[5] in the teletandem sessions. Lopes and Freschi (2016) indicated the relevance of addressing, in moments of further reflections between the participant (s) and the teacher-mediator, the topics that were previously identified in teletandem sessions.

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[2] Original quote: "*O mediador deve ser, sobretudo, um guia para os parceiros*". (ROCHA; LIMA, 2009, p. 234).

[3] For Kulick (2003 *apud* TELLES, 2015b, p. 6), "performativity is the process through which the subject emerges".

[4] For Borghetti, Beaven and Pulgliese (2015, p.44), such potential sequences involve the following: "(1) exemplifications and equivalences between phenomena; (2) communicating understanding to others and; (3); adapting to others' contributions.

[5] Original quote: "*aquilo que um interagente diz de si mesmo, de sua cultura e de seu povo não costuma ser questionado pelo parceiro*". (LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016, p.55).

As can be seen, in both Telles's (2015b) and Lopes and Freschi's (2016) studies it was pointed out that research dealing with fixed cultural representations under pedagogical mediation is necessary. This is because telecollaborative sessions can be a site for the construction of essentialized visions as regards people, countries, cultural references, and so forth.

Cultural representations and interculturality

Cultural representations come into play when individuals meet in telecollaborative exchanges. Jovchelovitch (2007, p. 11) makes clear that "the reality of the human world is in its entirety made of representation: in fact, there is no sense of reality for our human world without the work of representation".

According to Hall (1997, p. 15), "representation *is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture". He asserts that cultural representations allow individuals to construct their identities and to intersubjectively exchange meanings about the "real" and "imaginary" worlds linked to people, objects and events. From this perspective, Dervin (2014, p. 194) states that people convey cultural representations to position themselves and "to claim common identities" and adds that the more people interact with others in a variety of contexts, "the more varied representations one co-constructs and re-interprets". Despite this, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 9 e p. 27) warn that some cultural representations can cause the emergence of stereotypes, which "are based on feelings rather than reason".

In keeping with an intercultural approach (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2005, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013, 2014; BYRAM, 1997; BYRAM; GRIBKOVA; STARKEY, 2002; LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013; GIL, 2016), the interaction with people from different cultures includes the ability to look beyond stereotyped cultural representations, since, according to Byram (1997), they can trigger negative visions of other groups. In order for this to happen, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 25) claim that foreign language teaching should "examine and challenge generalizations or stereotypes, and suggest or present other viewpoints". Furthermore, teachers can play a role in the process of distancing students from "their preexisting assumptions and practices" (LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013, p. 26).

A glance beyond stereotyped cultural representations, gaining knowledge of other people's values and behaviors, respect for other cultures, adaptation to different contexts, openness to other viewpoints and personal desire to know other cultures are relevant aspects when it comes to the construction of interculturality, which Byram (1997, p.53) actually names intercultural communicative competence. For him, this term is related to the ability to use language in interactions with people from other cultures, and adds that for the development of such an ability it is paramount that language learners "elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents and events".

Byram (1997, p.34) proposes five components (which he actually names *savoirs*) for the development of intercultural communicative competence, namely: (1) attitudes (or *savoir être*), which are related to a "willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviors, and to analyze them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging"; (2) knowledge (or *savoirs*), referring to knowledge of other cultures and the self in social interactions; (3) skills of interpreting and relating (or *savoir comprendre*), that is, "the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (BYRAM, 1997, p. 61); (4) skills of discovering and interacting (or *savoir apprendre/faire*), meaning that it is necessary to have the ability to interpret documents or events of other cultures and relate them to her/his own cultural horizons; and (5) critical cultural awareness (or *savoir s'engager*), which stands for the examination and interpretation of cultural differences.

Müller-Hartmann and Kurek (2016) state that symbolic competence (KRAMSCH, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2014; KRAMSCH; WHITESIDE, 2008), which will be presented further along, can be deemed as an extension of Byram's (1997) intercultural model, since it provides special attention to the complex and multifaceted reality of intercultural encounters in today's world.

For Kramsch (1993), the interaction between "the self" and "the other" presupposes the deconstruction of fixed cultural representations as well as of the world itself. As stated by the author, the reflection about the self and the other can lead to interculturality, which stands for "an awareness and a respect of difference, as well as the socio-affective capacity to see oneself through the eyes of others" (KRAMSCH, 2005, p. 553).

In 1993, Kramsch coined the term *third place*, a hybrid space where a constant mediation between different cultures occurs. At the third place, such a mediation can help language learners to decenter themselves from cultural representations. In a more recent study, Kramsch (2011, p. 354-355) defined third place as "a sphere of interculturality that enables language students to take an insider's view as well as an outsider's view" regarding cultural representations.

The third place can be associated with the metaphor *discursive faultlines* (KRAMSCH, 1993; MENARD-WARWICK, 2009). For Kramsch (1993), discursive faultlines concern the moments in which cultural representations are contested at the third place. As explained by Menard-Warwick (2009, p. 30), these discursive faultlines, that is, "areas of cultural difference", are "pedagogically valuable because they index the cultural areas that need to be explored in order to work toward interculturality". According to Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002, p. 29), such an exploration of cultural differences can help language learners "to act on a [sic] the basis of new perspectives".

More recently, Kramsch (2006, 2009a, 2011, 2014) has been questioning her own concept of the third place, because cultural boundaries have proved to be more fluid in today's world. Kramsch (2011) claims that it is necessary to recognize a symbolic dimension that pervades the process of meaning-making in interaction, as it helps in understanding others. For Kramsch (2009a, p. 7), the meaning of symbolic is linked

"not only to *representations* of people and objects in the world but to the *construction* of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, and values through the use of symbolic forms". Thus, Kramsch (2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) has proposed the concept of *symbolic competence*.

Kramsch and Whiteside (2008, p. 664) assert that symbolic competence, which has to do with the ability "to shape the very context in which the language is learned and used", should be at the core of the intercultural approach. The authors go on to say that symbolic competence is "the ability not only to approximate or appropriate to oneself someone else's language" as well as a "mindset that can create relationships of possibility" (KRAMSCH; WHITESIDE, 2008, p. 668). Kramsch (2011, p. 359) makes it clear that symbolic competence is not only the ability to question essentilized cultural representations, but also "to resignify them, reframe them", and adds that for the construction of symbolic competence it is essential "to recognize the historical context of utterances and their intertextualities, to question established categories like *German, American, man, woman, White, Black* and place them in their historical and subjective contexts".

For Kramsch (2011, p. 357), there are three key dimensions of symbolic competence, which can also be seen as symbolic dimensions of language that permeate intercultural interactions. The first of them is called *symbolic representation*, placing emphasis "on what words say and what they reveal about the mind". The second dimension, *symbolic action*, draws attention to "what words do" as well as to people's intentions that can be revealed through the use of specific words. Finally, the third dimension, *symbolic power*, focuses on what words "reveal about social identities, individual and collective memories, emotions and aspirations".

Vinall (2016), by drawing from Kramsch's (2011) conceptualization of symbolic competence as well as from her three key dimensions as presented above, developed three specific features of symbolic competence: 1) *relationality*; 2) *transgression*, and; 3) *potentiality*. Relationality is linked to the idea that meaning does not lie only in one text, in a single person or in a single modality (e.g. written language and images), but rather "in the relations, reframings, and dialogues that emerge between them" (VINALL, 2016, p. 4). Transgression, the second feature, means that it is necessary to have language learners reflect upon themselves, worldviews in general and the language through which they produce utterances. To put it another way, transgression involves problematization and development of a critical attitude towards cultural representations. Finally, potentiality "points to the potential for another [meaning], in what becomes an endless process of resignification, recontextualization, and reframing" (VINALL, 2016, p. 5).

In a nutshell, an intercultural approach in the context of telecollaboration can enable learners, through contestation or moments of reflection, to recognize the intertextualities underlying their cultural representations and place them in their historical contexts. Besides that, such an approach can help learners to resignify, reframe, and (re) contextualize worldviews by playing with the tension between text and context.

Method

The data used in this qualitative study[6],[7] were collected in the aforementioned TTB project between September and December 2016. During that period, there was a telecollaborative partnership between a group of eight students from a state university in Brazil,[8] where TTB is developed, and a group of eight students from a university in the United States.[9] One of the researchers of this study was the teacher-mediator of the former group.

This research included two participants in particular regarding the telecollaborative sessions: Francisco and Dara[10], [11]. Francisco, a Brazilian 21-year-old learner of English at the time of the data collection, interacted with Dara, an American 19-year-old learner of Portuguese.

The three excerpts analyzed in this study were taken from (a) 1 out of 10 telecollaborative sessions and (b) 1 out of 12 interviews. The telecollaborative sessions took place on Zoom[12] and were video-recorded. In the interviews, which were audio-recorded, it was possible to better understand what Francisco had addressed in his experience reports.[13]

We should like to stress that as pedagogical mediation in the teletandem context can take place not only in group, but also between the teacher-mediator and one participant (ANDREU-FUNO, 2015), the researchers regard the interviews here as "individual conversations" and "mediation sessions" in addition to a methodological research instrument itself. This is because arranging an individual conversation with the participant is a possible pedagogical intervention that teachers may resort to in situations where fixed cultural representations can be contested at the third place (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2011), or even for other reasons. Seen in these terms, the interviews proved to be a moment for individual dialogue between Francisco and the researcher.

The excerpts analyzed in this study represent three interactive episodes where the following cultural topic was discussed: "*Programa Bolsa Família*".[14] We outlined the

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[6]   A qualitative research presupposes, according to Patton (1985, p. 1), "an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there".

[7]   The data are from a research project duly approved by Research Ethics Committee of Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa com Seres Humanos - CEPSH-UFSC), logged under Approval Number 1.762.956. CAAE: 56955216.8.0000.0121.

[8]   In this study, we included data only from one of the eight students of the Brazilian university: Francisco.

[9]   In this study, we included data only from one of the eight students of the American university: Dara.

[10] The participants in this study were given fictitious names in order to protect their identity.

[11] For ethical issues, a consent form (Free and Informed Consent Term) was signed by the participants in this study.

[12] Zoom combines online meeting, videoconferencing and mobile collaboration. It also provides cloud-based video communication.

[13] Through experience reports via Google Forms, Francisco had the opportunity to collect his thoughts and submit personal impressions regarding his weekly partnership with Dara. Data from such reports were not included in this study.

[14] It refers to a Brazilian program of direct transfer of a monthly stipend to families in a situation of poverty, so that they can overcome their situation of economic vulnerability.

following criteria to choose the cultural topic in question: 1) it was discussed more or less deeply along the telecollaborative session, since many times interactants began to address a topic but shortly after they changed it completely; 2) it portrayed fixed cultural representations (regarding cultural values and peoples' behaviors) and; 3) it was approached again in, at least, one instance subsequent to the telecollaborative session, in this case in the interview.

In order to facilitate and optimize the transcription process, we used the Transana program.[15] We translated the excerpts and other comments made by the participants from Portuguese to English, upon which we take full responsibility. The information between two parentheses, that is, (( )), as transcription conventions, are related to the researchers' comments.

Data analysis: I am not in favor of *Programa Bolsa Família*!

Data analysis is intended to answer the research question posed in the introductory section: how did a glance beyond fixed cultural representations take place in the telecollaborative activities conducted?

In one telecollaborative session, Francisco suggested the discussion of a specific topic: *Programa Bolsa Família*. The following excerpt, taken from the fourth telecollaborative session, depicts how this topic awakened in Francisco different emotions and feelings:

1. Francisco: I'm not in favor of *Bolsa Família*. Have you heard of it when you were here?[16]
2. Dara: Uh-huh I was going to ask you about it too.
3. Francisco: I'm not in favor... I'm not in favor... because the person lives at the expense of the government.
4. Dara: Uh-huh.
5. Francisco: Right? Like ah I have basic monthly grocery package[17] I have an income and I don't want to seek work... to work. *(Excerpt 1 / telecollaborative session / our translation from Portuguese / Francisco and Dara / 26-10-2016)*

In line with symbolic action (KRAMSCH, 2011), Excerpt 1 shows how Francisco expressed indignation and took a stance against *Programa Bolsa Família*. In turn (3), he made a gross generalization about the people who are benefited from this Brazilian

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[15] See http://www.transana.org/ for further information on *Transana*.

[16] Dara had had the opportunity to participate, a few years before that telecollaborative partnership, in one exchange program in São Paulo's countryside.

[17] Basic grocery items monthly delivered by the Brazilian government to people in need.

social program, and, when seen as symbolic representation (KRAMSCH, 2011), it was explicit in his words that all beneficiaries live at the expense of the Brazilian government. In other words, through a process of social categorization (we, not beneficiaries of *Bolsa Família* / they, beneficiaries of *Bolsa Família*), Francisco conveyed stereotyped views regarding these beneficiaries. This "marking of difference" converges with Telles (2015b, p. 5), for whom "teletandem discourse is basically characterized by performances of differences".

In turn (5), Francisco suggested that these beneficiaries do not demonstrate an interest in looking for a job, which represents a stereotyped portrayal. For Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002), stereotypes occur when a person is prejudiced against other people based on her/his own assumptions, which can cause a negative view of these people, as was the case with Francisco in turns (3) and (5). As Telles (2015b) stressed earlier, the teletandem context can be a site for the construction of cultural essentialism and that teletandem sessions "may fall into shallow performances of sedimented and pre-given representations of self and other" (TELLES, 2015b, p .1).

One must consider that Dara, in line with Byram's 1997 intercultural model, had the chance to learn from Francisco, and she was seeing a cultural aspect from an insider's perspective, that is to say, from Francisco's eyes. Similarly, besides providing Dara with information on *Programa Bolsa Família*, Francisco also expressed his opposing position and took a critical view of this topic. In this connection, Byram (1997) emphasizes that in intercultural contacts it is essential to discuss different subjects, such as institutions, cultural products and traditions, from the perspective of people living in the country or cultural context. However, this dialogue did not seem to favor Francisco's decentering from his homogeneous perspectives, meaning that they were not contested at the third place (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2011). In the next excerpt, also taken from the fourth telecollaborative session, it is possible to observe how Dara put forward her point of view on the topic:

1. Dara: It's complicated when people abuse the system isn't it?
2. Francisco: Yes exactly and there are a lot of people that abuse the system... it's what I don't like.
3. Dara: Uh-huh ah it's complica* it's because... here there is also the same thing in the United States... It's complicated because there's this mentality of using the system of "Ok I'm receiving a little I'm going to spend on alcohol and... drugs but I'm not going to do anything to make my life better. *(Excerpt 2 / telecollaborative session / our translation from Portuguese / Francisco and Dara / 26-10-2016)*

In turn (1), it is implied that Dara agreed with Francisco's stereotypical view (Excerpt 1), since her discourse may suggest that "the beneficiaries of *Bolsa Família* do indeed abuse the system". In turn (3), she compared this topic to what "occurs" in the United States, that is, that beneficiaries of income transfer programs also "take

advantage of the system". Even though Dara provided such a comparison, this piece of interaction did not prompt a possible confrontation of ideas in an attempt to make Francisco see his opinions on the beneficiaries of *Programa Bolsa Famíla* from another perspective. In effect, Belz (2005, p. 27) warns that telecollaborative exchanges may contribute to "retreating into self, reinforcing stereotypes and myths and even creating new, more negative stereotypes". In addition, linking back to Lopes and Freschi (2016), the two partners, in the teletandem context, do not generally question each other's comments, as was the case in Excerpts 1 and 2.

Francisco addressed this particular topic at a later date in the interview. Initially, he reported that his former boss once told him that whoever is a beneficiary of *Programa Bolsa Família* "does not feel like working". Moreover, Francisco acknowledged that this program indeed fights hunger, but even though his mother had already depended and his aunt was depending at that moment on such financial resources, he was thoroughly against it.

In order to deal with fixed cultural representations, Byram (1997) and Kramsch (2013) highlighted earlier the need for a critical approach. In a similar way, Kern (2000, p. 256) argues that "intolerance must be acknowledged as a cultural fact and explored through discussion that frames opposing perspectives critically", while Kramsch (2011) reminded us that established categories should be questioned to open pathways for the construction of interculturality. With that in mind, the next excerpt, taken from the sixth interview, shows the moment when Francisco was engaged in reflection upon the topic at stake:

1. Researcher: But your personal opinion is that... for example who receives Bolsa Família... isn't so fond of working.
2. Francisco: Don't want to work... or sometimes takes advantage of the government.
3. Researcher: Really? But do you think this happens to all of those who receive *Bolsa Família*?
4. Francisco: I will not generalize.
5. Researcher: Uh-huh.
6. Francisco: But I think so for most people. *(Excerpt 3 / semi-structured interview / our translation from Portuguese / 17-11-2016)*

In turn (1), the researcher let Francisco know what he considered to be the participant's vision until that moment. In turn (2), Francisco continued with his explanations, reinforcing his stereotyped vision of the beneficiaries of the social program in question, that is, that they "do not want to work" and that on some occasions they take advantage of the government. In turn (3), the researcher endeavored to facilitate an opportunity to Francisco "step outside [his] taken for granted perspectives" (BYRAM; GRIBKOVA; STARKEY, 2002, p. 23) at the third place (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2011), and then open up for different viewpoints (*savoir s'engager*) (BYRAM, 1997). In turn (4),

he said that he did not intend to generalize, which shows that an attitude of decentering (KRAMSCH, 1993) from his positioning, albeit very timidly, could be occurring.

Possibly as a result of the question in turn (3), Francisco, later on in that same interview, seemed to be able to stand back from his "preexisting assumption" (LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013, p. 26), as he could see *Programa Bolsa Família* from another angle, which validates Byram's (1997) notion of *savoir être* and *savoir s'engager* presented previously. For instance, the participant explained that "children are going to school" and that there was a reduction in school dropout rates by students who belong to families benefited by this program. In relation to the health sector, and stressing that he also worked in this area, he claimed that "the health sector has gained many patients, you know?". Furthermore, Francisco made it clear that this financial social aid had encouraged many families to be up to date with preventive exams, such as prenatal examinations and Papanicolaou[18] tests, which, according to him, played an important part in the decreasing number of breast and cervical cancer cases. It is possible to note that, by raising questions at the third place (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2011), the researcher was intending to make the participant see his cultural representations from other perspectives (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2013; BYRAM, 1997; BYRAM, GRIBKOVA; STARKEY, 2002; LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013).

In response to the research question presented previously, it can be seen that a glance beyond fixed cultural representations was possible through questions after the online session. As said earlier, teletandem sessions cannot be moderated by the teacher-mediator. As an alternative, the researcher, in the interview, could foster moments of in-depth reflection upon cultural essentialism. For Lopes and Freschi (2016) and Telles (2015b), it is crucial to go deeper into fixed cultural representations through pedagogical mediation. Lopes and Freschi (2016, p. 69) posit that:

> The role of the mediator in this process of development of intercultural competence is, so to speak, essential. A problematizing approach to group discussion seems to be the most effective alternative, viewing the mediator as a stimulating figure for the necessary reflection in this regard. (our trans.).[19]

In the interview, the researcher took the opportunity to go a little deeper into the topic about *Programa Bolsa Família* and contest Francisco's cultural representations in the discursive faultlines (KRAMSCH, 1993; MENARD-WARWICK, 2009). This way, he offered the participant an "intercultural bridge" or, according to Wood, Bruner

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[18] A laboratory examination in Brazil with the purpose of preventing and detecting early signs of cervical cancer.

[19] Original quote: "*O papel do mediador neste processo de desenvolvimento da competência intercultural é, por assim dizer, indispensável. A proposta da problematização no grupo nos parece ser a alternativa mais eficaz, tendo no mediador a figura instigante da reflexão necessária para tal*". (LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016, p. 69).

and Ross (1976, p. 90), a "scaffolding".[20] Perhaps as a result of the question in turn 3 of Excerpt 3, when seen as "potentiality" (VINALL, 2016, p. 5), which suggests that meaning "becomes an endless process of resignification", it may be argued that, along that interview, a timid process of decentering was taking place, mainly because this participant managed to see himself "from the outside" (KRAMSCH, 2011). That is to say, he was able to underline also some positive aspects of *Programa Bolsa Família*, in the sense that, as already explained, he claimed that there was a decrease in the number of students who drop out of school, bearing in mind that the students' families must keep their children enrolled in school in order to receive the financial benefit of this Brazilian social program. As this dialogue urged him to look beyond stereotypical images, his stable perceptions were, to some extent, resignified (KRAMSCH, 2011; VINALL, 2016).

In addition, the researcher, by facilitating, in terms of "transgression" (VINALL, 2016), further reflection as well as by contributing with alternative perspectives, was attempting to "shape the very context" (KRAMSCH; WHITESIDE, 2008, p. 664). This way, he facilitated transgredience (KRAMSCH, 2013), meaning that he brought about a space in which Francisco could see himself both from the inside and the outside. To put it another way, in keeping with Kramsch and Whiteside (2008, p. 668), who define symbolic competence as a "mindset that can create relationships of possibility", the researcher was endeavoring to have Francisco interpret the topic from other perspectives (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2013; BYRAM, 1997; BYRAM; GRIBKOVA; STARKEY, 2002; LIDDICOAT; SCARINO, 2013). In this regard, Ware and Kramsch (2005, p. 203) assert that

> As students explore the nature of language and communication across cultures through their technology-mediated interactions, teachers will be pivotal in helping them take […] an intercultural stance. They can help their students develop a decentered perspective that goes beyond comprehending the surface meaning of words.

Finally, it is important to stress that even though there was an opportunity for the resignification of Francisco's fixed cultural representations in an instance following the telecollaborative session (in the interview), it was necessary that this participant initially constructed them in this session (Excerpts 1 and 2) with his partner. From this perspective, the telecollaborative session was also relevant for a look beyond stereotyped views.

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[20] For the authors, "scaffolding" is a support mechanism that "enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (WOOD; BRUNER; ROSS, 1976, p. 90).

Conclusion

As has already been said, in order to attain the objective of this study, that is, discussing the way in which a glance beyond fixed cultural representations was made possible in the telecollaborative activities conducted, we outlined the following research question: how did a glance beyond fixed cultural representations take place in the telecollaborative activities conducted?

In short, in response to the research question stated above, the results revealed that a deeper reflection was enhanced through contestation at the third place (KRAMSCH, 1993, 2011). Put differently, questions subsequently to the telecollaborative session, that is, in the interview, were needed to make Francisco see beyond his fixed cultural representations about the beneficiaries of *Programa Bolsa Família.*

Therefore, given the outcomes of this study, we contend that there is clearly a demonstrable need for the discussion about fixed cultural representations through pedagogical mediation in telecollaborative activities. In fact, Schaefer's studies (2019, 2020, 2021) showed that pedagogical mediation was of paramount importance for the deconstruction of such representations.

As already explained, Müller-Hartmann and Kurek (2016) highlight that Kramsch's symbolic competence should be seen as an extension of Byram's (1997) intercultural model. They add that "the increased cultural hybridization of learners' identities warrants a fresh look at ICC, which has been provided by Kramsch's (2009b) notion of symbolic competence"[21] (MÜLLER-HARTMANN; KUREK, 2016, p. 131). Thus, we suggest that future research could benefit from looking at how symbolic competence can pave the way for further reflection upon historical, ideological and social aspects in future telecollaborative activities. In order to favor deeper reflection, Kramsch (2009b, p. 117-118) recommends the following questions: "who is speaking, for whose benefit, within which frame, on which timescale, to achieve what effects? What are the ideological values and the historical density of words?". Additionally, Kramsch (2011, p. 364) suggests that teachers

> (1) Use communicative activities as food for reflection on the nature of language, discourse, communication and mediation; (2) pay attention to what remains unsaid, or may even be unsayable because it is politically incorrect or disturbing; (3) bring up every opportunity to show complexity and ambiguity; (4) engage the students' emotions, not just their cognition.

Bearing in mind that the data were collected over a university semester, we believe that longitudinal research could focus on fixed cultural representations during a longer period of time, for instance, two semesters. O'Dowd (2016, p. 284) underlines this need. For him, research in telecollaboration "have not attempted to evaluate the impact of

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[21] "ICC" means Intercultural Communicative Competence, referring to Byram's (1997) intercultural model.

virtual contact and exchange on learners over a period any longer than one university semester".

We believe that telecollaborative projects can help language learners understand different worldviews, developing the ability to critically reflect on political and social issues and to dialogue about stable cultural representations. According to Byram *et al.* (2016), projects that have this purpose may be suitable to address cultural values and attitudes in addition to fostering dialogue on both global and local issues which, as a result, can play a part in the development of interculturality. Hence, drawing on the outcomes of this study, we suggest that future telecollaborative projects can contribute to a glance beyond fixed cultural representations by having students understand different worldviews through critical reflection on different social issues.

Acknowledgments

SCHAEFFER, R.; HEEMANN, C. Um olhar para além de representações culturais estáveis em atividades telecolaborativas. **Alfa**, São Paulo, v.66, 2022.

- *RESUMO: As representações culturais, para Risager (2007, p. 180), "transmitem imagens ou narrativas de cultura e de sociedade em contextos específicos", permitindo às pessoas trocar ideias relativas a imagens pré-construídas sobre outras culturas. Na telecolaboração (que, para O'Dowd (2013, 2016), refere-se à utilização de tecnologias digitais no contexto de aulas de línguas estrangeiras geograficamente distantes), representações culturais emergem quando os indivíduos se encontram. Recorrendo a estudiosos como Byram (1997), Kramsch (1993, 2014), Risager (2007), Lopes e Freschi (2016) e O'Dowd (2019), este estudo qualitativo (PATTON, 1985) teve como objetivo discutir o modo pelo qual um olhar para além de representações culturais estáveis foi possível nas atividades telecolaborativas. Para a análise, foram incluídos dados de sessões de telecolaboração e de uma entrevista. Os excertos analisados representam três episódios interativos em que o seguinte tópico cultural foi discutido: "Programa Bolsa Família". Os resultados revelaram que um olhar além das representações culturais estáveis foi possível através de mediação pedagógica, pois foram necessários questionamentos posteriores à sessão de telecolaboração para esse olhar. Pode-se afirmar que existe uma necessidade evidente para a discussão sobre representações culturais estáveis em atividades telecolaborativas, tendo em conta que tal discussão foi de suma importância em um olhar além de essencialismos culturais.*

- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: representações culturais; telecolaboração; intercâmbios telecolaborativos; interculturalidade; mediação pedagógica.*

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