ARTICLE

'Successful' participation in intercultural exchange: Tensions in American-Japanese telecollaboration

Tomoe Nishio, University of North Georgia

Masanobu Nakatsugawa, Otaru University of Commerce

Abstract

The concept of successful participation is context-dependent. Learners have different definitions, which are subject to potential tension in the manner of participation that affects other aspects of the interaction. Drawing on activity theory (Vygotsky, 1987), the present study analyzes tensions that emerged during a six-week telecollaborative project between American learners of Japanese (AMU students) and Japanese learners of English (JPU students) through their understandings of successful participation. Transpacific dyads engaged in online discussions regarding assigned topics and a series of reflective tasks. Using a three-stage grounded theory data coding strategy, major contradictions are identified and analyzed. The findings suggest emergent contradictions in two dyads deriving from differences in the definition of participation. In one dyad, the JPU participant negotiated the imbalanced division of labor due to her passiveness by intentionally changing her participatory behavior. In the other dyad, the AMU participant displayed frustration and disappointment by his JPU partner whose definition of successful participation comprised prompt responses instead of proactive engagement in the discussion. These two cases illustrate how learners' understandings of successful participation informed their actions and how local definitions affected their overall evaluation of the interaction.

Keywords: *Technology-Mediated Communication, Learners' Attitudes*

Language(s) Learned in This Study: *English and Japanese*

Introduction

Recent waves of globalization have changed the nature of how foreign languages are taught, learned, and used. Language teachers are now faced with more complex needs from diverse language learners (Kramsch, 2014). Along with expanded global networks and increased mobility of people and capital, the increasing popularity of online learning challenges language teachers with how to reconceptualize the traditional norms on which they relied in their classrooms. The concept of participation in an online environment is a good example that requires teachers' understanding and nurturing more today than ever before (Bento & Schuster, 2003). To add to this challenge, teachers involved with intercultural communication face the need to facilitate student participation through "culturally-contingent patterns of interaction in the absence of paralinguistic meaning signals" (Belz, 2003, p. 92). In this era where intercultural communication is more accessible due to technological advancements, practitioners of a computer-mediated intercultural project must appreciate the complexity of the fundamental notion of participation.

A popular mode for intercultural learning through technology is telecollaboration, which occurs through "virtual intercultural interaction and exchange projects between classes of learners in geographically distant locations" (O'Dowd, 2013, p. 47). Previous research reported a variety of emergent impediments and challenges caused from a complex configuration of factors in each context (Belz, 2001, 2002, 2003; Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Müller-Hartmann, 2006; O'Dowd, 2006, 2013; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Schneider & von

der Emde, 2006; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). For example, Ware (2005) reported a crucial difference in the manner of participation in a qualitative study of an online exchange between German students of English and American students of German. American students' lack of questions and attempts to establish personal rapport dissatisfied the German partners. In a Spanish-US context, O'Dowd (2005) showed that student motivation and participation were impacted by one group's negative stereotypes of the partner culture. Basharina (2007) also reported one group's frustration with the others due to unequal participation in an asynchronous intercultural telecollaboration.

From the perspective of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), human activity is configured in a triangle of culturally and historically situated participants engaging in culturally valued activities using cultural tools (Lantolf, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Thorne, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987). The CHAT framework guides recent scholars to analyze learner participation in the context of telecollaboration where complex human interaction occurs. For example, Antoniadou (2011) used CHAT to examine a transatlantic telecollaboration within Second Life between student teachers in Spain and the US. Antoniadou reported the participants' manners of participation and interactions were occasionally interfered with by discrepancies in participants' priorities and proficiency levels in the technological platform. Madyarov and Taef (2012) also illustrated how learners' activities were configured by multiple factors within the context of their study on Iranian college students engaged in a distance English-medium course on critical thinking. Recently, Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch (2014) reported a CHAT study on telecollaboration between U.S. students of Chinese and Chinese student-teachers of Chinese as a foreign language. They illustrated how such factors negatively impacted some participants' manners of participation and interactions, resulting in an uneven division of labor between participants, excessive politeness, insufficient intercultural competence, and gaps in individual motivations.

Various CHAT studies on telecollaboration reported tensions emerging in the complex configuration of intercultural interaction, including concerns with learner participation. However, few explored explicitly what successful participation in a specific context means to the individuals involved. A specific manner of participation is dynamically negotiated through unique social and historical positioning of a learner within the system. Furthermore, the definition of participation varies depending on whose viewpoint is used and the contextual factors in play at a specific time, some of which may be more salient than others. Key factors may be demographic (Hauck, 2007), behavioral (Dennen, 2005; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003), contextual (Panichi, 2015; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005) or a complex mixture (Hrastinski, 2007; Wang, 2017; Wang, Deutschmann, & Steinvall, 2013).

This case study aimed to understand better the effects of learner participation and how they may inform learners' personal actions during intercultural telecollaboration between an English classroom in a Japanese university and a Japanese-language classroom in a U.S. university. Most existing research in intercultural telecollaboration comprises classroom studies of lingua franca or major Western languages; little research on less-commonly taught languages, such as Japanese, exists compared to Spanish and German, despite an increase around the world in the number of institutions teaching Japanese and corresponding increases in the number of Japanese teachers and learners (Japan Foundation, 2017).. More research is needed on Japanese-language classrooms to guide teachers in developing pedagogical foundations for authentic learning experiences. Our study is unique in that it offers general as well as language- and culture-specific pedagogical implications for educators in telecollaboration to design and conduct projects that maximize intercultural learning.

We explored perceptional mismatches of participation among learners through analyzing tensions in student interactions during a six-week intercultural telecollaborative project. Drawing on CHAT, we examined how tensions emerged and were dynamically negotiated in each participant's unique context. In what follows, we will first review previous studies on participation and the CHAT framework. We will then describe methodology for the study and present two cases where tensions were negotiated in different ways. Finally, the concept of participation will be discussed and pedagogical implications will be drawn.

Literature Review

Participation in Online Learning

Successful participation has been explored in many online contexts. According to Hrastinski (2008), learner participation has been analyzed through the (a) quantity of messages or units, (b) message or unit quality, (c) learner perceptions, (d) message lengths, (e) system accesses or logins, (f) read messages, and (7) time spent. Reviewing these units of analysis concerning various operationalizations of online participation, Hrastinski (2008) argued that social perspectives on learning are potential research areas that would help disentangle the complexity of studying high-level conceptions of online participation.

The importance of social interaction to learning is emphasized by scholars (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Vygotsky, 1987; Wenger, 1998), who view language learning as participation in social practices. Wenger (1998) argues that learning occurs through active social participation with the practices of a specific community. Wenger's definition of participation is twofold, including "a process of taking part" and "the relations with others that reflect this process" (p. 55). Wegner, then, suggests that participation is more than quantitatively measurable acts.

In the context of online learning, Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005) examined factors that influenced learner participation in asynchronous text exchanges during a graduate online course, which corroborated Wenger's (1998) suggestion that participation consists of more than quantitative contributions. Informed by previous empirical studies and case studies on learner participation in online discussions, Hrastinski (2007) proposed a model online student participation comprised of demographic factors (education level, residence type, and gender), behavioral factors (student attitudes, teaching strategies and tasks, and a sense of community), and contextual factors (geographic dispersion of participants, availability of recipients, and physical accessibility of media). Corroborating his model, Hrastinski (2008) argues that online learner participation is "a complex process comprising doing, communicating, feeling and belonging, which occurs both online and offline" (p. 9).

Whether within traditional classrooms, outside the classroom, or in online environments, the concept of participation is multidimensional and dynamically negotiated in the complex social relations of each context. How learners participate or how they think they should participate in an activity is determined in the socially communicative context in which they are situated. To capture the dynamics of learner participation and their perceptions of participation, this study employs Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) for viewing this human activity as a complex social practice.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1987), CHAT (Engeström 1987; 2001) provide a valuable analytical lens for qualitative inquiries. In its fundamental framework, CHAT outlines a general conceptual model called an activity system with mutual relationships between subject, object, and community. Each relationship is mediated by instruments (or tools), rules, and division of labor, respectively (Figure 1).
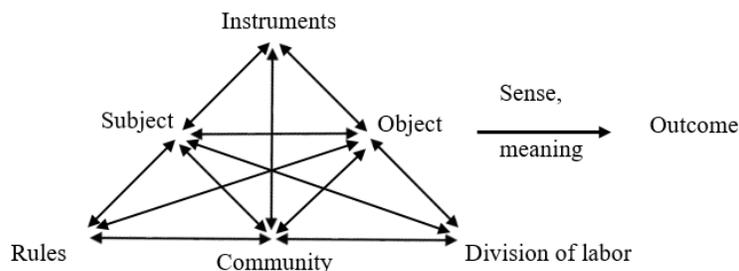

Figure 1. The structure of a human activity system (adapted with permission from Engeström, 1987).

A subject refers to an actor from whose viewpoint the analysis is conducted, an object denotes a focal entity or desired outcome, and a community consists of a group that shares with the subject interest in and involvement with the same object. Instruments are physical or conceptual tools the subject employs to act on the focal object or pursue the desired outcome. Rules refer to regulations on the subject's action toward the object. The division of labor is the explicit and implicit organization of a community in relation to the object by denoting who does what to pursue the desired outcome. The components are interconnected while continually affecting and being affected by one another to constitute a community of multiple points of view, traditions, and interests.

This model captures a multitude of relations and dynamic configurations of an activity to illustrate that human activity is object-oriented, collective, and culturally mediated (Engeström, 1987). Each component is situated within a unique cultural and historical configuration, and an activity system is subject to transformations and developments. The complex, multi-faceted configuration of an activity system is multiplied as it interacts with other activity systems. More recent versions of CHAT expanded Engeström's original model to capture the interaction of two (or more) neighboring activity systems (Engeström, 2001). The object of each activity system transforms from its initial state to "a collectively meaningful object constructed by the activity system" (p. 136). The intersection of these two objects may produce a shared or jointly constructed object common to the two activity systems. This minimal model depicts the interrelations between elements of an activity system and introduces the relationship between multiple working systems to the picture (Figure 2).
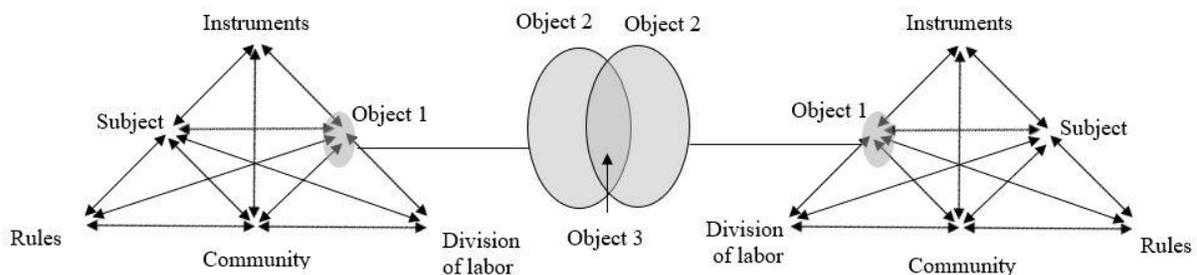

Figure 2. A model of interacting activity systems (adapted with permission from Engeström, 2001, p. 136).

An activity system is subject to dynamic transformation triggered by a *contradiction*. Engeström (2001) carefully differentiates contradictions from the static, screenshot-like connotations of such terms as problems or conflicts, and instead, defines them as "historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (p. 137). In Kuutti's (1996) terms, a contradiction is "a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities or between different developmental phases of a single activity" that manifests as "problems, ruptures, breakdowns or clashes" (p. 34). In other words, activities are continuously working through contradictions (Kuutti, 1996) allowing for long-term qualitative, expansive transformations of prior states (Engeström, 2001).

Drawing from previous studies featuring online participation and the CHAT model, this case study explores emergent contradictions between the interacting activity systems that account for perceptional mismatches of "successful" participation between transpacific dyads. This study aims to address three research questions.

1. What kind of tensions emerged regarding student participation?
2. How were these tensions negotiated over time?
3. How did students' conceptualizations of successful participation affect the emergence and negotiation of these tensions?

Methodology

Settings

We explored tensions in student participation during a six-week intercultural telecollaborative project between a Japanese language course at a university in the southern US (AMU) and an English language course at a university in Hokkaido, Japan (JPU). For the telecollaborative project featured in this case study, the Japanese course at AMU was taught by the first author in a traditional, face-to-face setting designed to cultivate students' comprehensive language skills in the language as well as a rich cultural understanding. Classroom experiences included lectures, pair work, and small group activities; students were assessed based on participation, homework, quizzes, exams, and projects. The telecollaborative component was introduced to the course as an authentic opportunity for practical application of the language and cultural learning and constituted 15% of the course grade.

The English-language course at JPU was taught by the second author and was designed to prepare students for the Test for English for International Communication (TOEIC), a standardized assessment of English skills for international workplace environments (Educational Testing Services, 2015), commonly required by Japanese employers during the hiring process. This course was part of JPU's campus-wide effort to encourage students to achieve high TOEIC scores and was required for all freshmen. The self-paced course was taught in a computer lab where each student worked on JPU's drill-based e-learning program under the supervision of the instructor. The telecollaborative project was worth 10% of the course grade and served as a supplemental learning opportunity to improve students' reading and writing skills, which were required by the TOEIC through additional authentic and interactive learning.

The AMU students ($N = 20$) and JPU students ($N = 33$) participated in two three-week paired discussion sessions, preceded by a week of orientation. The interactions were conducted by text in Google Hangouts[1], which is available for desktop computers and mobile devices. The interactions were asynchronous due to the 13-hour time difference. The teacher-researchers selected two topics to be discussed during each three-week session: Education System and College Life and Experience of Learning English or Japanese. Students were required to communicate in Japanese for the first discussion and in English for the second, and create three research questions for each in advance to prepare for the in-depth discussion. Students were expected to contribute to the paired discussion at least daily (e.g., leaving a message for their partner or engaging in synchronous discussion, if possible) as well as to ask and expand on the pre-set research questions for the topic within the three weeks. Students were also required to complete two sets of questionnaires, submit weekly journals in the primary language of the institution (i.e., English for AMU and Japanese for JPU), have a post-discussion interview with the teacher-researcher of their institution in the primary language of the institution, and write essays in the target language reflecting their experiences during the project. Performance was assessed based on contributions to the paired discussion; on-time completion of journals, questionnaires, and interviews; and the quality of project-related products, such as essays.

During the orientation week, the project was carefully introduced to students at each institution, a technological workshop was provided, the teacher-researchers randomly assigned transpacific dyads, and the students engaged in an introductory, small-talk session with their partners before the first discussion session began. Due to the imbalance in the number of students, some AMU students voluntarily took two JPU partners and had two separate lines of interaction, instead of communicating in a group of three.

Participants

While in-depth data analysis was conducted for all 33 dyads, we selected two based on a purposive sampling approach. Cases were selected based on relevance to the research questions, applicability to the analytical framework, and analytical process. Specifically, it was crucial that tension was observable or articulated by the participants from the early stage of interaction to provide in-depth analysis for its emergence and transformation and to illustrate how it was driven by the participants' idea of successful participation. What

made the two selected cases stand out was not exclusively the extremity of the tensions. Instead, the selected dyads experienced noticeable tension and they were more expressive about these tensions in their journals and interviews compared to other dyads. While multiple similar instances of tensions occurred in other dyads, the participants' reflective data were not sufficient to form systematic findings, and it was administratively difficult to conduct further follow-up interviews.

Sofia[2] was a 20-year-old student majoring in international relations at AMU. She was taking the Japanese course as a major requirement, expecting to use these skills in a future job. She also indicated a keen interest in the Japanese language and culture, which initially motivated her to take Japanese courses in college. At the time of the study, she was planning to study abroad in Japan during the following academic year. Her communicative proficiency level in Japanese at the time was Intermediate-low, which was typical among the students enrolled in the course. Sofia's partner, Nana, was a 19-year-old student majoring in law at JPU. She was taking the English course as a major requirement and to achieve a high TOEIC score for future job applications, although she indicated little interest in the English language and the cultures of English-speaking countries. Her communicative proficiency level in English at the time was intermediate, common among her classmates.

Chris was a 20-year-old finance major at AMU taking Japanese because he was interested in the language and culture. His major did not require the Japanese course, and he had no plans to use his Japanese skills in future jobs. Through his occasional family visits to Tokyo and a school trip to other regions of Japan as a child, he decided to pursue learning the language and culture in college to satisfy his interest. His communicative proficiency level in Japanese was low-intermediate. Yota, Chris' partner, was a 20-year-old JPU student majoring in commerce. His reasons for taking the English course included satisfying his major requirements, achieving a good TOEIC score for future job applications, preparing for English use in his future job, and improving his English skills for daily use. Like Nana, he indicated no interest in the English language or cultures of English-speaking people and his English proficiency was intermediate.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data included responses to a pre-discussion and post-discussion questionnaire, chat logs, journals, and interviews. The pre-discussion questionnaire was conducted during the orientation week to collect participants' demographic information. The post-discussion questionnaire was performed after the second discussion session was completed to ask for participants' evaluations of their overall experiences and personal reflections. Participants submitted their chat log to the teacher-researchers at the end of each discussion period and maintained weekly journals online to record personal reflections in the primary language of the institution. Individual interviews were conducted at each institution primarily as a follow-up on the post-discussion questionnaire.

Two methodological frameworks guided this study: Grounded theory to identify emergent tensions; and activity systems analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) to analyze these tensions to understand underlying contradictions. In addition to the text data, all interview recordings were transcribed and coded for recurrence of emergent themes, using the grounded theory-based coding system (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Preliminary codes and interpretations of data were regularly cross-checked between the teacher-researchers for careful redefinition and reanalysis, and the finalized themes were cross-referenced with the entire data repeatedly. Each theme was next analyzed using activity systems analysis to identify underlying contradictions and describe how they were negotiated over time.

Findings

Autonomic Improvement of Participation: Sofia and Nana's Case

On the pre-discussion questionnaire, Nana indicated her top priorities for the project included helping each other improve language skills and experience active interactions. She expressed she would initiate conversations to keep the flow active, so she "could contribute to the interaction as much as Sofia did"

(interview, translated). She also attached a certain level of importance to earning a good grade for this project and learning about her partner's cultural values. Figure 3 shows Nana's ideal activity system before the paired discussions started.
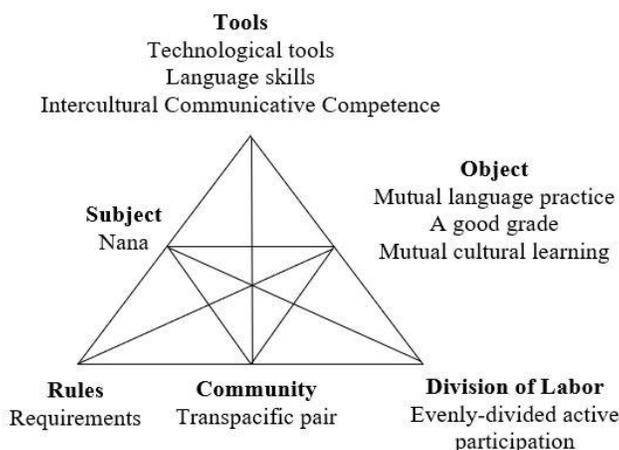

Figure 3. Nana's ideal activity system before transpacific interactions began.

As soon as the intercultural exchange started, Nana and Sofia actively communicated. They rapidly become friendly through introducing themselves and exchanging mundane anecdotes. As Sofia was excited about this project initially, she consistently responded with additional questions about Japanese culture, along with her reactions to Nana's responses. Nana, on the other hand, was preoccupied answering Sofia's questions and did not take the opportunity to ask as much as she anticipated. Nana commented, "I should have asked more questions during our discussion. I feel I was only answering her questions" (Journal 1, translated). During the interview, she told us that she "just couldn't find the right time. The moment I respond to her questions, she would ask more questions. Also, I didn't want to break the flow with my questions" (Interview, translated). Three weeks into the discussion, Nana continued to feel she was passive, "I was just answering her questions" (Journal 3, translated).

During the first few weeks of interactions, the division of labor in Nana's activity system was not what she intended. Her self-perceived passivity created a contradiction between the object and the division of labor (Figure 4) and as a result she felt her manner of participation did not satisfy her goals.
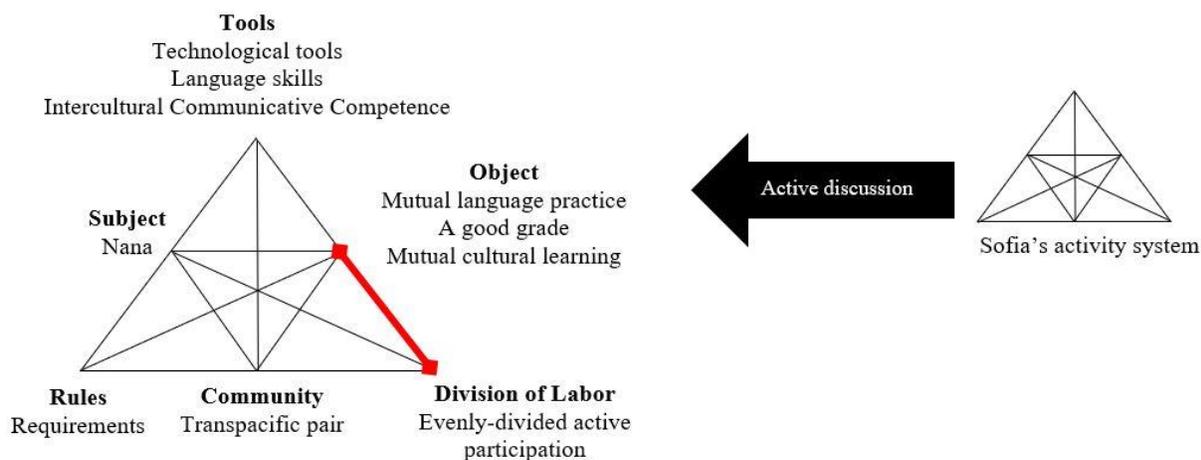

Figure 4. Nana's activity system during the transpacific interactions.

Sofia appreciated Nana for being a "great partner" and seemed satisfied with their interactions (Journals 1

and 2). When asked how Nana participated in the discussion during her interview, Sofia reported that she "might have taken the floor at first" as she was "so excited and had so many questions, and Nana was so kind to answer them all… Things went really well from the beginning." Her activity system found no contradictions between its components, including the division of labor. Sofia's understanding of the division of labor did not concern who asked and answered questions. She did not notice Nana's passivity as an issue to be fixed, as long as both were contributing to the interaction. From Nana's perspective, however, she expected herself to contribute to the discussion in a meaningful manner by asking as many questions as Sofia. She was not satisfied with her underachievement in the division of labor relationship to the object, which emerged as ongoing anxiety reflected through her critical journal comments regarding her participation.

Being aware of her passive participation in the discussions, Nana tried to make her participation more meaningful by asking questions. By the time they switched to the English discussion, many of Nana's responses had included her reaction to Sofia's earlier questions or comments as well as her questions as shown in the following (individual messages are written on separate lines):

> Sofia: *Your English is good! I'm sure it is better than my Japanese!*
>
> *What year in school did you start studying?*
>
> Nana: *Really? Thank you!*
>
> *I began to study English when I was a junior high school student.*
>
> *Your dream sounds great!*
>
> *Do you have a Japanese friend at [your] university?*
>
> Sofia: *I have a few Japanese friends. Some of them are even from the university I will*
>
> *study abroad at in Fukuoka next semester. Do you ever have any study abroad*
>
> *students at your university?*
>
> Nana: *Fukuoka! I'm living in Hokkaido now. Fukuoka is far from Hokkaido.*
>
> *When you talk with study abroad student from Japan, you speak in English?*
>
> *I know many study abroad students at my university.*
>
> *For example, my friend stayed at New Zealand and another friend stayed at Michigan.*

As Nana began to incorporate her questions into discussions, she felt better about interacting with Sofia and her anxiety diminished. Nana commented, "it was nice I could ask questions almost every time I responded to her. It was really good that I could ask what I have wanted to" (Journal 6, translated). The contradiction between the object and the division of labor was resolved from negotiation through Nana's continuous attempts to incorporate her questions without breaking the flow of ongoing conversation. By the end of the exchange, she "really liked how the project went overall" and was satisfied with her "improved" manner of participation (Interview, translated).

Frustration on Manners of Participation: Chris and Yota's Case

According to the pre-discussion questionnaire, Chris' priority was his language and cultural learning as well as his grade for the project. He indicated it was important for him to have active interactions with his partner. Yota, his partner, indicated his goals were to maximally use this opportunity to mutually learn cultural values and help each other's language skills through active interactions. As Figure 5 illustrates, based on their subjective assessments, Chris and Yota shared many goals for the project and expected mutual contributions during active interactions.
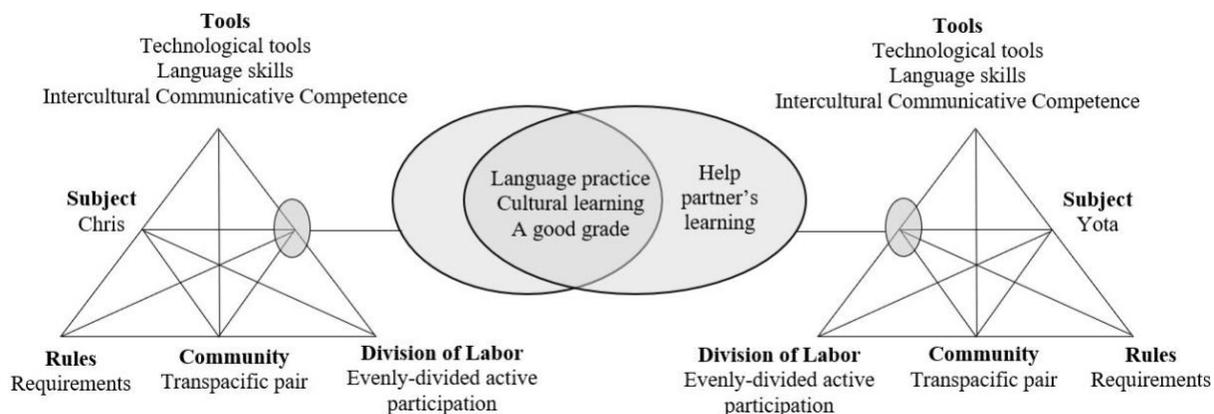
Figure 5. Chris and Yota's activity systems before the discussions began.

When the project was first introduced, Chris sent a message including a self-introduction on Hangouts to his JPU partner, Yota, who responded immediately. With no response from Chris for the day, Yota sent another message, "did my message go through?" (Chat log), to confirm the delivery of his prior message. After Chris confirmed it, they started an active discussion on the first topic, college life, sharing information, and exchanging photos. Through this exchange, another instance occurred where Yota sent a message followed by another a few hours later requesting confirmation of message delivery. As Yota did not receive Chris' confirmation soon enough, he sent an email message to the AMU teacher-researcher that he was worried if his message was delivered to Chris and wondering why he had not heard back from him. Despite the 13-hour time difference, Yota's expectation for response time was extremely high both for Chris and himself.

As Chris was informed of Yota's concern from the teacher-researcher in class, he seemed surprised because the interactions appeared prompt from his perspective. Learning Yota's high expectation for response time, Chris tried to communicate with Yota more frequently. However, as much as Chris appreciated frequent interaction and Yota's prompt responses, he started to feel concerned about Yota's passivity in terms of starting new subtopics. Chris commented on his mixed feelings of appreciation and frustration about Yota's participation, "he is very prompt with responses, but I have to do most of the work of coming up with new conversation topics" (Journal 2). Chris' frustration continued to increase as reflected in the comment, "sometimes I have trouble finding new topics because he does not start many" (Journal 3).

On the other hand, from Yota's perspective, the interactions were going well, "I don't think there are any problems in our discussion because I have been able to answer his questions. It is nice he describes his life in detail" (Journal 2, translated). In addition, Yota's critical comment on his participation revealed his priority in frequency and promptness, "this week I couldn't reply soon because I was working when I wanted to. I think we were able to talk somewhat, but only a limited number of times" (Journal 3, translated).

During the interactions, a divergence emerged between the definitions of the division of labor between Chris' and Yota's activity systems (Figure 6). For Chris, "evenly-divided active participation" included equal frequency and promptness, equal learning opportunities for language and culture, and equal levels of mutual respect and interest. On the other hand, Yota's definition of "evenly-divided active participation" was narrowly defined and limited to equal frequency and promptness of messages. The interaction of these two activity systems with two slightly different configurations in the division of labor led to Chris' anxiety and frustration about having to repeatedly initiate conversations.
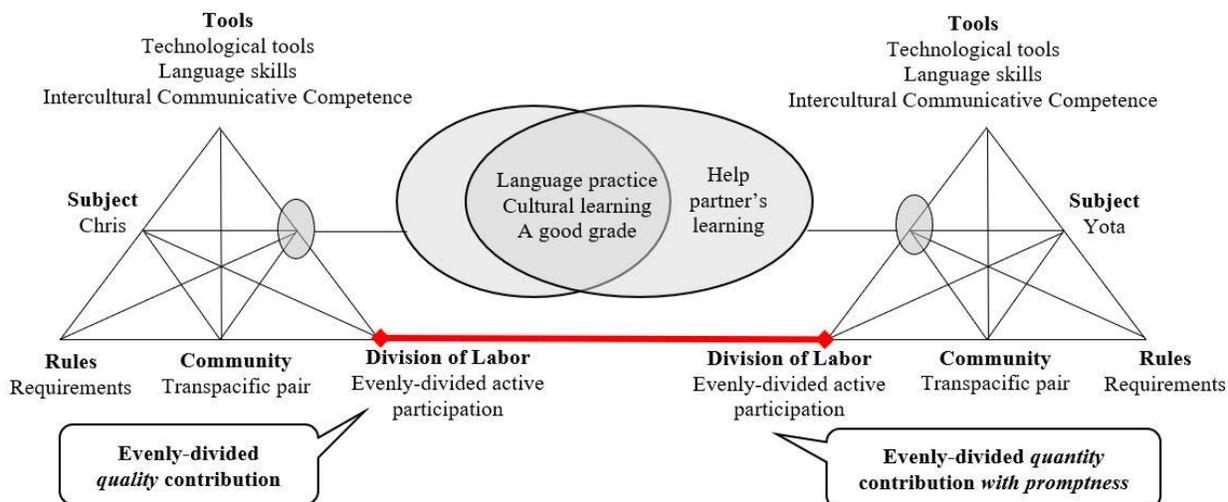
Figure 6. The divergence in the division of labor between the two systems.

Chris' frustration was caused by the contradiction between the two sets of the division of labor. However, Chris did not take actions to resolve the issue directly with Yota and decided to "go with the flow my partner seemed to want" (Interview). By negotiating the contradiction within his activity system, Chris accepted the situation and his existing anxiety and frustration ebbed. Although Chris' overall impression of the project was "not too bad overall" (Interview), the post-discussion questionnaire revealed he became less excited about the project over time.

Discussion

Revisiting the first two research questions, the findings above illustrate how tensions in two cases regarding student participation emerged and were negotiated. To Nana, merely answering Sofia's questions was insufficient, no matter how Sofia enjoyed it and was satisfied with Nana's contribution. This dissatisfaction resulted in Nana's critical reflections on her participation and eventually triggered a change in her manner of interaction with Sofia. In Yota and Chris' case, a divergence in the definition of successful participation caused different frustrations from each. To Yota, promptness and frequency of messages were the top priority, and he extended the expectation to his partner. When Yota recognized Chris did not respond to him as quickly as expected, he was bothered and acted (i.e., requested confirmation of message delivery) to resolve the situation. On the other hand, the quantity of interaction was never an issue for Chris while he was frustrated by Yota's reluctance to contribute to the quality of discussion. Unlike Yota, Chris did not take any actions but went with the flow, resulting in a reduced level of motivation for learning and collaboration.

From the CHAT perspective, there emerged a contradiction between the object and the division of labor in each learner's activity system, except for Sofia. The contradiction in Nana's activity system existed internally between her definition of the division of labor and her objective. She proactively resolved it by asking more questions, which eventually resulted in a positive evaluation of her participation as well as the overall project. Yota faced the contradiction between his expected division of labor and the shared objective, leading him to request delivery confirmations to negotiate the divergence when his expected promptness was not achieved. Chris' improved promptness then resolved the contradiction in Yota's activity system maintaining the initially intended outcome of the activity. The contradiction Chris perceived about Yota's minimal contribution to the discussion quality was negotiated internally within his activity system. Instead of taking action that would directly influence his partner's activity system, Chris redefined his initial expectation for the division of labor and made peace with the quantity-focused manner of interaction.

Corroborating Wenger (1998) and Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005), this study suggests that participation is more than quantitative contributions. In Nana's case, the number of her responses was not the issue (as she did have as many responses as Sofia). Instead, the issue was what constituted her responses—answers to Sofia's questions—and the gap between reality and her initial intentions. Also, for Yota and Chris, the number of messages was never an isolated issue. Their frustrations resulted from a complex process of doing, communicating, feeling, and belonging, which occurred both on- and offline (Hrastinski, 2008). In other words, the frustrations were configured and developed in a specific context, including the emerging manners of online interaction and how each felt.

Kern's (2014) idea of relational pedagogy helps us better understand a potential factor for Yota's frustration. Relational pedagogy focuses on how medium and context interact with language use, and Kern argued that technology used in materials and interactions can produce subtle mediational effects that can influence learners' evaluation and interpretation (p. 340). The chat function of Google Hangouts was designed for synchronous communication, and this expectation from the technological medium may have led Yota to expect more prompt responses from Chris, despite his awareness about the time difference and his partner's schedule. Yota's case proved to be a good example for Kern's argument that a language educator using technology must "consider ways to use technology to study the very ways it mediates language use, communication, cultural expression, and social meaning" (p.352).

Concerning the third research question, this study shows how participation is co-construed in the social interaction between learners (Ware, 2005). Sofia's proactive questioning based on a significant interest in the target culture resulted in Nana's concern about her passivity compared to Sofia's, which led to Nana's intentional change in her manner of participation. Yota's dissatisfaction for Chris' sense of punctuality led to Chris' increased promptness in responding to messages, while Yota's lack of qualitative contribution to discussions caused Chris' frustration and decreased motivation. Their online partnership was in constant negotiation driven by frustrations toward their own or their partner's manners of participation. As suggested in previous studies (Belz, 2001; O'Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005), such frustrations are often manifested by different beliefs about appropriate communication online. Nana's frustrations were caused by the perceived discrepancy between her expectation of ideal participation and her actual participation. Both Yota and Chris felt uneasy when their partner did not act as they expected.

This leads to the question of what successful participation means in different contexts and to different learners (Hanna & de Nooy, 2003; Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004). As Hrastinski (2007) argued, online student participation is influenced by a complex web of demographic, behavioral, and contextual factors. While the demographic configurations of AMU and JPU may be similar within each group (e.g., first languages, language learning experiences, and goals), each dyad presented a unique context of interaction co-construed by various factors within and across the activity systems. Each participant constituted an element (i.e., subject) of their activity system in conjunction with other factors, which included their subjective definition of successful participation.

Divergences in expectations and norms arise in intercultural interactions *a priori*, and individual differences add complexity to the situation. In this sense, there is no single definition for successful participation that is shared by the involved parties. This scenario requires teachers to play a guiding role in helping learners to pursue a form of success. Teachers should discern, explain, and reflect upon culturally contingent patterns of interaction with their students (Kern et al. 2004) and train students in advance to anticipate possible discrepancies in any intercultural communication. Furthermore, students should be coached to put themselves in their partner's position and take action to resolve emergent problems, which will cultivate an intercultural approach to language learning (Hanna & de Nooy, 2003; Ware & Kramsch, 2005).

These two cases show how the concept of participation is negotiated dynamically in each context to spontaneously configure manners of participation through social activities. With the many different reasons for and approaches to language learning, participation requires additional attention in research and pedagogy. Future research must provide more cases in various settings and using other media to identify the essential variables in each context. The continuing emergence of new media and technologies will keep

researchers busy in reassessing and reconceptualizing learner participation.

Similar to other qualitative studies, this research provides descriptive accounts of specific cases of intercultural telecollaboration with participants at a defined time and place. The data (e.g., students' responses to the questionnaires, journals, and interviews) are not to be reviewed in terms of quantifiable values but should be understood as emergent outcomes of a given context. While this study is not generalizable to a larger population, these cases provide pedagogical implications for various classrooms where telecollaboration is involved, including, but not limited to, the ones between U.S. and Japanese students.

It is important for teachers to understand their roles in learners' activity systems. Although it was outside of the scope of this study, in-class instructions and announcements, private consultations in person or via email, and other teacher involvement in the project contributed to participants' negotiation of their activity systems. Sometimes the effect of teacher intervention can be minimal, while other times it may be necessary for drastic adjustments of learner actions or the project. Teachers should also understand that they have their own activity systems, which interact with the activity systems of everyone involved in the collaboration. Teachers should be constantly aware of shared goals within their classroom and across interacting classrooms and they must carefully examine what constitutes each node of their activity system in terms of the understanding of the concept of successful participation presented by this study.

It is hoped that teachers using telecollaboration apply context-specific measures for successful participation of cross-cultural groups of learners to maximize authentic learning of the target language and culture. For example, teachers may cultivate students' objective perspectives by showing sample cases where different understandings of successful participation caused contradictions cross-culturally or within the same group. For another example, students could consider potential contradictions in the other intersecting nodes of multiple CHAT systems, such as objects and communities. This approach will help specify project expectations from an administrative perspective and the increased cross-cultural awareness will encourage mutual respect on all levels of intercultural interactions.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Google Hangouts was selected for this study because of its accessibility to both AMU and JPU students. Prior to this year's interaction, a previous cohort of AMU and JPU participants used Google Groups, another discussion forum platform, and some participants shared that the interaction would be improved through a texted-based chat service available on mobile phones. Google Hangouts was an accessible tool for all participants as they already had a Google account and its app was freely available to download on their mobile phones.

2. All the names of participants are pseudonyms.

References

Antoniadou, V. (2011). Using activity theory to understand the contradictions in an online transatlantic collaboration between student-teachers of English as a foreign language. *ReCALL*, *23*(3), 233–251.

Basharina, O. (2007). An activity theory perspective on student-reported contradictions in international telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology, 11*(2), 82–103. Retrieved from

https://www.lltjournal.org/item/2575

Belz, J. (2001). Institutional and individual dimensions of transatlantic group work in network-based language teaching. *ReCALL*, *13*(2), 213–231.

Belz, J. (2002). Social dimensions of telecollaborative foreign language study. *Language Learning & Technology, 6*(1), 60–81. Retrieved from https://www.lltjournal.org/item/2373

Belz, J. (2003). Linguistic perspectives on the development of intercultural competence in telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology, 7*(2), 68–117. Retrieved from https://www.lltjournal.org/item/2431

Bento, R., & Schuster, C. (2003). Participation: The online challenge. In A. Aggarwal (Ed.) *Web-based education: Learning from experience* (pp. 156–164). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

Dennen, V. (2005). From message posting to learning dialogues: Factors affecting learner participation in asynchronous discussion. *Distance Education*, *26*(1), 127–148.

Educational Testing Service. (2015). *The TOEIC® tests: The global standard for assessing English proficiency for business*. Retrieved from https://www.ets.org/toeic/succeed?WT.ac=toeichome_succeed_121127

Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta- Konsultit.

Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, *14*(1), 133–156.

Firth, A., & Wagner, J. (2007). Second/foreign language learning as a social accomplishment: Elaborations on a reconceptualized SLA. *The Modern Language Journal*, *91*(s1), 800–819.

Hanna, B., & de Nooy, J. (2003). A funny thing happened on the way to the forum: Electronic discussion and foreign language learning. *Language Learning & Technology, 7*(1), 71–85. Retrieved from https://www.lltjournal.org/item/2418

Hauck, M. (2007). Critical success factors in a TRIDEM exchange. *ReCALL*, *19*(2), 202–223.

Hauck, M., & Youngs, B. (2008). Telecollaboration in multimodal environments: The impact on task design and learner interaction. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 21*(2), 87–124.

Hrastinski, S. (2007). *Participating in synchronous online education* (Doctoral Dissertation, Lund University, Sweden). Retrieved from https://lup.lub.lu.se/search/ws/files/4623381/600490.pdf

Hrastinski, S. (2008). What is online learner participation? A literature review. *Computers & Education*, *51*(4), 1755–1765.

Japan Foundation (2017). *Survey report on Japanese-language education abroad 2015*. Retrieved from https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey_2015/Report_all_e.pdf

Kern, R. (2014). Technology as pharmakon: The promise and perils of the Internet for foreign language education. *The Modern Language Journal, 98*(1), 340–357.

Kern, R., Ware, P., & Warschauer, M. (2004). Crossing frontiers: New directions in online pedagogy and research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *24*, 243–260.

Kramsch, C. (2014). Teaching foreign languages in an era of globalization: Introduction. *The Modern Language Journal*, *98*(1), 296–311.

Kuutti, K. (1996). Activity theory as a potential framework for human-computer interaction research. In B. A. Nardi (Ed.), *Context and consciousness: Activity theory and human-computer interaction research* (pp. 17–44). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Lantolf, J. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford University Press.

Madyarov, I., & Taef, A. (2012). Contradictions in a distance course for a marginalized population at a Middle Eastern university. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning, 13*(2), 77–100.

Mazzolini, M., & Maddison, S. (2003). Sage, guide or ghost? The effect of instructor intervention on student participation in online discussion forums. *Computers & Education*, *40*(3), 237–253.

Müller-Hartmann, A. (2006). Learning how to teach intercultural communicative competence via telecollaboration: A model for language teacher education. In J. Belz & S. Thorne (Eds.), *Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education* (pp. 63–84). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching*, *44*(4), 412–446.

O'Dowd, R. (2003). Understanding the "other side": Intercultural learning in a Spanish-English e-mail exchange. *Language Learning & Technology, 7*(2), 118–144. Retrieved from https://www.lltjournal.org/item/2432

O'Dowd, R. (2005). Negotiating sociocultural and institutional contexts: The case of Spanish-American telecollaboration. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 5*(1), 40–56.

O'Dowd, R. (2006). The use of videoconferencing and e-mail as mediators of intercultural student ethnography. In J. A. Belz & S. L. Thorne (Eds.), *Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education* (pp. 86–120). Boston, MA: Thomson Heinle.

O'Dowd, R. (2013). Telecollaborative networks in university higher education: Overcoming barriers to integration. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *18*, 47–53.

O'Dowd, R., & Ritter, M. (2006). Understanding and working with failed communication in telecollaborative exchanges. *CALICO Journal, 23*(3), 623–642.

Panichi, L. (2015). *Participation in language learning in virtual worlds: An exploratory case-study of a business English course* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Hull, UK. Retrieved from http://hydra.hull.ac.uk/resources/hull:11583

Ryder, L., & Yamagata-Lynch, L. (2014). Understanding tensions: Activity systems analysis of cross-continental collaboration. *CALICO Journal*, *31*(2), 201–220.

Schneider, J., & von der Emde, S. (2006). Conflicts in cyberspace: From communication breakdown to intercultural dialogue in online collaborations. In J. A. Belz & S. L. Thorne (Eds.), *Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education* (pp. 178–206). Boston, MA: Thomson Heinle.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Thorne, S. (2003). Artifacts and cultures-of-use in intercultural communication. *Language Learning & Technology, 7*(2), 38–67. Retrieved from https://www.lltjournal.org/item/2430

Vonderwell, S., & Zachariah, S. (2005). Factors that influence participation in online learning. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, *38*(2), 213–230.

Vygotsky, L. (1987). Thinking and speech (N. Minick, Trans.). In R. W. Rieber & A. S. Carton (Eds.), *The Collected works of L. S. Vygotsky. Vol. 1. Problems of general psychology* (pp. 39–285). New York: Plenum Press.

Wang, A. (2017). *Learning English in a multi-user virtual environment: Exploring factors affecting*

participation. (Doctoral dissertation, Mid Sweden University). Retrieved from https://miun.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1104037/FULLTEXT01.pdf,.

Wang, A., Deutschmann, M., & Steinvall, A. (2013). Towards a model for mapping participation: Exploring factors affecting participation in a telecollaborative learning scenario in Second Life. *JALT Call Journal*, *9*(1), 3–22.

Ware, P. (2005). 'Missed' communication in online communication: Tensions in a German-American telecollaboration. *Language Learning and Technology, 9*(2), 64–89. Retrieved from https://www.lltjournal.org/item/2507

Ware, P., & Kramsch, C. (2005). Toward an intercultural stance: Teaching German and English through telecollaboration. *The Modern Language Journal, 89*(2), 190–205.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Yamagata-Lynch, L. (2010). *Activity systems analysis methods: Understanding complex learning environments*. New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media.

About the Authors

Tomoe Nishio is Assistant Professor of Japanese in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of North Georgia. Her primary research interests include technology and language teaching and learning, intercultural communication, curriculum development, and material design.

E-mail: Tomoe.Nishio@ung.edu

Masanobu Nakatsugawa is Assistant Professor of English at Otaru University of Commerce. His primary research interests include language policy, critical discourse analysis, and the JET Program. He is co-author of *Solution: A Topic-based Communication and Discussion Text "Asking Why" -The Science of Everyday Life*.

E-mail: masa@res.otaru-uc.ac.jp