IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN TELECOLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES: NEGOTIATING SUBJECT POSITIONS

A CONSTRUÇÃO DE IDENTIDADES EM ATIVIDADES TELECOLABORATIVAS: NEGOCIANDO POSICIONAMENTOS DOS SUJEITOS

LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE IDENTIDADES EN ACTIVIDADES TELECOLABORATIVAS: NEGOCIANDO POSICIONAMIENTOS DE LOS SUJETOS

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ABSTRACT

O'Dowd (2018) defines telecollaboration as the use of online technologies in the context of language teaching and learning between students who are geographically dispersed. For Risager (2007), interaction between individuals from different cultures gives rise to cultural representations and, as Rodrigues (2013) puts it, such an interaction triggers the participants' cultural identities. In this sense, this study sought to explore identity construction through cultural representations in telecollaborative activities. For the interpretative analysis, which was based on scholars such as Tajfel and Turner (1979), Woodward (2000), Salomão (2011) and Dervin (2014), data from telecollaborative sessions, a mediation session, an experience report, Facebook private messages and an interview were included. The outcomes revealed that the participants, through the telecollaborative activities, could highlight people's characteristics according to specific social groups, in addition to having had an occasion to express dissatisfaction regarding particular issues.

KEYWORDS: Telecollaboration. Identity construction. Intercultural dialogue. Cultural representations.

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RESUMO

O'Dowd (2018) define telecolaboração como a utilização de tecnologias *online* no contexto do ensino e aprendizagem de línguas entre estudantes que se encontram geograficamente dispersos. Para Risager (2007), a interação entre indivíduos de diferentes culturas dá origem a representações culturais e, como Rodrigues (2013) explica, essa interação desencadeia as identidades culturais dos participantes. Neste sentido, este estudo teve como objetivo explorar a construção de identidades por meio de representações culturais em atividades telecolaborativas. Para a análise interpretativa, que se embasou em pesquisadores como Tajfel e Turner (1979), Woodward (2000), Salomão (2011) e Dervin (2014), foram incluídos dados de sessões de telecolaboração, uma sessão de mediação, um relato de experiência, mensagens privadas no Facebook e uma entrevista. Os resultados revelaram que os participantes, através das atividades telecolaborativas, puderam destacar características de pessoas segundo grupos sociais específicos, além de terem tido a oportunidade de manifestar descontentamento no que diz respeito a questões particulares.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Telecolaboração. Construção da identidade. Diálogo intercultural. Representações culturais.

RESUMEN

O'Dowd (2018) define la telecolaboración como el uso de tecnologías en línea en la enseñanza-aprendizaje de idiomas entre estudiantes que se encuentran dispersos geográficamente. Para Risager (2007), la interacción entre individuos de diferentes culturas da lugar a representaciones culturales y, como explica Rodrigues (2013), esta interacción desencadena las identidades culturales de los participantes. En este sentido, este estudio buscó explorar la construcción de identidades a través de representaciones culturales en actividades de telecolaboración. Para el análisis interpretativo, que se basó en investigadores como Tajfel y Turner (1979), Woodward (2000), Salomão (2011) y Dervin (2014), se incluyeron datos de sesiones de telecolaboración, una sesión de mediación, un informe de experiencia, mensajes privados en Facebook y una entrevista. Los resultados revelaron que los participantes, por medio de actividades de telecolaboración, pudieron resaltar características de personas según grupos sociales específicos, además de haber tenido la oportunidad de expresar descontento con respecto a cuestiones particulares.

PALAVRAS-CLAVE: **T**elecolaboración. Construcción de identidad. Diálogo intercultural. Representaciones culturales.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Facilitated by the use of digital resources, telecollaboration favors the practice of foreign languages as well as the contact between people from different countries and cultures (O'DOWD, 2003, 2013, 2018; AUTOR X, 2019, 2020, 2021). O'Dowd (2018) defines telecollaboration as "the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations" (p. 1). Thorne (2006, p. 3) already highlighted that telecollaborative practices allowed for "actual interaction with expert speakers of the language", whereas for O'Dowd (2013, p. 123) they provide students with "virtual contact with members of other cultures and speakers of other languages".

Cultural representations emerge when individuals from different countries and cultures come into contact. As Risager (2007, p. 180) puts it, such representations "convey images or narratives of culture and society in particular contexts". Rodrigues (2013, p. 153),

on her part, understands that "any interaction amongst peoples and cultures, naturally, will trigger cultural identities involved in the interaction process"[3]. Seen in these terms, the process of identity construction in telecollaboration takes place on the basis of the participants' life stories, cultural representations, experiences, interests, affiliations, world views, and so on.

Taking that into account, as was explained earlier, telecollaboration provides the contact among people from different cultures, this study focused on identity construction through cultural representations in telecollaborative activities. For this purpose, as it will be better explained later, data from telecollaborative sessions, a mediation session, an experience report, Facebook private messages and an interview were gathered.

This text is divided into five sections. The first focused on the aim as well as on a brief contextualization of this research, while in the second section we dealt with the relevant literature to ground this study. In the third section, we addressed the method used and, in the following section, we present the data analysis. Lastly, final considerations are made in the fifth section.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the telecollaborative practices documented in the literature are of a bilingual-bicultural nature, e.g. the models **e-tandem** and **telecollaborative exchange** (GUTIÉRREZ; O'DOWD, 2021). In the e-tandem model, two students who are learning each other's language swap their roles: at times as learners of a foreign language, and at other times as tutors of their mother tongue or other languages. The telecollaborative exchange model, in turn, which is generally integrated into the classroom and under the supervision of a teacher-mediator, is centered around linguistic and intercultural development.

It can be said that the intercultural dialogue is at the heart of telecollaborative exchanges. O'Dowd (2003, p. 133) asserts that it enables "learners to express their ideas and then to clarify and redefine them through feedback and through the other perspectives to which they are exposed". Veloso and Almeida (2009) argue that the intercultural dialogue allows language learners to take a major control over the learning process.

One mode of telecollaboration is teletandem (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006; TELLES, 2015a, 2015b). Telles (2015a, p. 604) summarizes teletandem as an autonomous context in which "two students help each other to learn their own languages (or language of proficiency)". For

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[3] Original quote: *"qualquer interação entre povos e culturas, naturalmente, desencadeará identidades culturais envolvidas no processo de interação".*

this purpose, they use "text, voice and webcam image resources of VOIP[4] technology (such as Skype)" (TELLES, 2015a, p. 604).

Teletandem Brasil: foreign languages for all (henceforward TTB[5]) (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006; TELLES, 2015a, 2015b; LEONE; TELLES, 2016) is the specific telecollaborative context in this study. This project, which allows college students from Brazil to interact with college students from other countries, was created in 2006 (TELLES; VASSALLO, 2006) and it is run at a state university in São Paulo's countryside.

In TTB, mediation sessions (TELLES, 2015b, LEONE; TELLES, 2016; LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016) are a crucial way of promoting, as stated by Lopes and Freschi (2016), moments of further reflection and the questioning of essentialist views in intercultural communication. Leone and Telles (2016, p. 244) define mediation session as follows:

> Moments that follow interactions in teletandem. During these sessions, 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 possibility of providing deeper reflection in mediation sessions reconciles with the intercultural approach. Many scholars, among them Kramsch (1993, 2013), Byram (1997), Silva (2019) and Liddicoat (2020) have proposed the adoption of such an approach to foreign language teaching and learning. For Kramsch (1993), the reflection between **the self** and **the other** in intercultural interaction presupposes the deconstruction of fixed cultural representations as well as of the world itself, which, according to Byram (1997), can lead to the development of intercultural competence, that is, the ability to use language in interactions with people from other cultures.

As, in line with Byram (1997), there is a tendency to perceive other people as representatives of a certain nationality in intercultural communication, cultural representations come into play when individuals meet in telecollaborative exchanges. 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 highlights 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 appropriate 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

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[4] VOIP - Voice over Internet Protocol.

[5] See http://www.teletandembrasil.org/ for further information on TTB.

one co-constructs and re-interprets".

For Tajfel and Turner (1979), the human being is defined by the division between *we* and *them*, and they add that this division plays a role in the process of social categorization, e.g. **Spanish people have this way of seeing the world, whereas we, Brazilians, think that way.** The authors go on to say that, through the process of social categorization, the members of a social group, as a way to reinforce their self-image, can find negative aspects in relation to other groups. As a result, stereotypes, which "are based on feelings rather than reason" (BYRAM; GRIBKOVA; STARKEY, 2002, p. 27), can emerge and give vent to various forms of prejudice, since they accentuate the differences between different social groups.

In many respects, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) conceptualization of identity converges with Silva (2000) and Telles (2015b). For Telles, the "marking of difference" (p. 5) is a very common aspect of the intercultural encounters in teletandem. Silva (2000), for his part, makes clear that identity refers to what **one is** and difference to what **the other is.**

Telles (2015b) argues that it is on the basis of individual experiences that interactants in teletandem, in a dynamic and continuous process, construct their identities. This is also consistent with Block (2007, p. 27), who claims that

> Identity work occurs in the company of others – either face-to-face or in an electronically mediated mode – with whom to varying degrees individuals share beliefs, motives, values, activities and practices. Identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of the past, present and future.

Seen in this light, our study is based on Block's (2007, p. 27) definition of identities, in the sense that they should be regarded as "socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret and project in dress, bodily movements, actions and language".

Different studies address the process of meaning-making in the context of teletandem. Mendes's study (2009), for instance, had the purpose of understanding the beliefs of undergraduate English teachers with regard to English language and the United States, as well as the implications of a growing worldwide sense of anti-Americanism in this context. Some of the feelings exposed by some participants were **America as a superpower in decline** and **America as the center of the world**. Despite this sense of anti-Americanism, the data analysis revealed the coexistence of feeling of admiration and "of adoration regarding everything linked to the EUA (…) characterizing a conflict of beliefs about that

country" (p. 97[6]).

The objective of Salomão's study (2011), in turn, was to analyze Brazilian in-service teachers' concepts and beliefs regarding language and culture. She underlines that before the teletandem sessions started, the teachers had a static and factual view of culture, but after these sessions they came to see it also as an interpersonal process of meaning-makings. The author suggests that, to favor the conception of culture as an interpersonal process which is characterized by elements such as "pluralization of one's cultural identity" (HALL, 2006 apud SALOMÃO, 2011, p. 272), the view of culture in the teletandem context should go beyond the transmission and explanation of national cultural references.

The focus of Telles's study (2015b) was also placed on meaning-making in the teletandem context. This piece of research sought to show how Performative Theory[7] 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" (p. 5) and he adds that learners' conceptions of the world "are performatively produced and not merely represented in their (intercultural) discursive practices" (p. 7). The analysis indicated that teletandem is a context where participants can express ideologies and their subjectivities.

In short, given that telecollaborative spaces facilitate the dialogue between people from different cultures, they open pathways for identity construction between **the self** and **the other** through cultural representations. Looked at from this angle, interactants negotiate meanings with their peers while they share stories, tell jokes and their plans for the future. Similarly, language learners construct their identities as they, for instance, explain cultural particularities about the country and the city where they live in, explore anecdotes revolving around past events, and the like.

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[6] Original quote: *"de adoração por tudo que esteja ligado aos EUA … caracterizando um conflito de crenças a respeito daquele país".*

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

3 METHOD

The data used in this study[8] were collected in the abovementioned telecollaborative project, TTB, between September and December 2016. During that period, one of the authors was a teacher-mediator at TTB and collected data for his doctoral research[9].

We included two partnerships concerning the telecollaborative sessions: Valentina x Samantha and Davi x Abigail[10]. They were part of a telecollaborative partnership between a state university in Brazil, where TTB is developed, and a university in the United States. Valentina, Brazilian, was 27 years old and a learner of English. She interacted with Samantha, an American 27-year-old learner of Portuguese; Davi, Brazilian, was 21 years old and a learner of English. He interacted with Abigail, American, 19 years old and a learner of Portuguese.

The data used in this study are from (a) 2 out of 20 telecollaborative sessions; 1 out of 8 mediation sessions; 1 out of 19 experience reports; 2 out of 3 Facebook private messages and 1 out of 25 semi-structured interviews. The telecollaborative sessions between the partnerships Valentina x Samantha and Davi x Abigail were video-recorded through the application *Zoom.* During the mediation sessions (TELLES, 2015b; LEONE; TELLES, 2016), which were audio-recorded and occurred right after the telecollaborative sessions, Valentina, Davi, other participants of the Brazilian university (including Maria[11] and Enzo[12]) and the teacher-mediator were able to discuss different aspects related to the online sessions. Through the experience reports via Google Forms, Valentina and Davi had the opportunity to collect their thoughts and submit personal impressions regarding their weekly telecollaborative sessions. Valentina and Davi also participated in interviews, through which the researcher could better understand what they had addressed in their experience reports. Lastly, even though the researcher had not previously thought about using Facebook private messages to collect the data, we ended up including them here as a methodological tool because in the middle of the data collection process Valentina sent the researcher some messages via Facebook about a specific issue, as will be seen further along.

For Dörnyei (2007, p. 38), in qualitative research the findings are "ultimately the product of the researcher's subjective interpretation of the data". In fact, the data collected

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[8] The data are from a research project duly approved by Research Ethics Committee.

[9] The data used in this study are therefore from this investigation (AUTOR1, 2019), which focused on (*we excluded this information with the aim of ensuring the blind peer review*).

[10] Fictitious names to safeguard the participants' identity. Participants signed a Free and Informed Consent Term for ethical issues.

[11] Maria was a 20-year-old learner of English. We also included data from this participant.

[12] Enzo was a 21-year-old learner of English. We also included data from this participant.

underwent a long process of interpretation and reflection. Therefore, to understand the process of identity construction in telecollaborative activities, we triangulated the interpretations regarding the data from the telecollaborative sessions with the data from the experience report, the mediation session, the interview and the Facebook private messages. As stated by Maxwell (1996), triangulation decreases the risk that the outcomes of a study reproduce biases or limitations of a single procedure.

We translated the excerpts from Portuguese to English, upon which we take full responsibility. The information between two parentheses, that is, (( )), are related to the researcher's comments.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis is intended to explore identity construction through cultural representations in telecollaborative activities. Therefore, we will embark upon the discursive practices constructed in these "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" (GEE, 1989, p. 6), where the participants engaged themselves in the process of "negotiating new subject positions" (BLOCK, 2007, p. 27), in which they (1) **highlighted people's characteristics according to specific social groups** and (2) **expressed dissatisfaction regarding particular issues.** Having said that, these two aspects will be discussed in what follows.

4.1 Highlighting people's characteristics according to specific social groups

In response to a question from her partner, Valentina explained that she was born in a city of the State of São Paulo, and that she was currently living in this same state, but in another city. Furthermore, she noted that she had already lived in two states in the Northeast of Brazil. The next excerpt, taken from Valentina and Samantha's first telecollaborative session, depicts the impressions that the former had of having lived in these places:

1. Valentina: But it's ((the Northeast)) COMPLETELY completely different from here.

2. Samantha: Yeah.

3. Valentina: I I maybe I… when I lived there I thought ah… they are… ah… here and there are different countries… ah… for me it's similar like that because ah...

4. Samantha: Yeah.

5. Valentina: The weather is very different the food is different the behavior of the people is different… ah… the the… way to… the way to… ((facial expression indicating that she did not know how to say in English)) ah...

6. Samantha: Say that in Portuguese... ((laughing)) ((they both laughed)) I need to practice. ((in turns (7) and (9), Valentina alternated her speech between Portuguese and English))

7. Valentina: O... o... *obrigada o jeito das pessoas se vestirem é muito diferente*[13] it's very different.

8. Samantha: Uh-huh.

9. Valentina: The clothes are different ah… *eu*[14] yes ((giving a shy laugh)) it's very different… maybe because there it's ah very hot and here is colder and the people ah… ((facial expression indicating that she did not know how to say in English)) *esqueci de falar* (incompreensible) *mas as pessoas se vestem de uma forma diferente*… *eu acho que aqui no Estado de São Paulo… nós somos um pouco mais conservadores*[15]… **(Excerpt 1 / telecollaborative session / original in English / Valentina and Samantha / 28-09-2016)**

In turns (1) and (3), Valentina emphasized that the two Northeastern states and São Paulo are considerably different from one another, and in turn (5) she mentioned two differences between these two regions of Brazil: the food and people's behavior. In turn (9), this participant voiced an essentialized view concerning people of the State of São Paulo when she claimed that "we are a little more conservative". Hence, in her discourse it is implied that she is among the people in this larger entity (the State of São Paulo) who are *a **little more conservative***, as opposed to the people of the other larger entity (the two Northeastern states), who are **less conservative.**

As it is evident from this excerpt, Valentina has created representations of two cultural entities: the two states from the Northeast, where she had lived, and the State of São Paulo, where she was born and was currently residing. Some binary oppositions pertaining to these two larger entities evoked by this participant are **the weather / food / behavior from the State from São Paulo vs the weather / food / behavior from the Northeast and in the State of São Paulo people are more reserved vs in the Northeast people are less reserved**. Woodward (2000, p. 47) highlights that "an identity is always produced in relation to another" (our translation[16]) and that "identities are constructed through the marking of the difference" (p. 40, our translation[17]). This **marking of the difference** meets Telles (2015b, p. 5), given that "teletandem discourse is basically characterized by performances of differences". In effect, Valentina constructed these identities on the basis of the comparison between the cultural groups in question, and, through that, she put forward particular characteristics which indicate her connection with both the State of São Paulo and the two states of the Northeast.

In the mediation session a month and a half later, where Enzo and Maria were also present, the topic about cultural differences between the two Northeastern states vs. the

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[13] Our translation: "thank you the way how people dress is very different".

[14] Our translation "I".

[15] Our translation: "I forgot to say (*incompreensível*) but people dress in a different way… I think that here in the State of São Paulo… we are a little more conservative".

[16] Original quote: "*uma identidade é sempre produzida em relação a uma outra*".

[17] Original quote: "*as identidades são fabricadas por meio da marcação da diferença*".

State of São Paulo was again referred to by Valentina. The following excerpt, taken from the sixth mediation session, illustrates how the latter addressed this topic after Enzo expressed outrage over the fact that his online partner, a U.S. citizen, had asked him if he was keeping an affective relationship with someone:

1. Enzo: I feel a bit… ashamed (incomprehensible) already wants to know about my life...

2. Maria: It's more like the opposite right? like Brazilians want to know more intimate things and then Americans think "huh... this guy?"

3. Enzo: ((he laughed)) YEAH!

4. Valentina: But today I discussed something with Samantha I found it very... as you were saying... like... I think that Paulista in general… I was talking to her… there are some cultural differences like… and Paulista we ARE a little more conservative like we are we are colder… when compared to Northeast for example… then she said like ah she found it interesting this… this difference... because people have an idea that Brazilians are very open IT'S NOT LIKE THIS.

5. Maria: I think that in Rio Grande do Sul like the South even MORE reserved. **(Excerpt 2 / mediation session / our translation from Portuguese / 16-11-2016)**

In this excerpt, an intersubjective construction of identities encompassing cultural representations was in progress. For Woodward (2000, p. 42), "difference is what separates one identity from the other" (our translation[18]). Thus, by drawing on the cultural differences voiced throughout this excerpt, the participants were "constructing their own and others" (KRAMSCH, 2013, p. 68).

Both Maria in turn (2) and Valentina in turn (4) attributed characteristics to people in terms of larger and fixed entities, and generalizations of this nature also occurred on the part of Maria in turn (5). Valentina used **in general** in turn (4) probably with the intention of making it clear that her comment did not regard all the people from these regions, even though a prevailing homogeneous tone is echoed. The following is implicit in the latter's discourse: **I had Samantha see that not all the people in Brazil are open**, although at the same time she provided her classmates with solid cultural representations. As Tajfel and Turner (1979) reminded us previously, the members of a social group can find negative aspects in relation to other groups through the process of social categorization, that is, the division between **we** and **them**. As a result, according to Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002), negative feelings can give rise to stereotypical images.

The next excerpt shows how the teacher-mediator positioned himself in reaction to the participants' comments in that mediation session:

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[18] Original quote: "*a diferença é aquilo que separa uma identidade da outra*".

1. Researcher: I see that differences are much more individual than necessarily whether I am Brazilian or whether I am from the region X and so on... [...] then I also think that it's a matter of the... of the... individual.

2. Valentina: Yes.

3. Researcher: That is, each person receives according to her/his history... according to what she/he thinks... to her/his convictions... isn't it? of course... there can be also influence of where the person is... of where she/he lives in of where she/he comes from... everything... right?

((Enzo got back to talking about the topic that triggered this discussion))

4. Researcher: And what do you think of this of what I explained do you agree with or not?

5. Valentina: I agree.

6. ((other participants said "yes"))

7. Researcher: Really?

8. Valentina: Not necessarily the region but the person.

9. Maria: Point of view.

10. Valentina: Yes point of view stereotypes. **(Excerpt 3 / mediation session / our translation from Portuguese / 16-11-2016)**

In turns (1) and (3), the teacher-mediator attempted to make the participants aware that perspectives and behaviors also vary from person to person and that these cultural differences are not solely related to the fact that people pertain to a specific social group. Valentina in turns (5), (8) and (10), other participants in turn (6) and Maria in turn (9) agreed with that, and in turn (8) Valentina proved to be able to capture the essence of the teacher-mediator's positioning when she said "not necessarily the region but the person". Considering that it is necessary to challenge stereotyped representations (TELLES, 2015b; LOPES; FRESCHI, 2016) and suggest other viewpoints (BYRAM, GRIBKOVA; STARKEY, 2002), this excerpt illustrates how the teacher-mediator provided the participants with a different perspective as regards the topic under discussion.

4.2 Expressing dissatisfaction regarding particular issues

At times, it was possible to notice that Valentina was creating a negative feeling concerning her partnership with Samantha. For instance, in the mediation session, she clarified that although her partner could reasonably communicate in Portuguese, there was no possibility of further deepening the discussions, and that those telecollaborative sessions were not as advantageous as her other online sessions, with other partners, at that moment. She even described her experience with Samantha as **boring**.

The following excerpt, taken from Valentina's third experience report, describes this participant's complaint regarding that particular partnership:

> I realize that the interaction does not take place in such an organic, natural way and another factor that possibly makes this fluidity a little difficult, a sort of "stone in the middle of the road" consists of my superficial knowledge of the foreign language in question [English]. **(Excerpt 4 / Valentina's experience report / our translation from Portuguese / 24-10-2016)**

As can be seen, Valentina pointed out that her online exchange was not "organic / natural", and made it clear that one of the reasons for this might be her restricted abilities to communicate in English. Seeing that many times she proved to have a keen interest in classical works of literature, she mentioned an excerpt from a poem[19] by a famous Brazilian poet, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, to place greater emphasis on this restriction. Valentina appropriated the verse of this poem in order to help her to construct an identity of someone who was not satisfied with that telecollaborative partnership.

Later, Valentina sent the researcher a message via Facebook whose content revolved around her relationship with Samantha. The next excerpt, taken from this participant's first Facebook private message, shows that the former's motivation to carry out the telecollaborative interactions with the latter seemed to be dying:

> There are the power relations and I realize that there are on the part of some interactants one certainty that I don't know where it comes from which makes them think they are superior / The interaction with Samantha is always, tortuous, complicated, but I'll give more detail in the reports, I realize that she doesn't prepare enough, there is no great interest in this regard unfortunately / I noticed another aspect which we had talked about, I have a great difficulty to understand her accent, there is of course a fault on my part, since I don't speak fluently the language, but I can't see a real effort on her part to make herself understood, which makes everything more complicated, but anyway, better days will come, in fact, better interactions will come, at least I hope...lol. **(Excerpt 5 / Valentina's Facebook private message / our translation from Portuguese / 03-11-2016)**

As can be seen from this excerpt, Valentina's perception of the presence of unequal power relations in the interaction with some of her American teletandem partners and, by extension, with Samantha, was making room for a negative feeling. This is consistent with Dervin (2014, p. 193), as power relationship "determines what takes place in intercultural encounters".

Valentina's perception that there was the presence of unequal power relations in this partnership may be linked to what she had already mentioned in the mediation session and in her experience report. For example, in the first mediation session of the semester, she had underlined that she did not look favorably on Brazilians who, broadly speaking, are better informed about cultural aspects of the United States than of the countries of Latin America,

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[19] The name of this poem is "No Meio do Caminho / *in the Middle of the Road*". See
https://www.culturagenial.com/poema-no-meio-do-caminho-de-carlos-drummond-de-andrade/ .

since, according to her, Latin America "is our culture" (our translation from Portuguese). In her first experience report, she observed that "we are so bombarded with "news" coming from the North American lands and we forget our own Latin identity, Brazilian" (our translation from Portuguese). In that way, by "negotiating representations with the 'other'" (DERVIN, 2014, p. 194), that is, with Samantha, Valentina was conveying an identity of someone who did not resign herself to the **bombardment of news coming from the United States.**

The content of the message that Valentina sent the researcher (Excerpt 5) made him deeply concerned, since he realized that she was losing her motivation to talk to her partner. Additionally, this could be negatively affecting these participants' interpersonal interaction, which could eventually cause the break-up of this partnership. Therefore, the researcher decided that he could help Valentina work on the skill of interacting (BYRAM, 1997; KRAMSCH, 1993; 2013) with her partner. The following excerpt, taken from the researcher' Facebook private message, depicts his reactions to Valentina's critical viewpoint on her partner:

> Good morning / No, it's not ego (in my opinion). I think that you, as you said, are suggesting the topics that you like, since you don't see this initiative on the part of your partner. Maybe, you should ask her whether it's OK for her like this. Maybe, Valentina, you could ask her if she is enjoying, if everything is all right, if she'd like to talk about a specific topic... what do you think*? (Excerpt 6 / Researcher's Facebook private message / our translation from Portuguese / 08-11-2016)*

Another display of dissatisfaction can be seen from the Excerpt 7 below, taken from Davi and Abigail's third telecollaborative session, in which the former asked Abigail what her view about Brazilian and American teachers was. This dialogue is inside a larger conversation about differences and similarities in relation to some aspects of public education schools in Brazil and in the United Sates, such as how to get into college, the quality of foreign language education and problematic student behavior.

1. Davi: Let me just ask you another question about something I've always had doubt about.

2. Abigail: Uh-huh.

3. Davi: When you came to Brazil[20]... what is... your vision about... here you saw that the vision about teachers is a garbage... right? nobody values them you know? who values I already had teachers who left the classroom crying... how are teachers viewed both in the United States and in Brazil according to what you found when you came to Brazil?

4. Abigail: So... I think this is... it's related to culture because in general you are noisier in general, right? ((smiling and making gestures with her hands to place greater emphasis on what she was explaining))

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[20] Abigail had the opportunity to participate, a few years earlier the period of the data collection, in one exchange program in Brazil. During this time, she had been an English teacher in a public school.

5. Davi: Yes.

6. Abigail: It's Brazil right? there's more disruption in general... then... it's different you know?

[…]

7. Abigail: Ah... but like... it's not the same thing we don't throw paper at each other I've never seen this in my life...

8. Davi: Here this is normal. ((laughter))

9. Abigail: I've never seen the how do you say? ((imitating someone who is whistling))

10. Davi: Whistle. **(Excerpt 7 / telecollaborative session / our translation from Portuguese / Davi and Abigail / 19-10-2016)**

In this excerpt, Davi and Abigail delved themselves into an issue equated to a national reference of culture, meaning that the discussion between them concentrated on the behavior of school students from Brazil vs. the United States. This attachment to a national duality was also evidenced by Menard-Warwick (2009, p. 42), since in her study the culture representations "were generally of national cultures". Moreover, as was already seen, in Salomão's study (2011) the participants' view of culture was also associated with national references prior to the start of the telecollaborative sessions.

In turn (1), Davi let Abigail know that he had a question and Abigail, in turn (2), showed willingness to hear Davi's question. In line with Byram (1997), demonstrating an interest in cultural aspects of the other, as was the case by Davi in this excerpt, is a core aspect when it comes to encounters amongst people from different countries and cultures. In turn (3), even before Davi finished stating the question, he added that the vision that one has about Brazilian teachers was **garbage,** which emphatically signals his discontent with the situation of teachers in his country. Evidently, this participant voiced his negative view while he was still framing the question, which may have had an effect on Abigail's comments afterwards.

As can be seen, in turn (3) Davi constructed solid representations on the topic under discussion, such as when he claimed that "nobody values them ((teachers)) you know?" (our translation from Portuguese). Moreover, Abigail, in turns (4), (6) and (7), developed her line of thought by drawing upon several negative characteristics of Brazilian students as well as the duality between Brazil x the United States. By stressing the difference between *we* and *they*, she expressed, specifically in turn (7), her own perspective about students' behavior ***(they, the Brazilians, throw paper at each other, while we, from the United States, do not do this)***. In this regard, as already explained, Telles (2015b) places emphasis on the fact that the marking of difference is a fairly common feature in the teletandem context. The essentialist nature in this dialogue also corroborates with Thorne (2006, p. 8). For him,

referring to the need to go beyond essentialisms in online exchanges, "tandem learning may have significant limitations".

Afterwards in that telecollaborative session, Abigail also made it clear that in her country, just as in Brazil, there are educational problems, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

1. Abigail: But I also... in the United States there are also school problems you know? it's like it's like you said it's not like in Brazil.

2. Davi: No it's not.

3. Abigail: Sure not at all it's not the type of perfect system but... **(Excerpt 8 / telecollaborative session / our translation from Portuguese / Davi and Abigail / 19-10-2016)**

In turn (1), Abigail underscored that problems also exist in her country, but she did not go beyond this shallow comparison. In other words, she did not provide more details about her country's public schools, nor did she mention examples of such challenges. This could explain why Davi actually did not react to her comments. Just as in Excerpt 7, in Excerpt 8 there was not further exploration into the topic, but rather a mere exchange of information seemed to be taking place, which remained constant and without necessarily leading to different insights into the perspective of the other. This meets O'Dowd (2016, p. 277), who asserts that online partners are likely to pay greater attention to "what cultures may have in common at a superficial level". While Ware (2005, p. 66) coins this shallow approach to cultural issues in online spaces as **assumption of similarity**, Ware and Kramsch (2005, p. 200), in a similar fashion, name it **the illusion of commonality.**

Shortly after in that interview, the researcher asked Davi whether he and Abigail had drawn upon their own experience while they were speaking about that topic in the telecollaborative session (Excerpts 7 and 8), and also questioned him if they had resorted to a few parameters in order to ground their arguments. He acknowledged that they had discussed that subject in the light of their own experience and that it might probably have remained at a superficial level (TELLES, 2015b; O'DOWD, 2016). The following excerpt, taken from the third interview with Davi, describes the moment in which the researcher engaged this participant in further reflection:

1. Researcher: And... were you careful to tell her like "hey we're talking... about this teacher profile here".

2. Davi: Boy I didn't make that clear to her! I generalized. ((laughing))

3. Researcher: And wouldn't it be interesting to ask her to return ((to the topic in question))...

4. Davi: Yes it's interesting yes.

5. Researcher: Right? because perhaps she may have understood in a different way right Davi?

6. Davi: Yes true! **(Excerpt 9 / semi-structured interview / our translation from Portuguese / 08-11-2016)**

In turn (1), the researcher asked Davi whether he had been careful to let Abigail know that they were talking about a specific teacher profile, and in turn (2) he acknowledged that he had indeed generalized in the telecollaborative session (Excerpt 7). It can be asserted that Davi having recognized that he actually had generalized the cultural topic in question (Excerpt 7) is showing that there was, albeit very timidly, an initial process of decentering from his fixed cultural representations, a process that Kramsch (1993, 2013), Byram (1997) and Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) claim to be especially relevant for the development of intercultural competence.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed at exploring identity construction through cultural representations in telecollaborative activities. The results revealed that, through the telecollaborative activities, the participants (1) highlighted people's characteristics according to specific social groups and; (2) expressed dissatisfaction regarding particular issues.

A close look at the outcomes showed that, by means of the telecollaborative activities and by drawing on cultural differences, the participants could, in line with Kramsch (2013, p. 68), engage themselves in the construction of "their own and others", that is to say, "in identity construction and negotiation" (NORTON, 1997, p. 410). Furthermore, the participants, during the telecollaborative activities, had an occasion to display discontent as regards some specific cultural representations. In this respect, Norton (1997, p. 410) argues that language learners continuously (re)organize "a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" when they express themselves through language. Thus, it seems possible to claim that the participants transited through a multitude of personal and social identities while they were negotiating cultural representations in the telecollaborative activities.

Linking back to Salomão's study (2011), culture as an interpersonal process should be viewed as part of the "pluralization of one's cultural identity" (HALL, 2006 apud SALOMÃO, 2011, p. 272). Indeed, although the participants were aware that they were from different countries (Brazil x the United States), the content of the conversations was not completely restricted to national cultures, since it was also related to idiosyncratic features of their cultural identities. For instance, in the course of the telecollaborative session in Excerpt 7, Davi and Abigail developed explanations with particular reference to their previous experiences and their own perspectives. Hence, the process of meaning negotiation in the telecollaborative activities occurred in the interplay between a national framework of culture

and personal contributions, in which the participants proved to be part of both national and local identities.

Last but not least, the application of different research techniques, namely the experience reports, the mediation sessions and the interviews, helped the researchers to understand more deeply the data, which means that, through the use of different methodological resources, they were able to understand more fully the process of the participants' identity construction as the latter delved into the discussion of various cultural representations. Put differently, the researchers had the chance to acquire a more holistic view concerning their multiple collection instruments. Thus, we suggest that future studies should also include methodological resources, such as the ones used in this research but also others where necessary, to better understand the complex process as regards identity construction in telecollaborative activities.

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