

Power (Im)Balance in Telecollaboration

Sarah Guth

EFL teacher, Università degli studi di Padova

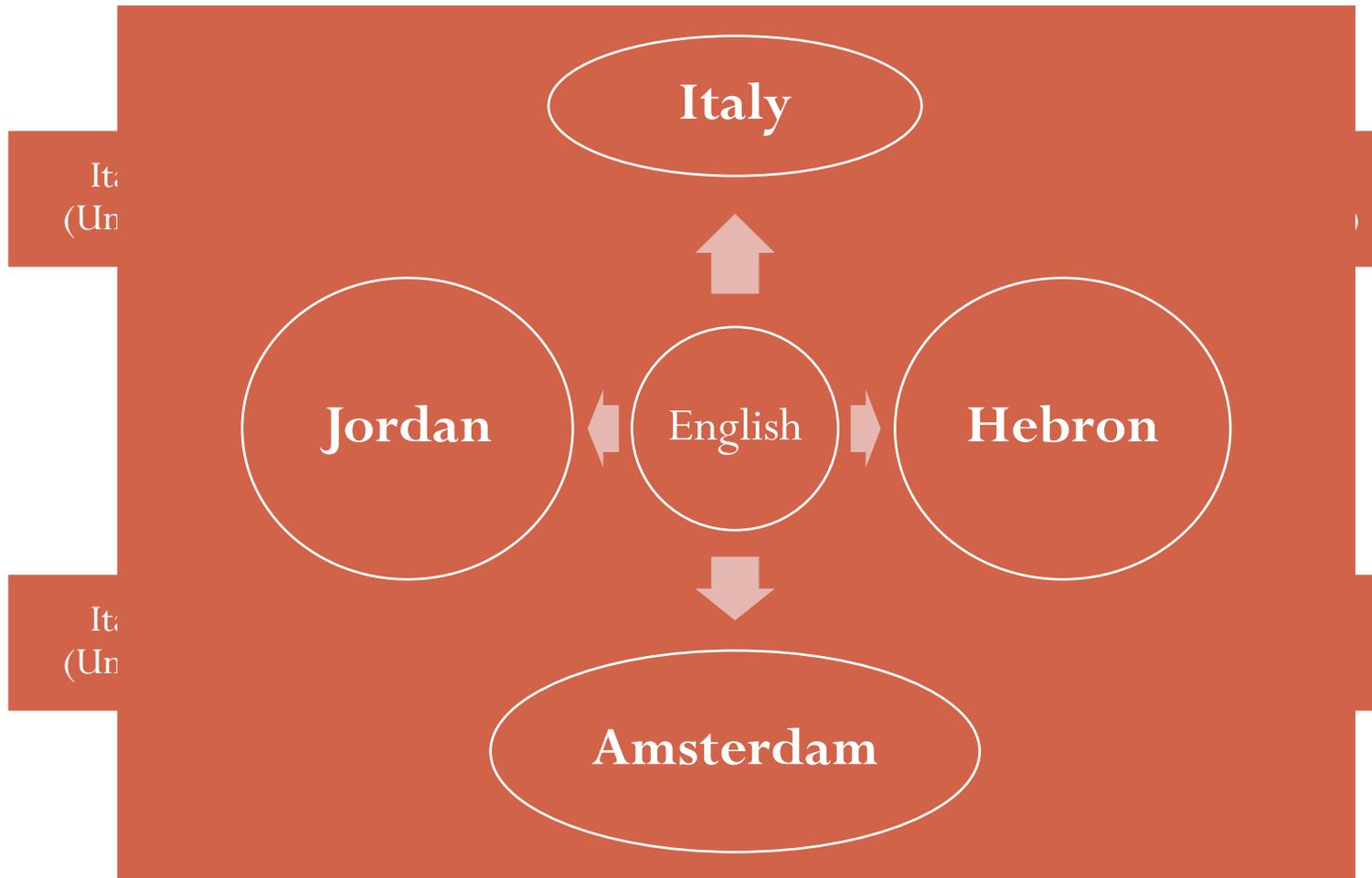
Language and Literature Track Leader, COIL Institute

Member of the European-funded INTENT project

Telecollaboration

- Internet-based intercultural exchange between students with different cultural/national backgrounds organized in institutional contexts with two main objectives to develop:
 - language skills
 - intercultural **communicative** competence
 - online literacies

Brief history of my practice (2006-2011)



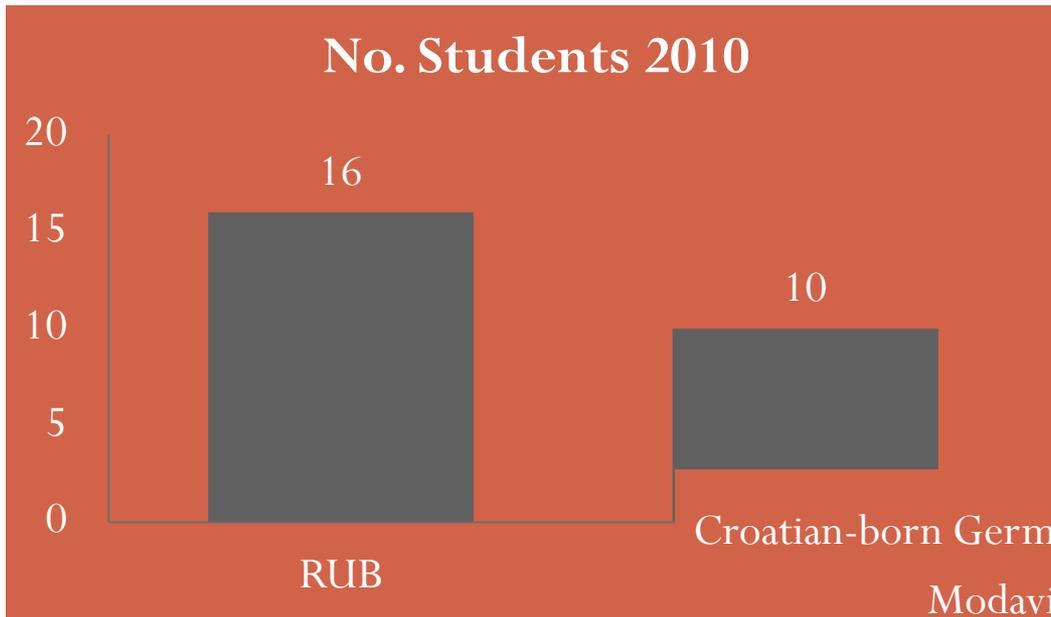
Lingua Franca exchanges – why?

- Move beyond the dichotomy of comparing two national cultures
- Ever-increasing global communication in lingua francas, in particular English
- Less intimidating for less proficient students

BUT

- Several factors may lead to power imbalances among participants. We will look at:
 - choice of language,
 - choice of discussion topic, and
 - participants' geographical location.

Two EU countries, one language



2010



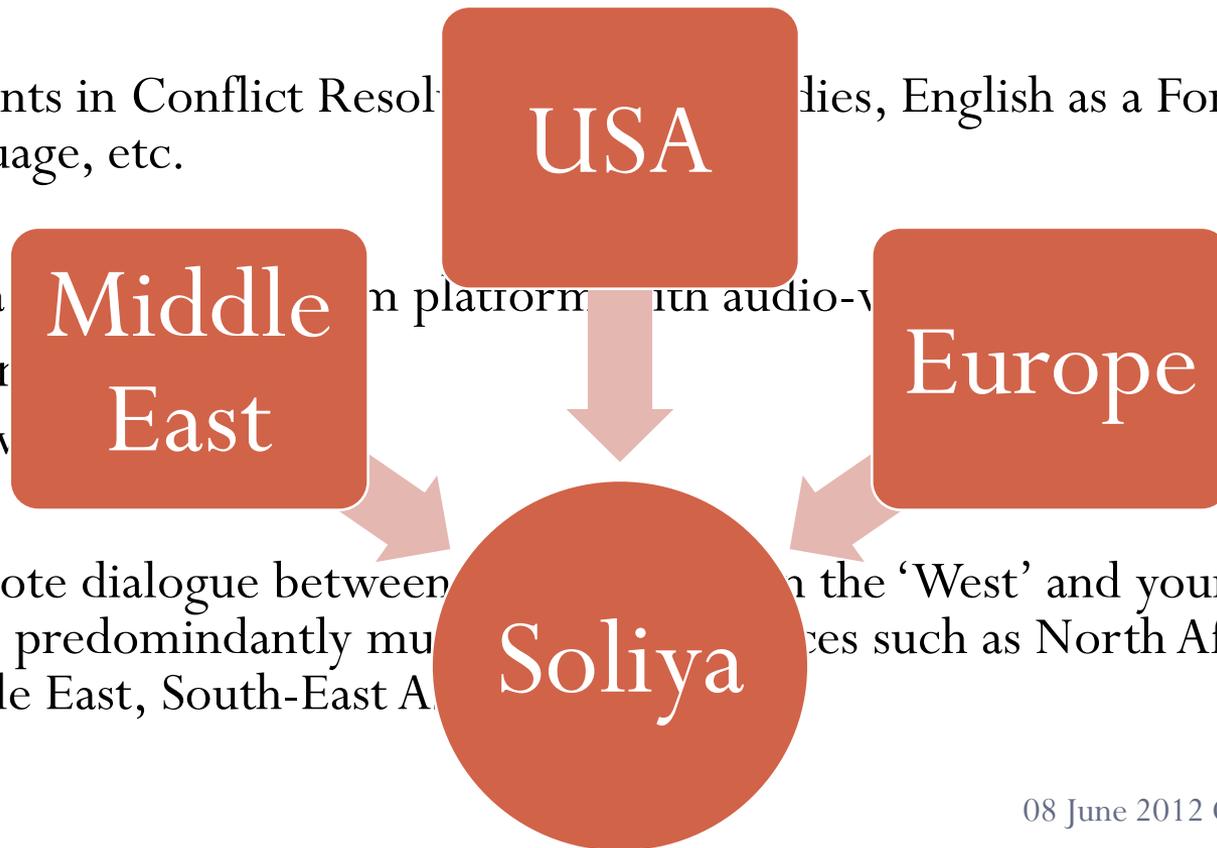
- Asynchronous written communication
- Synchronous oral communication
- How long?
 - 6 weeks, 3 of which were...
- Aims?
 - To develop intercultural communication skills and...



Many countries, one language



- Who?
 - Students in Conflict Resolution Studies, English as a Foreign Language, etc.
- How?
 - Soliya is an online platform with audio-visual content
- How long?
 - 9-10 years
- Aim?
 - Promote dialogue between the 'West' and young people in the predominantly Muslim countries such as North Africa, the Middle East, South-East Asia

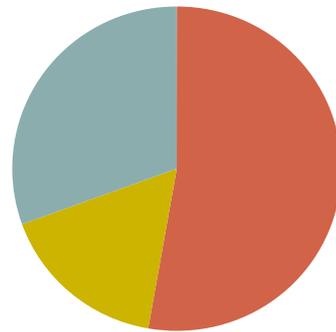


Research findings (Spring 2010)

Quantitative data:
pre- and post-survey
results

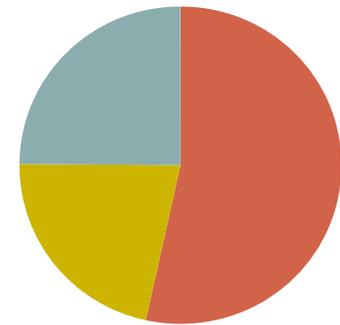
N=217 sts

Universities



■ Group A
■ Group E
■ Group U

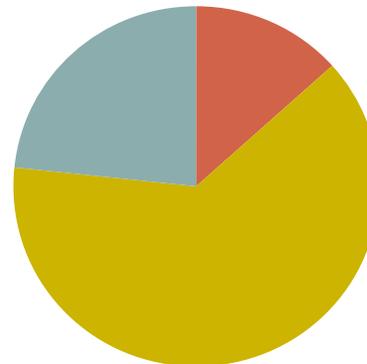
No. of sts



Students in Hebron, Jordan and Padova

Qualitative data:

N=30 sts



■ Hebron
■ Jordan
■ Padova

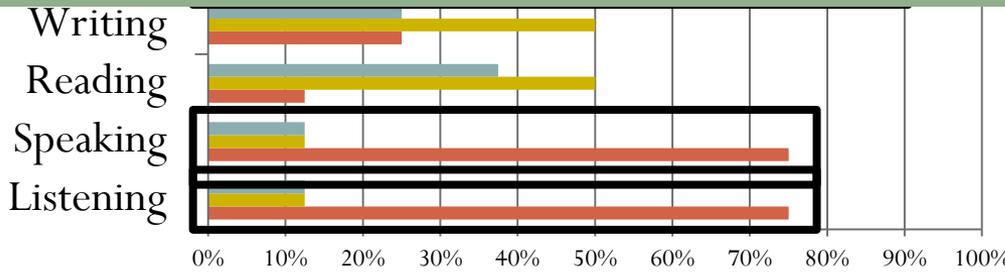
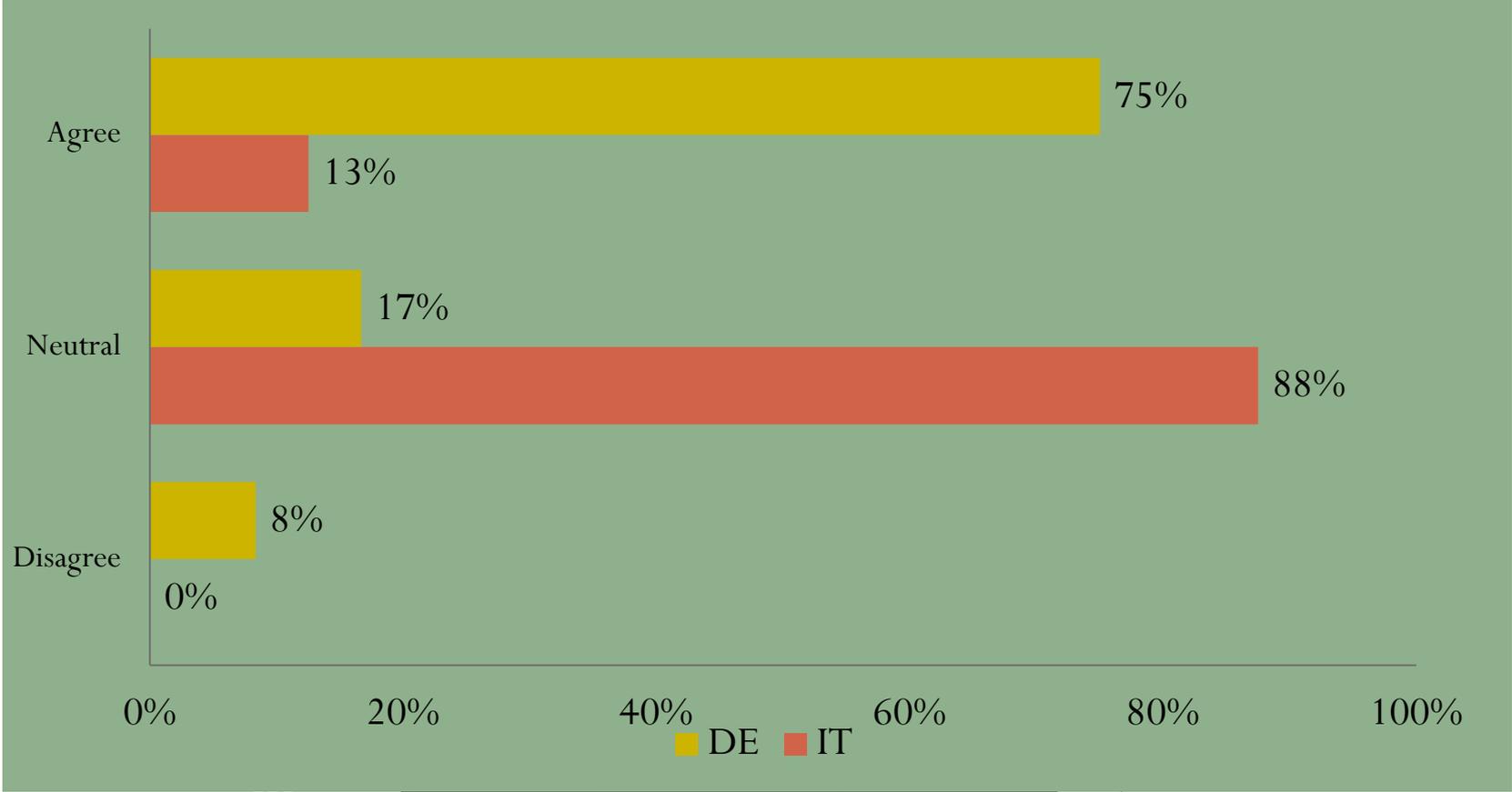
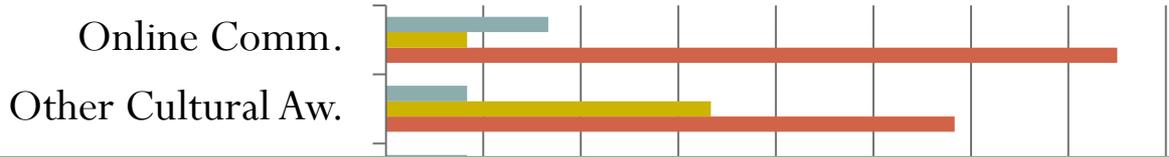
Language: Padova-Bochum

Overall positive effects related to language:

- Reduced stress between non-native speakers
- More or less proficient speakers learn to accommodate one another
- Sharing of terms and expressions from students' native languages

I learned to consider more important the emotional approach we have with foreign people and how prejudices can affect badly a conversation. So I learned to be less rigid in my views and use more empathy when I speak English. (IT)

spoken interaction (in a language different from mine). (IT)



■ a lot

Language: Soliya

- only 5 out of 30 report the importance of language learning: students placed more importance on the dialogue process and meaning-making rather than on simply “speaking in English”.
- Hebron and Jordan:
 - *“how to express my opinions bravely”* (J03)
 - *“it gave me a chance to talk freely about different issues”* (J08).

Discussion Topic: Padova-Bochum

- Topics chosen were balanced in that no one group necessarily had 'more' knowledge
 - Topic 1
 - Topic 2
 - Topic 3
- Students were given 15 minutes to prepare for the discussion activities before the discussion
 - Watching a video
 - Reading a text
- However...the discussion was an intense discussion and increased efforts to express their ideas.

I am very sensitive towards this kind of problems and I think that both Deborah and Volker understood my point of view, even though I sometimes had some little problems while trying to express my feelings and thoughts. For example, I didn't manage to explain what I meant for "take the law into your own hands", but then they understood what I wanted to say.

Discussion Topic: Soliya

- Topics chosen to stimulate debate and discussion, e.g. Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but are moderated by two facilitators (one fluent in Arabic and English, the other in English).
- Telecollaboration as a learning process: our analysis of learner diaries d... the greater the disagreement... express one's own opinion... learning.

Well, it was tough...but we can't always agree with others...and even by disagreeing, we manage to see how much we can learn from others points of view.

Geographical Location

- Padova-Bochum
 - Final conclusion: more similarities than differences
- Soliya
 - Major impact on participation with regards to:
 - Internet access
 - Personal experience with reference to topics discussed

Conclusions

- In the literature on power asymmetries **dominant groups** tend to minimize inter-group difference and emphasize common humanity and building friendships
 - *From a cultural point of view I learnt that we are not so far from Germany both economically and socially. We have more or less the same view on major topics, and that shows that Europe is not an utopia, but in my opinion needs to strengthen its political role. (DE)*
 - *“We really all are the same, maybe different beliefs and customs, but we do all want the same things” (US)*
 - *One of the most important things I've learnt is that we should not dismiss differences by assuming that in the end we're all the same. Instead, cultural and social differences do exist and shape our lives: what we should really do is to be willing to get to know them, trying to appreciate other people's perspectives, so as to respect them without fear or prejudice. (PD)*
 - *“I learned to respect people's opinions more, in addition to having a good idea about other cultures and countries.”(J)*

Getting the right balance



- Experience with COIL Institute groups in the Language and Literature strand with US speakers of English and groups from other countries:
- **Language**
 - exploit the multilingual abilities of the non-native speakers
 - raise awareness about different ‘Englishes’, e.g. using films with strong accents/dialects such as “The Full Monty”
 - point out grammar issues that students of English as a Foreign Language may be more familiar with than their US peers, e.g. differences between the present perfect and the simple past
- **Topics**
 - choose topics and carry out preparatory activities that allow all participants to feel ‘prepared’
- **Geographical Location**
 - respect geographical differences by using different modes of communication and different tools, and by emphasizing the enriching nature of contact between different cultures

The many ways of saying
XIÈXIE "Thank You" SPASIBO
GRACIAS Grazie Mahalo
Merci Danke WA-DΘ
Arigato Dhanyawaad Asante

Sarah Guth

sarah.guth@unipd.it