

## PROMOTING DIALOGUE OR HEGEMONIC PRACTICE? POWER ISSUES IN TELECOLLABORATION

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This qualitative study explores the impact of potential linguistic, technical and educational hegemonies on the learning outcomes for English language students in Hebron, Palestine, and Padova, Italy, who were involved in the Soliya Connect Program, a telecollaboration project developed to explore critical issues that divide the ‘West’ and the ‘predominantly Arab and Muslim world’. The project is organised around weekly synchronous moderated video discussions between students from the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa. The authors first discuss the hegemonies that might be at play in this telecollaboration project and examine the specific power imbalances on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels that students in Hebron and Padova might experience. Then, drawing on data from learner diaries and reflective papers, facilitator reports, and questionnaires, the authors provide evidence for the emergence of a third space conceptualised as a site of struggle and conflict, but also a dialogic, fluid and evolving space. The aspects of the project that seemed to contribute most to the creation of a third space were found to be: (a) the role of trained facilitators in addressing power imbalances, (b) the dialogic approach to conflict that the program is based on, and (c) the use of audio-video conferencing which humanises the experience and increases empathy among students.

**Keywords:** Technology-Mediated Communication, Online Teaching and Learning, Sociocultural Theory

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There is much discussion regarding the hegemonic implications of the ubiquity of the internet around the globe and the spread of English as a ‘global’ language. Some (e.g., Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992) argue that the spread of English constitutes not only linguistic, but also cultural and political, hegemony, which is reinforced by the ‘Western model’ of the internet and its exponential growth around the world (Morozov, 2011). On the other hand, from a social justice perspective, others (e.g., Dwaik & Shehadeh, 2010; Norton & Kamal, 2003) argue that the increased opportunities for transcultural communication and dialogue offered by a global language such as English and by internet communication tools permit marginalized groups to challenge dominant hegemonies and injustice. Telecollaboration projects, particularly those where English is used, highlight these issues which have been little explored in the literature on online intercultural foreign language exchange. In part this is due to the fact that the first widely used models, such as [eTandem](#) (O’Rourke, 2007) and [Cultura](#) (Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillet, 2001), were designed as bilingual, bicultural exchanges based on the concept of reciprocity between learners, and used relatively simple technologies such as email rather than the web. As telecollaboration has become a more common practice, especially in the U.S. and Europe, involving different configurations of learners and languages and more web-based technologies (Guth & Helm, 2010), the need for a shift in the focus of research in telecollaboration to include these issues has become necessary. Lamy and Goodfellow (2010) highlight the importance of critiquing telecollaboration by “asking historically-informed questions about whose interests the practice might serve and how its hidden power relations might be deconstructed and understood” (p. 130).

The present study examines the experience of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from [Hebron University](#) (HU), Palestine, and the [University of Padova](#) (UP), Italy, who participated in a large

telecollaboration project, the [Soliya Connect Program](#) (SCP), which involves students from universities in the predominantly Arab and Muslim world (henceforth A/M world) and parts of the Western world. In SCP, students participate in nine weeks of two-hour synchronous audio-video group discussions in English, which are led by Soliya-trained facilitators. The groups of around eight students are organized to ensure a balanced cohort of Westerners on the one hand, Arabs and Muslims on the other, and men and women. SCP differs from most telecollaboration projects found in the CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) literature because it is not designed for foreign language learners but rather for students of disciplines like international relations, conflict resolution and media studies. However, since 2007 small groups of EFL learners have also been participating in SCP.

The most obvious appeal of SCP for EFL educators is the fact that English is the project language, hence all reading materials and discussions take place in English, though Arabic translation is available for some reading texts and, if necessary, in discussions. SCP thus offers an opportunity for authentic English language use as participants interact with both native speakers and non-native speakers to discuss important global issues. The principal aim of SCP is to explore the causes of tension between the A/M and Western worlds and “facilitate dialogue between students from diverse backgrounds across the globe” (Soliya, n.d.). Its aims thus coincide with objectives which are increasingly becoming important for language educators in different parts of the world: the notion of transcultural competence proposed by (a) the Modern Language Association’s Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (2007) in the U.S., (b) intercultural communicative competence and intercultural dialogue promoted by the Council of Europe (2008), and (c) Islamic approaches and principles of dialogue such as those proposed by Ashki (2006), who defines dialogue as:

a type of communication between people that respects the differences of ‘the Other’, which allows for true listening in a safe environment that offers possibilities for the transformation of self-awareness in each individual. (p. 6)

The approach adopted in SCP has parallels with the practice of “sustained dialogue” (Saunders, 1999), which is “a process of multiple and progressive interactions through which participants have an opportunity to develop relationships and deepen their understanding of each other” (McKenna, Hanson & Coogan, 2009, p. 12). This process occurs in five stages (Saunders, 1999), starting with the creation of a safe space where participants can feel secure enough to fully engage in dialogue in order to better understand previously unfamiliar cultures. The aim is for participants to undergo a transformation and in the final stages of the project they are led to identify ways they can act together to reshape the larger community. Since SCP places itself within a framework of conflict resolution, power issues are acknowledged and addressed in various ways. Potential power imbalances in SCP dialogue groups can be due to participants’ region of origin, English language proficiency, and access to technology. Failing to address these issues can lead to the unravelling of groups and fragmentation of relationships (Agbaria & Cohen, 2000).

This paper reports on a study which explored the impact of power-related issues for EFL learners from Hebron and Padova engaged in SCP. It discusses whether this English-language, high-technology telecollaboration project is supporting existing hegemonies or promoting the development of a dialogic third space, where traditional hierarchic relationships can be rewritten (Bretag, 2006). The first part of the paper is primarily descriptive, providing a discussion of the cultural, linguistic, technological and educational hegemonies we consider may be at play in SCP. The second part focuses on the study, with a description of our methodological approach and data collection methods followed by a discussion of the findings. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of these for telecollaboration practitioners, and we explore avenues for future research.

### **Cultural Hegemonies**

The view of hegemony adopted in this paper stems from the concept of cultural hegemony developed by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci early in the twentieth century. Gramsci argued that cultural hegemony is a subtle process of political domination through ideological domination, whereby the ruling classes succeed in persuading individuals to consent to a subordinate position in a system which operates in the best interest of those in power. The effectiveness of cultural hegemony stems from the imposition of the worldview of those who wield power as a universally valid ideology that benefits all of society, and this is achieved through popular culture, the mass media, education and religion. Gramsci's theorisation of cultural hegemony is transposed to a more transnational and global context in the work of Joseph Nye (2004) and the concept of what he calls *soft power*, particularly in relation to the US (Vacca, 2010). Whereas *hard power* achieves domination through military strength and economic power, *soft power* does so by making a country's culture and ideals seem attractive to outsiders (Nye, 2005). Language, technology, education and the media are important tools of soft power and the line between reaching out to other cultures and culturally dominating them is very fine. Given this fine line, educators need to be aware of the power issues involved in their teaching and telecollaboration contexts, and whose interests they may be serving in their practice.

### **Linguistic Hegemonies**

Controversy around the global spread of English is not new (Seidlhofer, 2003). The issue is complex and has been viewed from multiple perspectives (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997, 2006; Lee & Norton, 2009; Pennycook, 1998, 2001; Phillipson, 1992, 2003). Based on his early research on English/Tamil bilingualism in Sri Lanka, Canagarajah (1999) argued that local and global perspectives are simplified in the dichotomizing views which dominate the Western approach to the debate. He argued that:

[t]he question confronting the students is not whether English should be learned, but how. They will neither refuse to learn English nor acquire it unconditionally in the terms dictated by the centre. They will appropriate the language in their own terms, according to their needs, values, and aspirations. (pp. 175-6)

Other scholars have studied English language teaching and learning and social change in 'outer circle' countries such as Pakistan (Norton & Kamal, 2003). Lee and Norton (2009), for example, report on how students in Pakistan use English to reach out to the international media and connect with the diaspora community using hotlines and email, and point out that their students succeeded in acquiring English while maintaining their Muslim identities.

### **Technological Hegemonies**

Many of the arguments around the hegemonic implications of the spread of English pervade the debate around the internet. During the period 1996-2008 "the broad perception was that of a massive, pervasive and stable English dominance on the Internet, in the context of a virtual world that was supposed to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the 'real' world" (Pimienta, Prada, & Blanco, 2009, p. 10). Yet the dominance of internet users with English as a first language decreased from approximately 80% to 40% in the same period, and other languages appeared as the web grew (Pimienta, Prada & Blanco, 2009). However, some spread less rapidly than others due in part to the fact that initially the transmission of non-Roman scripts through the web required transliteration to Roman script, such as that used in the case of Arabic as described by Warschauer, El-Said, and Zohry (2002). Nowadays an increasing number of languages with non-Roman scripts feature strongly, for example, Chinese is now the second language on the web and Arabic the seventh (Internet World Stats, 2010). In 2009 ICANN (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) approved non-Latin characters for use in internet domain names (Coursey, 2009). Undoubtedly, hegemonies persist, but with the diffusion of different languages

on the internet they are being challenged.<sup>1</sup>

Not only has language limited access to the internet, but so has geography, along with economic and political interests. In rural communities worldwide, including the U.S., the economic interests of internet providers have meant that access is limited or non-existent and dependent on government investment (Gallagher, 2010), specifically on governments' willingness to develop digital policy and the necessary infrastructures. In many countries, for instance China, the information available online is censored, and social networking sites such as Facebook (and others) have been blocked for some periods of time. Overall internet access is also subject to government control, as the dramatic events and internet blackout in Egypt at the beginning of 2011 showed. Talk of limiting access to social networks during social unrest also emerged in the UK following the riots of August 2011. Just to what extent the internet can be used as a liberating force is subject to debate (see, for example, Morozov, 2011), but its role, particularly the use of Twitter and Facebook, in organising demonstrations to call for political change most recently in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Palestine cannot be ignored, though it has been pointed out that "dictators are toppled by people, not by media platforms" (Calderone, 2011). The internet and social networks are undoubtedly useful in organizing protests and rallying support for causes but they can, many argue, lead to "homophily", that is, people associating with others who are mostly like themselves (Yardi & boyd, 2010). Progressive, pluralistic movements use them as a vehicle for their counter-hegemonic discourses just as extremist groups use them to incite racial hatred and discrimination (Cammaerts, 2009). Online tools are not generally exploited for their potential in bridging differences and promoting dialogue (Fleishman, 2008; Hanna & de Nooy, 2009) outside of educational contexts, and when they are exploited to that effect in educational contexts, stereotypes may be reinforced rather than overcome, as is extensively documented in the literature on telecollaboration in particular (see for instance Belz, 2002; Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010; O'Dowd, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Ware, 2005).

### **Hegemonic Implications of Technology and Educational Models**

Technology has undeniably broadened access to education, providing opportunities to groups of people who previously could not attend university, for example working adults or people living in remote communities. What has worried educators across the world, however, is that Anglophone educational institutions are using online learning, wittingly or unwittingly, to export their educational models, values and beliefs (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009). There is a growing recognition that technology and online learning are not culturally neutral (Hewling, 2005; Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche & Chase, 2004) and that educational hegemonies need to be addressed. Ess (2009) argues that failing to do so "is simply naive and inevitably fatal to efforts to exploit ICTs [information and communication technologies] for effective crosscultural communication" (p. 27).

Educational hegemonies can be addressed through studying culture in online learning contexts, as researchers in computer mediated communication (CMC) have done (e.g., Kim & Bonk, 2002; Liang & McQueen, 1999), following the work of scholars like Hofstede (1984, 2001) and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) in identifying communication styles of learners based on nationality or broader ethnic origin. Though this essentialist approach can offer insights into the role of culture in online communities (Gunawardena, Alami, Jayatilleke & Bouachrine, 2009; Hewling, 2005), concerns about the reductionist characterisation of this approach are shared by many (Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005; Hewling, 2009; Kramsch, 2001; Reeder *et al.*, 2004; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006; Zaharna, 2009).

Poststructuralist, postmodern theorists view culture as heterogeneous and fluid, recognizing individuals' multiple identities, and seeing identities not as fixed but as continually negotiated across different activities and contexts (Maybin, 2000; Reeder *et al.*, 2004; Risager, 2007). Research in the areas of new literacy studies (Gee, 2000), situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and learning cultures (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009) highlights that meaning-making is always socially situated, and foregrounds the agency of the participants, the roles they play within specific

learning contexts, and the power relationships that develop within these situated practices.

The online environment in which communication takes place is also a “player” with agency (Hewling, 2009) because the design of online environments and interactions themselves have “a strong bearing on the way that activity in the environment comes to be understood” (Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005, p. 364). Yet it has also been shown in telecollaboration contexts that the participants involved in an online communicative exchange have a significant influence on the culture of the online space. As Thorne (2003) explains:

[c]ultural artifacts such as global communication technologies are produced by and productive of socio-historically located subjects. Such artifacts take their functional form and significance from the human activities they mediate and the meanings that communities create through them. (p. 21)

In other words, traditional dynamics of power and established practices can be challenged and overturned as culture is negotiated and new forms of interaction and dialogue are found in what has been conceptualised by some as a *third space*.

### **Third Space**

A third space can be viewed as a place where “the fixed identities of the traditional social order do not hold sway” (Doran, 2004, p. 96). It may be a useful tool for enhancing models of intercultural learning in L2 learning (Ortega & Zyzik, 2008). Originating in the work of Bhabha (1994) and in Kramsch’s (1993) notion of a “third culture”, many definitions of a third space have emerged (Bretag, 2006; Burbules, 2006; Haythornthwaite, 2005; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat & Crozet, 1999; Pegrum, 2009; Raybourn, Kings & Davies, 2003) with common attributes. On the basis of these various interpretations we define a third space as:

- not a fixed space, but rather a fluid, dialogic space which is constantly constructed and re-constructed by participants who actively engage in dialogue and negotiate identities, not only through self-expression but also through mindful listening and the co-construction of meanings;
- at times influenced by national/local/ethnic cultures but not determined by them;
- a place where differences are not hidden or minimised but acknowledged and valued;
- a situated space with its own culture and processes, which *may* be influenced by communication technologies but is not created by or located in them;
- a place where attribution of power is not fixed, but rather “may change as the context evolves in response to the positioning of participants” (Hewling, 2009, p. 123);
- both an individual and a collective space: without the group it cannot exist, but it is not experienced by all members of a group in the same way; and
- a place where answers are not found but rather questions are raised (Schneider & von der Emde, 2006) and which is “problematic and problematizing [...], risky and as prone to chaos, or even heightened conflict, as to producing new understandings” (Burbules, 2006, p. 114).

### **Research Questions**

Our research questions in this study are intended to explore the hegemonies at play in SCP, and their effect on EFL learners involved in the project:

1. What issues of power and identity are at play for EFL students in Hebron and Padova participating in SCP and how do these affect their experience?
2. What evidence is there for the emergence of a third space in SCP?

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND DATA COLLECTION**

Our study lies within the sociocultural research tradition (Palfreyman, 2006; van Lier, 2000, 2004; Warschauer, 2005). It has been argued that the Western conceptualization of Vygotsky's work has "tended to ignore the social beyond the interactional and to celebrate the individual and meditational processes at the expense of the consideration of socio-institutional, cultural and historical factors" (Daniels, 1996, p. 9). There has consequently been a call for a more critical approach, with attention being paid not only to the individual and the classroom setting, but also to the broader context of institutions, educational policies and ideologies. In this study we initially compared the local contexts of two groups of EFL learners on three different levels: the macro-, the meso- and the micro-levels (Lamy & Goodfellow, 2010). At the macro-level we considered political influence in international politics, national educational policies, general attitudes towards English throughout society, and internet access and know-how. At the meso-level we looked at the individual universities and their policies, beliefs and practices, in particular regarding EFL and ICTs. At the micro-level, we looked at EFL classes, their participants and habitual practices, and how SCP was integrated into EFL programs. We also considered the telecollaboration context of SCP (i.e., the situated activity) in which learners from these local contexts engaged with participants from many other backgrounds.

In collecting data we acknowledged the need to accord attention primarily to the subjective points of view of those directly involved (Müller-Hartmann, 2007; O'Dowd, 2009; Tudor, 2003). These emic perspectives came from: the two teacher-researchers working in Hebron and Padova; trained SCP facilitators who moderated the dialogue groups of participants in this study; and the EFL students themselves. Altogether, there were 24 participants from HU and 21 participants from the UP. The HU students were predominantly women (20 out of 24) aged 21 and 22, in their final year of a Bachelor Degree in English Language and Literature in the Faculty of Arts. The UP students were also predominantly women (16 out of 21) in their early 20s, mostly studying for their second-cycle degree in the Faculty of Political Science, with three students from the Faculty of Modern Languages. Qualitative data was collected for each of these groups:

- descriptions of the local setting, context and students provided by the two teacher-researchers in Hebron and Padova;
- facilitator reviews (FR); and
- student responses to end-of-exchange open questions (OQ), student end-of-exchange reflection papers (RP), and student reflective diaries (RD).

At the same time it was felt that the etic, outsider perspective could contribute different insights precisely because it was removed from the context and different from the groups themselves (Burbules & Rice, 1991). The etic perspective came from Guth, who had no involvement in SCP but has extensive experience in telecollaboration.

The data was collected over two years with the informed consent of the participants. The three author-researchers first individually read through the data, highlighting references made to language issues, technology, identity and roles within SCP groups, and then triangulated the data from the various sources. They then iteratively cross-checked their interpretations in order to come to agreement. The indicators identified to shed light on the first research question were:

- reports of English language proficiency as a barrier to participation;
- reports of technology issues as a barrier to participation; and
- reports of roles in the group based on aspects of cultural identities.

Concerning question two, the researchers followed a similar iterative process, reading through the data

and highlighting excerpts which related to the definition of a third space as described above. Excerpts were then grouped under broad headings and three indicators of the development of a third space were identified:

- the third space as a dialogic space (i.e., reports of active engagement in dialogue where different viewpoints were acknowledged and respected);
- the third space as a site of struggle (i.e., reports of difficulties, disagreements and conflicts); and
- the third space as a fluid, constantly evolving space (i.e., reports of change).

## Research Sites

### *Local Contexts*

The data gathered about the two contexts (i.e., HU and UP) on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels is summarised in the [Appendix](#). They were quite different on a macro-level in terms of geopolitics. Italy is a Western European country, a nation-state which is a voting member of the United Nations and also a member of the G8 and G20; Palestine on the other hand is recognised by some, but not all, countries as a state. While Palestine formally applied to the UN for full membership in September 2011, at the time of writing it is still considered a non-member entity of the UN although it has been given a seat in UNESCO, the UN's cultural organisation, amidst significant controversy (BBC, 2011). Palestine was under British mandate from the end of the First World War until 1948<sup>2</sup> and since 1967 it has been under Israeli occupation, with major economic and social repercussions (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2011).

On the meso-level the differences were slightly less marked, since both universities are public institutions, though varying in size, age and mission. English is compulsory in both contexts. ICTs are not widely used for teaching in either university, though in both cases there is student internet access. Both teacher-researchers reported that, in the context of foreign language teaching, some CALL took place (Farrah, 2011; Farrah & Tushyeh, 2010; Helm, 2009).

On the micro-level, that is, at a classroom level, there were again similarities. Both teacher-researchers saw SCP as offering their students the opportunity to improve their listening and speaking skills in a real-world context, through interaction with native and non-native speakers in parts of the world with which they had limited contact. At both universities the main problem for students was identified as a lack of confidence in speaking. In addition, SCP was seen to offer political science students in Padova the opportunity to discuss issues relevant to their degree courses, so that they could acquire topic-related vocabulary.

SCP was introduced at HU in 2008 and started with eight students. They were given the option of doing this program or a 20-page research paper where they would write on a topic related to teaching methods or literature. The majority of the students majoring in English are female and this led to limited take-up even if there was significant interest on the part of students. Although the mission of HU makes specific reference to female students, stating that the University wants to “create a good opportunity for the needy and conservative families who would not otherwise send their daughters out of town to pursue higher education, either due to financial considerations or due to traditions” (Hebron University, 2011), practical limitations continue to exist for the young women interested in taking part in SCP. Most do not live in the city and, therefore, do not have internet access at home, and those who do live in the city cannot access computers on campus after 4 pm when the campus closes. Furthermore, though there are internet cafés in Hebron, young women are rarely seen there alone, regardless of the reasons.

At the UP, SCP has been offered since 2008 as an alternative to a traditional English language course for students enrolled in the second-cycle degree in International Politics and Diplomacy. However, the uptake in Padova has been very limited (no more than eight students per semester when 15 places were

available). Access is also a challenge in Padova: many students do not have internet access in their residential halls or homes, and though computers are made available, they are located in a corridor where the presence of other people at times has an inhibiting effect and disturbs comprehension.

***Site of Situated Activity: Soliya Connect Program (SCP)***

SCP was developed by **Soliya**, an American non-governmental organization set up in 2003 with the aim of building a global network of young adults empowered to bridge the divide between the West and the A/M world. Since then, Soliya has worked with 79 universities and 2,600 students from 25 countries. These universities range from large state universities to private universities, and include English-medium universities in the Middle East such as the American University of Sharjah in the UAE, as well as traditional Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

From a university language educator's point of view, SCP is a form of outsourced telecollaboration since Soliya designs the SCP curriculum, sets up dialogue groups, assigns each group two trained facilitators, provides university professors with guidelines on how to integrate SCP into curricula, and requires facilitators to provide local teachers with student reviews (i.e., reports on students' participation and performance). It is up to the professors at each participating university, however, to prepare students for SCP, integrate the assigned readings and discussion topics into their courses or seminars, debrief participants and encourage reflection on the experience, and finally grade students on tasks which are assigned by Soliya. Clearly professors of different subject areas will focus on different aspects of SCP in both preparing and evaluating their students.

There are up to 38 dialogue groups of seven to ten students each in every iteration of SCP, which lasts nine weeks. Students from participating universities are assigned by Soliya to a group, which is balanced between Western and A/M participants as mentioned earlier. All groups follow the same curriculum though the actual activities may vary slightly as the two facilitators for each group select activities for the weekly topics from the constantly updated SCP Online Curriculum. In addition, for two of the nine sessions the groups themselves select the topics to be discussed from a series of options. Thus, though all groups follow the same calendar and program, their experiences can be quite different. As well as participating in dialogue groups, all participants are required to do a video-editing project and everyone has an individual blog on the SCP website, which they can use to communicate with the broader SCP community outside their dialogue groups. In this study, however, we concentrated on the students' experience of the dialogue groups.





Figure 1. A Soliya dialogue group.

## FINDINGS

### Research Question 1

The indicators for the first research question involved reports of English language proficiency, technology and cultural identity inhibiting participation in the discussion groups. With regard to the first two types of barriers, our findings were similar to much work that has already been reported in the literature (e.g., Blake & Zyzik, 2003; Helm & Guth, 2010). Language proficiency did initially prove to be a hurdle for many students but was overcome largely through the key role played by facilitators in creating a safe environment of trust where students could feel free to express themselves and receive help when necessary. Many reported finding the facilitators' use of the text chat to summarize the discussion as it evolved extremely useful as it helped overcome technical problems with audio and supported comprehension. Facilitators also periodically summarise discussions and clarify points when they may not be clear for all students, and translate into and out of Arabic if necessary. They are trained to acknowledge the imbalance in power that using English creates, and "to highlight that it is not a result of Arab students' lack of knowledge of English, but rather a result of Americans' lack of knowledge of Arabic that forces the language of communication to be English" (Soliya, 2010, p. 19). For most of the students both in Padova and Hebron it was also the motivation to participate more actively in the dialogue sessions which stimulated them to talk and encouraged them to read beyond the required texts, take notes and prepare themselves for the sessions, both in terms of language and content. Nonetheless, connectivity problems had a negative impact on the participation of HU students. Missing entire sessions or parts of a discussion was reported to make participation even more challenging due to a lack of knowledge of what had already been discussed, fear of repetition or redundancy. This impacted learners' affective experience of discussion sessions and increased anxiety. Our findings regarding the influence of cultural identity on participation for these two groups of students will be the focus of the rest of this section.

### *Role of Cultural Identity*

SCP seeks to address the causes of tension between what are very broadly defined as the West and the A/M world, in part by addressing the views people in the different regions may have of one another. In much of the A/M world there is a common perception that:

Western powers for two centuries have routinely used their diplomatic power and sent their armies to occupy our lands, remove nationalist or anti-Western regimes they dislike, preserve conservative regimes and dictators they are comfortable with, maintain access to oil, or ensure Israel's superiority over all neighboring countries. (Khouri, 2004)

In the West there has been a spread of anti-Islamic sentiment, particularly since the events in New York on September 11, 2001. This is often described as Islamophobia (Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Runnymede Trust, 1997), which includes a dread of Muslims and the perception that Islam is a violent political ideology. Consequently, prior to their first online meeting, many participants may see each other through such stereotypical lenses, or have views on how they might be perceived by their peers. For example, an Italian student, Maria,<sup>3</sup> wrote in her reflective diary:

Paradoxically, [even though a lot of Muslims live] in Padova, they are seen as dangerous immigrants to avoid, so it's hard to have a direct experience with the world of Islam. I want to use this experience first of all to hear people who I'm afraid to listen [to] in my narrow reality. (UP14\_RDwk2)

As participants enter SCP dialogue groups their positioning is initially as part of the broad groups of Westerners or Arabs/Muslims, and this is more immediate and visible than their identity as learners of English. Video-conferencing allows the students to see those elements which define much of their identity (e.g., actions, voice, gesture, dress) and convey differences, features which are missing in text-based computer-mediated communication. The wearing of the *hijab* by some of the A/M women, for instance, was noted by several of the Italian students, and was a discussion topic chosen by several groups. Students both in Hebron and Padova were surprised at the lack of information that other group members had about, for instance, the Palestine-Israel issue, Islam, Italy or Europe. In response to an open question about the most important thing that he had learnt through SCP, Malik reported:

I learned that the west does not know anything about the reality (concerning islam and the palestinian issue). they are just given information that muslims are bad and palestinians are the ones who do everything bad to israel. they don't know that the palestinian people are suffering greatly for the sake of their freedom. (HU14\_OQ)

However, he wrote that what he enjoyed was "talking about islam most because it helped me to expose islam in its real shape. in addition to that, it helped a lot in changing a lot of the participants thoughts about islam" (HU14\_OQ).

For some of the Italian students, rather than challenging misconceptions about their culture, it was more a case of realising how little their peers actually knew about their country. One Italian student's reaction to this was to undertake an effort to inform her group about Italian history and politics, frequently citing examples to make her points. When the topic was terrorism, she discussed the *Brigate Rosse* in Italy:

I meant to explain, in my opinion, that kind of terrorism as today's international terrorism are both characterized by a strong linkage between the power of the state and these paramilitary groups. (UP9 RD\_wk3)

Regional origin and identity also affected how the students saw their role within the SCP dialogue sessions. The Palestine-Israel conflict was discussed by all SCP dialogue groups and, as Palestinians who had experienced the conflict directly, the Hebron students were in a position to offer a unique insight in the discussions, which many of them were willing to do, as revealed in this facilitator review:

When her tech was working, she contributed some very deep and powerful comments including

sharing her personal narrative. She brought a unique perspective to the group as someone that has grown up living in an active conflict zone and she was often able to connect our topics in class to her personal experiences, which is a key goal of the program. (HU22\_FR).

Many of the facilitators commented on the openness and frankness of the Hebron students in sharing opinions, even those which were perhaps “unpopular”, as one facilitator wrote. In triangulating the data we found that facilitator comments were echoed in the words of the Hebron students themselves, who often specifically situated themselves as Palestinians and reported feeling a strong sense of responsibility in describing their situation, as well as empowerment through doing so:

During the program time I felt like I was the ambassador for my country, my culture and my people. I had to clarify the real situation in Palestine, Gaza and West Bank. I had to express myself, my feelings during the Intifada. I wasn't surprise[d] by the fact that not all of my friends are familiar with the real situation. Unfortunately, because media is dominated by the major forces in the world, people outside don't know the real situations. (HU03\_RP)

The importance of the Hebron students' contributions to the SCP dialogues also emerged in the data from the Padova students. For instance, in Anna's diary she recounted the impact of hearing Ahmed's life story living in Palestine:

Everyone of us had an interesting story to tell, but the more shocking was Ahmed's one: he told us the problems that he had to face due to the occupation in Hebron (because he's Palestinian), the imposed curfew to the Palestinian and the two weeks he passed in a jail. Well, I felt myself so useless, and all my efforts to cheer him up and give hope were so vain for me (but I understood not for him!). I felt that this was so unfair, and that was an unjust fate! So we tried to ask him if we could make anything useful. He was so happy and quite satisfied only for having told us the real and present state of affairs. (UP19\_RDwk7)

On a macro-level, HU students were members of a group with little political and economic power but there is “a certain kind of moral authority that comes with being in the less powerful group. If your people have been hurt or oppressed, you might have a certain kind of ‘rightness’ on your side” (Agbaria & Cohen, 2000, p. 7). This moral authority empowered them to open up and express their feelings, however strong these may have been. The data shows that their opening up often pushed others to express their views openly, again however strong or contentious they may have appeared. There was evidence, however, from one student in Hebron who felt limited by her role as ambassador:

There are a lot of things and issues I really need to know about from its origins like cultural diversities in America and the west but I didn't had the chance to ask those questions as I was so busy answering their questions about us!!! (HU4\_RP).

The identity of the Italians which emerged from the data was not as homogeneous as that of the Hebron students and their self-positioning depended very much on the discussion groups they found themselves in. In SCP, Italian participants are positioned as Westerners, more specifically Europeans, and some facilitators referred to the Padova students as providing “the only European perspective in the group” (4 out of 21) or as providing a unique Italian perspective, whilst in discussions about religion they represented different religious or non-religious views. What also emerged from the facilitator reviews of many UP students' experience was their curiosity, and ability to listen, ask questions and encourage others to participate.

Students were aware of their roles and how they could change depending on the topic and people present

in the group at the different sessions, as evidenced in the diaries of one student, Giovanni, who often mentioned his positioning in the group and the perspectives he felt called upon to provide. For instance, in one session he mentioned three different aspects of his identity and also how his position was different from that of a broader group (Catholics) he might be associated with (bold added by authors):

It was the main theme of the “veil” in West world. This is normally a strong argument, in the case of my group the four girls from East wear all the veil, so I immediately felt it was an hot theme. In this case **I was the only one from West** and above all **the only man**, so my role was very important. All the girls didn’t agree with the position of French president to ban the veil from public place. My position was the same but I said that as **I am atheist** it’s not a problem for me to see religion symbol, but I also think that the main position of catholic people is very different. (UP11\_RDwk7)

The roles the students chose to adopt often derived from the unique perspectives they said they could offer the group in discussions on particular topics. Sometimes, however, this made them feel uncomfortable and reluctant to share, as Elisa reported:

When they at last asked me the same question I felt a little uncomfortable as I would have liked to say that I’m atheist and for this reason my favourite holiday isn’t a religious one. Unfortunately I’m too shy and I was afraid to express my opinion about religion because they are all believer and after having thinking about it I have realized that I was wrong. It would have been very interesting to know how religious people feel about atheist people. (UP9\_RDwk4)

In reporting on the SCP experience, several students mentioned that it helped them explore their identities:

It gave me an opportunity to understand my own identity and examine it closely, so as to be able to represent it to the others with utmost objectivity and honesty. It also taught to me to accept and respect different views no matter how much I disagree with. (HU01\_OQ)

## Research Question 2

### *Third Space as a Dialogic Space*

Many students from both groups reported on the importance of dialogue in order to learn about others’ perspectives and promote understanding. As Malik wrote: “In this time I was able to share ideas, thoughts ... etc. And also I was able to receive the other’s ideas and beliefs that helped me greatly in understanding others as well as understanding how they look to us” (HU14\_OQ). Words arising frequently in student diaries, reflective papers and answers to open questions were *accepting*, *respecting*, *understanding*, and *appreciating* different opinions and perspectives. For example, Martina wrote:

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. (UP12\_OQ)

Generally students felt the sessions were safe places where they were free to express their views, even when they knew others would not agree. This feeling of trust and respect, some reported, promoted active engagement in dialogue:

Though each one of us in the group has his/her point of view and opinion, we were strongly able to respect each other. That mutual respect encouraged me to be an effective participant in Soliya. (HU21\_RP)

### *Third Space as a Site of Struggle*

Whilst SCP seeks to offer participants the opportunity to genuinely examine and analyze pre-existing opinions and beliefs in a space in which transformation and reconsideration of existing views is possible, the aim is not for participants to persuade their peers that they are right and that their peers are wrong, but to explore their own and their peers' viewpoints and the underlying needs and fears which might have led to these positions. This is certainly no easy task. In the diaries and reflective papers of several students there appeared to be an interior struggle between the desire to recognise and accept cultural difference, and the desire to convince others to agree with them. Ameerah, for example, wrote:

the idea of knowing more about the students' cultures and thought and making them know about my culture is one of the most important things that I, as an Arab person and a Muslim, take the benefit of it. Knowing more about the Western values and beliefs makes me have a better understanding of their culture. Also, when they know my values and beliefs, they change their negative and untrue ideas about the Arab-Islamic countries. (HU5\_RP)

Echoing our earlier observation about groups forming images about each other, Ameerah was participating in the SCP under the assumption that her Western peers had "negative and untrue ideas" about her culture. She also, therefore, felt empowered by the fact that she had gained "the skills that I used to convince the others to agree with my opinion" (HU5\_OQ).

This supposed dichotomy between the West and the A/M world led to moments of heightened tension. Several of the students both in Hebron and Padova referred to these in their reflections, using strong language and resorting to metaphors of war, for instance (bold added by authors):

The discussion became very hot and each group was **attacking the other...words were falling like bombs** and we were just like **fighting!** Whose fault was that? Whose politics was wrong? Whose war was right? (UP13\_RD)

[...] in one of the sessions something happened, American student asked me what I look [for] in a man, [and] I respond[ed] immediately without thinking that he should be religious man[;] I had no idea that **I triggered a bomb!!** [T]hey were so surprised [by] my answer [and] their response can be explained [by] their wrong idea about Islam. They see Muslim m[e]n as heartless, cold and controlling human being[s] ... so why would any woman want to marry a religious man?? And that caused a big debate. (HU4\_RP)

It is important, however, to see these comments in the larger context and to better understand whether or not they were interpreted as negative moments. The Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference (2001) states that at the high-intermediate B2 level, learners "[c]an sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker." Apart from the fact that, in the case of SCP, learners are not engaging solely with native speakers, the underlying assumption here is that a proficient speaker should avoid conflict. Similarly, in their work on sociocultural strategies for dialogue between cultures, Savignon and Sysoyey (2002) promote: "[u]sing diplomacy for the purpose of maintaining a dialogue of cultures in the spirit of peace and mutual understanding; redirecting a discussion to a more neutral topic; dissimulat[ing] personal views to avoid potential conflict" (p. 513). Yet the data in our study seemed to indicate that these occasions of conflict were actually the most motivating for students involved in the SCP. Indeed, some

expressed frustration that these moments often occurred towards the end of the sessions:

In my opinion, every session has its marvellous impact, but the hottest and most exciting session was the session through which we discussed the double stand[ards] of the United Nations. It was really hot and provoking to the point that all the group members wish not to leave at the end of the session. (HU6\_OQ)

Moments of tension also tended to encourage students to explore reasons for conflict, or to find support for their arguments. They proved to be rich moments for learning; participants learnt from others' views: "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... and that what made this session very constructive and pretty interesting!" (UP13 RD wk4). They also discovered that conflict can be approached in different ways, as this student from Hebron reflected, drawing parallels between her experience of conflict in SCP compared to her local everyday context:

Based on my experience, I know [...] how to manage conflict in a way that maintains our integrity. We know much more about how to fight with and destroy one another – this we have perfected. Learning how to relate to one another in a way that brings out the best in us rather than the worst. (HU22\_RP)

Underlying the SCP curriculum is the belief that if managed well, conflict and anger can provide real learning opportunities and can lead to genuine transformation in the group and the group dynamic. Thus, facilitators are not encouraged to avoid conflict, but rather are trained to work with it so that it helps the group grow. SCP facilitators learn techniques which can be used to "turn the 'heat' in the conversation up or down", which may prove more or less successful depending on groups. Clearly there are risks that tension can get too high and become destructive, but conversely groups which constantly avoid conflict may have bland, superficial conversations. Indeed, data from a parallel study by Guarda, Guth & Helm (2011) of the Italian EFL students seems to prove the point that where groups remained on a comfortable, non-conflictual level, less transformation took place.

### ***Third Space as a Fluid, Constantly Evolving Space***

All of the students participated in SCP initially as EFL learners, because it was their English teachers who enrolled them and gave them academic recognition for their participation. Students saw it as an opportunity to improve their language competence, to engage in authentic dialogue and to make contact with people in other parts of the world. In many of their reflections about the experience, however, it is clear that it provided them with much more than an exercise in speaking English.

SCP was seen as a 'journey' for many of the UP students, as indicated by the metaphoric representation in several of their reflective papers. For example, one student used the flight metaphor to organize her final reflective paper, starting it with a sort of itinerary:

New Generations Flight

Time: Monday, 12 p.m. 2010

Operator: Soliya's main page

On board: Seven students, two facilitators

Equipment: Webcam, microphone

## Destination: Our fears (UP13\_RP)

Other students referred to the participants in their groups as “fellow travellers” (UP9\_RP) or companions on “a great trip” or “an adventure” coordinated by Soliya (UP11\_RP). This journey was not an easy one but, as we have seen, involved struggle. As Maria reported: “The first stations of the Soliya railway line are difficult to achieve. I tried to surmount a bumpy road with several linguistic, emotional and knowledge’s gaps” (UP14\_RP). As this account demonstrates, progressing through SCP required honesty, understanding, and empathy, led to a questioning of one’s own values and assumptions, and allowed participants to emerge with a sense of the complexity of intercultural relations. Carla, too, described the process she went through in her reflective paper:

Unfortunately, understanding other cultures is far more complicated than knowing them: knowledge is only the first step of a long and difficult way that requires a lot courage and empathy. First of all you have to listen to other people, catching all their words without any omission. That’s not easy, because you’ll often find these words absurd, improbable or even stupid, but you have to stop your judgement and to avoid any interpretations. When I first read my Jordan friend Sumaya’s reflections about religion, I was astonished and I tried to interpret them according to my way of thinking. That was a mistake, because my way of thinking was influenced by my culture and made me judge her opinion without understanding it. (UP1\_RP)

She concluded by acknowledging the complexity of the process.

I don’t know if I succeed in completing “the mutual understanding process”, but I’m sure I’ve understood its complexity and I will never take it for granted anymore. (UP1\_RP)

A fundamental step for many students on this journey was gaining an awareness of the origins of their own beliefs and an understanding of others’ practices and opinions. As one student from Hebron reported:

when we talked about the topics all of us talked their opinions so we knew what the differences and similarities in opinions between us. I think I see things differently because of my religion. It was a lot of things like drink alcohol, travel outside alone, and the relationship between man and women before married. (HU9\_RP)

Several Hebron students considered SCP to be an “eye-opening experience” (HU20\_RP) which allowed them to challenge not only some Westerners’ stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, but also their own misrepresentations of Westerners: “It opened my eyes and changed many of the opinions I had about other cultures” (HU02\_OQ).

The greatest change in the students from Hebron was their increased self-confidence in expressing their ideas and finding their voices:

Overall this experience affected me in a major way. I now feel closer to people around the world. Now I know that if someone asks me a question, whether it is about Palestine/Islam/Arabs or the West, I can answer it even better after joining Soliya. I used to hesitate a little bit, because I felt that I did not know enough, but not anymore! (HU2\_RP)

Perhaps the most revealing comment about the change in the students was Anwar’s, who wrote: “To conclude, I am so happy because I became one of Soliya participants. It contributed to make me understand others’ cultures and views. I believe that we were and are one family though our differences” (HU21\_RP). It characterised the transformation the students underwent through participating in this situated activity: they acquired new, flexible identities and roles within this third space and became fully-

fledged members of an international dialogue group, not just EFL learners.

## CONCLUSIONS

With reference to internet forums dedicated to language learners, Hanna and de Nooy (2009) argue that “the self-positioning as learner limits discussion primarily to oneself, one’s immediate environment and one’s learning deficiencies” (p. 140). Since SCP was not a telecollaboration project designed for language learners, it did not allow students to position themselves as such, but rather they were situated as members of either the Western world or the A/M world, engaged in discussion about the relationship between the two and the causes of conflict. This apparent polarization of two deliberately vague cultural groupings would seem to cast the learners into the role of “defensive representatives of their culture” (de Nooy, 2006), a common role in intercultural telecollaboration projects which, Hanna and de Nooy (2009) argue, increases the probability of intercultural conflict occurring. Yet our findings support Schneider and von der Emde’s (2006) conclusion that conflict can be transformed into an opportunity for learning rather than being considered as “failed” (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006) or “missed” (Ware, 2005) communication. However, certain preconditions are necessary for productive dialogue to occur, including an awareness of the potential hegemonies at play in a telecollaboration project and the addressing of power issues.

Based on our findings, there are certain affordances which, institutional constraints permitting, we believe could be introduced into telecollaboration projects that seek to adopt a more dialogic approach:

- a curriculum which broaches sensitive topics and takes learners out of their comfort zones to develop intercultural awareness through dialogue followed by reflection and retrospection;
- dialogue groups with a balanced distribution of participants from different backgrounds;
- trained facilitators to create a safe environment of trust where controversial topics can be discussed and conflict can lead to learning opportunities;
- not positioning students solely as language learners, but highlighting other aspects of their multiple identities; and
- use of multimodal environments that support different forms of synchronous communication, particularly text chat, when technical problems inhibit effective video or oral communication.

Online education need not reproduce cultural, technological and educational hegemonies, as we hope this study has shown. A dialogic approach which directly addresses cross-cultural differences and power dynamics by putting diverse learners together to explore misconceptions and the causes of conflict is one way of addressing sensitive issues. Dialogue is to be understood as a form of communication which occurs in safe environments where opinions can be expressed openly, where differences are respected, and where participants truly listen to one another in a manner that increases understanding and empathy. A dialogic approach does not seek to minimise difference and emphasise universal beliefs, nor does it seek to persuade or convert the other, though it can transform personal self-awareness. This view of dialogue is inherent in the Western concept of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) and intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008) as well as Islamic dialogical principles (Ashki, 2006). Telecollaboration projects such as the one described in this paper can offer students and educators alike the opportunity to overcome the hegemonies that exist on the macro-level in our societies and allow people to get to know and understand each other as “human beings” and “real people”, as the students reported in the dataset.

## LIMITATIONS

Linguistic hegemony can be seen to be at play within this study itself, for the data was collected in English, not the students’ native languages; hence, we acknowledge that some of the students’ thoughts



will not have been expressed in their full complexity. However, we feel that this has allowed the students' identities as EFL speakers and SCP participants to emerge, as they speak through their own voices, rather than being mediated through translation. Furthermore, in this study we did not analyse the synchronous interactions of the SCP dialogue groups, since each EFL learner in this study belonged to a different group and with our limited resources it would have been overwhelming, given the multimodal nature of the communication and the hours of dialogue for each group. Further features of SCP which have an impact on the learners, such as the SCP task design, video project and readings, were not considered in this study. Plans are underway for a future ethnographic study focusing on a more limited number of students, including data collection in both learners' native languages and English, and an analysis of selected interactions of their SCP dialogue groups.

## APPENDIX. Salient features of the Hebron and Padova contexts

	Hebron University	University of Padova	
MACRO LEVEL	<b>Geography</b>	Middle East Palestine, Hebron	Europe Italy, Padova
	<b>Geopolitics</b>	Palestine – Member of the Arab League and “non-member entity” of the United Nations	Europe - global player in 21 <sup>st</sup> century Italy – Member of United Nations, G20 and G8
	<b>Int. penetration</b> <b>Ranking x region</b> <b>FB penetration</b>	14.2% 12 out of 14 3.2%	51.7% 22 out of 27 29.1%
	<b>Language and Educational Policy</b>	<a href="#">Palestinian Curriculum Development Center (PCDC)</a> (Supervised by the Palestinian Minister of Education and Higher Education)	<a href="#">Common European Framework of Reference for Languages</a> (Council of Europe, 2001) <a href="#">The Bologna Process</a>
	<b>Role of English in Society</b>	Under British Mandate after WWI until 1948; under Israeli Occupation since 1967. English is seen as means for international communication as Palestine opens up to world. Attitude is positive, English is not seen as threatening because used for purposes which are justified.	Fluency in English seen to open doors to travel, employment, knowledge, and internationalisation of education. Investment in language education however is low both in terms of teacher training at schools and employment of foreign language teachers at universities.
		English compulsory FL from primary education to university. Often a requirement for employment. Most communication is NNS-NNS. Cultural references are British (and more recently also American and ‘other’ Englishes).	
MESO LEVEL	<b>University</b>	<a href="#">Hebron University</a> Independent, public and non-profit institution of higher education founded in 1971, 9 Faculties. 6459 students. (72% f., 28% m.) Teaching is lecture-based combined with discussion and presentations and research-based methods. EFL instructors all Palestinian.	<a href="#">University of Padova</a> Large state university founded in 1222, 13 faculties and over 60,000 students (56% f., 44% m.) Teaching method is predominantly lecture-based with large student groups. EFL instructors are native speakers and Italian.
		At least one English language exam compulsory for ALL students at both universities. ICT quite limited in university but CALL is used for English Language Teaching in both contexts.	
	<b>Internet use and access</b>	Internet access now quite easy on campus (though connection is weak), more difficult outside particularly in some areas and villages. Students also access from Internet cafés, but this is problematic for female students.  Most students have email accounts, are members of social networks, use Internet for some academic activities. Firewalls limit access to some sites.	Computer labs in every department but student access limited. Access quite high at home but limited in residence halls and apartments.
MICRO LEVEL	<b>Integration of Connect Program in the local contexts</b>	SCP is part of a course for students majoring in English. Sometimes it is part of a course such as Integrated Language Skills, or another elective course “Culture in the English Language classroom” depending on the course that is offered in a particular semester. For other students, it is also an alternative to a seminar paper in the fourth year. Participation is optional and the students are given 20% of the total course grade.	SCP is offered as alternative to overcrowded English lessons (70-80 students per class) for students doing second-cycle degrees at faculty of Political Science. SCP is the sole focus for these students who have seminars every 2-3 weeks for debriefing, discussion and language awareness. Students receive 6 ECTS for participation Very low uptake (max 8 out of c.100 students per semester).
	<b>Rationale</b>	To experience meaningful authentic communication by listening to real speakers, talking to a real audience, and having a real purpose. To improve confidence in speaking and listening skills.  To bridge cultures and to find out more about W-M relationship.	

## NOTES

1. There is still controversy regarding the linguistic diversity of *contents on* the internet as opposed to the linguistic diversity of *users of* the internet. We have looked at results from both of these types of studies and concluded that although English remains dominant as it is the *de facto* language at the base of the programming of the world wide web and of much international communication, the presence of webpages in other languages or users employing their native/local languages on the internet has increased significantly in recent years.
  2. From 1948 until 1967 the West Bank (including Jerusalem) was under Jordanian rule.
  3. All student names have been changed to maintain anonymity, and some minor errors in their texts have been corrected by the authors in order to make the meaning clear; this is indicated in square brackets.
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable suggestions on improving the manuscript, the LLT editorial staff, and in particular Marie-Noëlle Lamy and Mark Pegrum, the editors of this special issue, for their advice and support throughout the writing of this paper. They would also like to thank all of the Soliya team for their constant support, sharing and enthusiasm, in particular Salma Elbeblawi, the Connect Program director. Finally, gratitude is also expressed to our English language students at Hebron University and the University of Padova.

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