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HERITAGE LANGUAGE LONG-DISTANCE ACQUISITION  
IN REMOTE AREAS—IMPLEMENTING TELECOLLABORATION  
IN SOCIAL MEDIA TO INCREASE EXPOSURE  
TO POLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

As digital technologies permeate all areas of life, it is no wonder that computers and the Internet applications should have a significant effect on the shape of language acquisition. Over the recent years, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have noticed a considerable growth of teaching initiatives organized and conducted both globally online and locally in a flipped, blended and distance mode. All major improvements in computer technology and network development, such as personal computer, multimedia, World Wide Web, Web 2.0, social networking, Web-based conferencing, virtual reality and many others were adopted very quickly by teachers to create new instructional environments.

Computer-Mediated Communication tools of both Web 1.0 era (email, text-based chat), as well as Web 2.0/3.0 facilitate human-human as well as student-student interaction (Wu et al.) and open the floor for diverse exchanges between people who would otherwise find it difficult to get in real contact (Dede et al.), mostly due to geographical isolation (McDonald).

Both early CMC tools and social media have been found to be particularly beneficial for telecollaboration, in which whole classes, groups, pairs or individual learners may engage in focused interactions in one or multiple languages (Dooley

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and Sadler; Meskill). Since some communities may be isolated, geographically dispersed or economically disadvantaged, online provision of access to their heritage language through social-media-based telecollaboration seems more than appropriate. Hence, the purpose of the present study is to highlight such possibilities within the Promotion of Polish Language and Culture project delivered to Polish Brazilians in the region of Ijuí.

## 1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### 1.1. WEB 2.0 COMMUNITY BUILDING TOOLS — FROM BLOGS TO SOCIAL MEDIA

The earliest forms of Web 2.0 environments for interactions between language users in remote locations were blogs, wikis and online word processors. All three shared the features of two-way communication, with blogs more controlled due to owners moderating comments, while wikis and word processors were more open, democratic and loosely controlled. Blogs used to be viewed as convenient discussion spaces for a class (Campbell; Carney; Sung and Lin). Being relatively low-tech, with little hardware and software demands, the blogosphere may still be a viable option for telecollaborative projects in technology-limited contexts.

On the other hand, wikis and online word processors were Web 2.0 collaborative environments, which assumed equal rights of all participants in knowledge co-construal (Kessler et al.). Lack of predetermined structures in wikis made wikis a highly useful tool for the collaborative creation of knowledge. Sample projects involved, for instance, collaborative glossary/dictionary making (Elia).

Wikis and online word processors allow many-to-many communication, enable collaborative writing, encourage students to plan and engage in collaborative tasks, contribute to their sense of ownership and autonomy (Kessler). Kessler et al. proved that Google Docs online word processor fostered collective scaffolding, communication and collaboration resulting in lengthy back-and-forth and simultaneous exchanges. As they helped each other in edits and idea development, the participants demonstrated a willingness and ability to work together in the writing process.

Given the great popularity of social network sites, it is not surprising to see the wide use of such portals for people's activities in all areas of life, including second/foreign language acquisition. Per Blattner and Lomicka, social network sites redefine learning and teaching; offer new opportunities for connectivity

with classmates, peer trainees and instructors on a more personal and motivating level; create a more positive learning environment through a closer and more intimate connection; increase learners' autonomy and involvement in knowledge development (Leis). However, although SNSs such as Facebook are an integral part of the Net Generation students' life, students do not necessarily know how to take advantage of such tools and need guidance in selecting which strategies to adopt in order to efficiently take advantage of this dynamic environment (Blattner and Lomicka). A particularly important matter here is following social media ethics (Blyth), where a range of security and privacy options, cookies and breadcrumbs should be understood and controlled for safe and conscious online work.

While Facebook might be the most popular choice for building online communities in one culture, in other parts of the world the preferences for social networks might differ. The choice of platforms for telecollaborative exchanges can be culturally conditioned, based on social preferences and perceptions of use as well as on access possibilities. For instance, Carpenter and Krutka reported upon a very wide (755 educators) use of Twitter for multicultural professional development, which proved to be a viable alternative to other means of communication due to its 24/7 availability. On the other hand, Kelley employed Myspace rather than Facebook when educating Chinese learners of English, since the former was popular with American youth and thus a more authentic intercultural exchange could be created, while the latter was inaccessible without virtual private network access. Differing perceptions of particular social network sites may obstruct intercultural collaborative projects—in a Polish-German student-student telecollaboration, the default choice of Polish participants, Facebook, was rejected and regarded as unsafe and unprofessional by German peers. They were more accustomed to the use of WhatsApp, which, on the other hand, proved too basic and limiting for Polish users.

However, according to Bustamante and Moeller, a Web 2.0 online learning programme should not draw its impact only from the use of tools, but rather from pedagogical procedures, activities and tasks that are employed to build required competencies and attitudes. Hence, Web 2.0 language acquisition should be characterized by creativity, information sharing and collaboration, alongside improvement of students' proficiency in their second language.

## 1.2. TELECOLLABORATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Since language learners in many countries are deprived of the opportunity to get in real touch with the speakers of the target language, telecollaborative

projects are a useful chance to recreate a real language exposure experience in a virtual way (Hilliker). Telecollaboration is generally understood as an “internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence through structured tasks” (Guth and Helm, “Telecollaboration” 14). As Godwin-Jones reports, the two most widely used models for telecollaboration have been the e-tandem and the blended intercultural model. In the former, speakers of two different languages are paired to engage in conversation (synchronously or asynchronously) with the time split evenly between the languages used. In the latter, more preparation and collaboration between classes and instructors is involved, and participants respond to culturally-oriented questionnaires, engage in discussion forums, and discuss experiences both in class and online. Typically, the focus in such intercultural exchanges is more on the development of cultural understanding rather than on the acquisition of language or subject-matter content (O’Dowd, “Emerging trends”).

Telecollaboration has been evolving since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the first major studies into telecollaboration at the university level (Belz) were published. The evolution has been noticeable in the realm of technologies—as more sophisticated tools became available, the exchange projects moved away from text-based chat and email, through blogs and wikis, to Learning Management Systems (Moodle), social media (Facebook, WhatsApp) or synchronous conferencing tools (Google Meet, Zoom, Skype). The development of communication tools has made it possible to implement real-time exchanges, however, time zone differences, academic year discrepancies and likelihood of technical issues lead to a preference for asynchronous tools to be used in telecollaboration today (Avgousti; Çiftçi and Savaş; Godwin-Jones).

The second area in which much change has been noticed is task design—INTENT, EVALUATE, EVOLVE or VALIANT+ projects provided teachers with ready-made, well-documented and well-tested inventories of tasks and task sequences which are worth implementing or adapting to fit particular partners’ needs. Most notable examples are culture autobiographies, ethnographic interviews online or photo sharing (O’Dowd, “Learning”).

If a telecollaborative project is to supplement regular face-to-face instruction, it becomes a challenge to integrate online activities with the regular curriculum and to develop assessment tools for intercultural and computer-mediated learning so that there are no mismatches between teaching and assessment (Lamy). Here careful design involves the specification of content areas, setting realistic

objectives, choosing forms of online work that are doable in a particular context with a given group of students, within the timeline that is likely to reinforce the quality of f2f instruction rather than be some kind of burden.

The learning design and the activities applied in the telecollaborative project need to be selected in such a way that the intercultural differences arising between partners are either minimized or consciously exploited during the exchange. Careful management of 'sensitive' issues in the pre-project phase, as well as monitoring them while the project is running, should release the psycholinguistic pressures arising due to synchronicity and diversity.

It is inevitable that the projects involving two or more instructional contexts will bring about technological, educational and cultural disparities. As Helm, Guth and Farrah show, telecollaborative projects aim at creating a 'third space' (Bhabha), a fluid, dialogic space that is constantly restructured and re-constructed by participants through dialogue and negotiation of identities, through self-expression and mindful listening. The third space, according to Helm et al., is a place where differences are not hidden or minimized but acknowledged and valued, where attribution of power is not fixed but is changing as the context is evolving in response to the positioning of participants, both as individual and collective space. The third space where telecollaboration is taking place may exhibit the cultural, educational and technological hegemonies. However, instructors should strive to overcome the hegemonies existing on the macro-level in societies and allow participants understand each other as 'human beings' (Helm et al.).

While previous studies (e.g. Grau and Turula) aimed at achieving a perfect match of project partners, where the participants on both sides differed only in the country of origin, Hilliker intended to set up a competence gap, teaming up EFL student teachers from a U.S. university with EFL students at a university in Mexico. Connecting teacher candidates with students from a different country supported teacher education, boosted teacher trainees' self-confidence, enabled making connections between cultures as well as fostered recognition and neutralization of stereotypes.

Challenges and problems involved in telecollaborative projects were also reported by some authors. As Yang claims, differences in timezones between the countries, frequency of communications, the amount of time it took participants to respond, together with intercultural differences in terms of communication styles all affect the perception of the usefulness of the project and their overall participation in it. In her plenary lecture to the Telecollaboration in Foreign Language University Education conference (February 2014, Leon), Marie-Noelle Lamy pointed to the following challenges and tensions in telecollaboration:

- negative grammatical pragmatic transfer;
- sociopragmatic differences;
- age differences;
- differences in local learning values;
- institutional and professional misalignments;
- practical constraints;
- psycholinguistic pressures due to synchronicity;
- mismatches between teaching and assessment;
- teacher workload;
- political incompatibilities;
- tension-creating influences from the wider context of use.

Their negative effects would have to be prevented or at least minimized in order for online intercultural exchanges to constitute a positive learning experience for university students.

## 2. THE STUDY

### 2.1. AIMS OF THE STUDY

The major aim of the study was to examine the applicability of social-media-mediated telecollaborative exchanges in exposing foreign language learners in a remote area to their heritage language and culture. Due to pandemic restrictions real-life exposure to the heritage language is severely limited, hence, interactions with native speakers via social media would provide a useful opportunity for heritage language and culture acquisition. Another purpose of the study was to spot strong and weak points of online language tutoring via social media. Finally, it was interesting to see how native speaker Polish students would find themselves in the role of experts providing language tutoring.

### 2.2. THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study joined native Polish students studying at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University with Brazilian Poles from the Ijuí region grouped around the partner university UNIJUI. Brazil is a country with a multitude of ethnicities entering into complicated relations. Due to the current globalization processes, Brazilian Poles are becoming more and more aware of the need to maintain and revive their heritage language and culture. This is also because reviving ethnic identity

can be an important integrating factor (Budakowska 33), which was the reason why it was essential to provide a motivating offer to both young and old representatives of the Polish ethnic community.

The community targeted in the study were descendants of Polish settlers in Rio Grande do Sul state, which was colonized by Polish immigrants much later than Parana (Stawiński). First Polish settlers (from Prussia) came to the state in 1876–1884. The process of cultural and linguistic assimilation was proceeding over the years, as a result, the Polish community is very much integrated into the society, barely using the Polish language. This was mainly due to geographical location, large distance to other Polish communities and difficult access to Polish diplomatic posts. Still, according to Miodunka, Rio Grande do Sul is one of the three states in Brazil (apart from Parana and Santa Catarina) where the Polish community managed to preserve the language, and the second largest (after Parana) in terms of number of ethnic community members (Malinowski).

Despite difficulties in contacts between descendants of Polish settlers and native Poles as well as due to unfavourable political climate for ethnicity preservation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Polish community did manage to preserve some remnants of the Polish culture and language, inspire the younger generation to establish links with the country of their forefathers, increase their awareness of its cultural heritage and build a sense of identity and uniqueness. This was possible thanks to the activities of the Karol Wojtyła Polish Cultural Center led by Marlie Magier Siekierski and the support of UNIJUI university, engaged in organizing ethnic cultural events such as Day of Languages, National Festival of Multiculturality, parades, marches and conducting research into the history of ethnic communities in the region.

Close cooperation between the two universities in the areas of research, teaching and student mobility and cultural activity resulted in joint preparation of the promotional grant “Polish language across borders”, which was qualified for funding by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (project number PJP/PJP/2020/1/00002/U). The project aimed at supporting the Polish ethnic minority in the Ijuí region in preserving their national identity, raising the level of heritage language proficiency, exposing Brazilian Poles to the elements of the heritage culture.

Originally aimed as student-student telecollaborative exchange, the project turned out to bring together young native Polish students and middle-aged and senior Brazilians, who proved to be much more motivated and interested in their heritage language and culture preservation than the younger generation.

The majority of interactions were conducted between Polish students (groups mixing students of Polish studies and Portuguese/applied linguistics studies) and Brazilians of Polish origin, all run under the supervision of the university instructors who were responsible for overseeing the project's activities.

### 2.3. DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

Run in the pandemic situation from December 2020 to November 2021, the project comprised a number of activities mediated via social media and other communication tools in the following areas:

1. "Polish Language Clinic"—online synchronous language tutoring;
2. "Snapshots from Lublin"—a series of films about famous Polish writers and their connections with the Lublin region, all subtitled in Polish and Portuguese and accompanied with teaching resources;
3. "Polish Language across Borders"—a student-run bilingual Facebook page;
4. "Polish Folk Music across Borders"—online meetings devoted to teaching singing Polish folk songs.

These activities exposed its participants to the Polish language and culture and enabled them to follow individual interests within the high, traditional and popular cultures. The project participants were also involved in cross-generational language interaction and integration based on awareness-raising activities of the Polish diaspora in Brazil.

A highlight of the project, as well as its added value, was the involvement of UMCS students of different faculties (applied linguistics, Polish studies, e-editing and editorial techniques, Portuguese studies) as heritage language carriers and linguistic/cultural informants. They contributed their expertise in those areas in which they were most qualified given the profile of studies (Polish studies—grammar problems; Portuguese studies and applied linguistics—interpretation; e-editing and editorial techniques—preparation of e-booklets with Polish heritage materials, songs and music and running the social media profile page).

Online intercultural exchanges between Polish students and Brazilian Poles were a case of confrontations of linguistic and cultural spaces, an opportunity for in-depth reflection over one's own culture, a chance for broadening horizons and realizing the uniqueness of the Polish linguistic and cultural heritage. The implementation of social media and online communication tools helped participants on both sides to expand their digital literacy, find creative solutions to the problems encountered and overcome limitations of technology.



The module selected for analysis in the present paper, “Language Clinic”, involved bi-weekly synchronous meetings between Polish native speaker students and Brazilian Poles. The meetings were devoted to online tutoring, interactions in Polish, asking and answering language- and culture-related questions, finally, explaining doubts about language issues.

The meetings were held on Zoom on weekdays and weekends to encompass as wide range of participants as possible. As assumed in the project, the tutoring sessions would adopt the Communicative Approach as the methodological framework and would be centred around previously prepared “Snapshots from Lublin” film materials. The participants on both sides interacted in Polish and Portuguese in different activities and discussions going beyond the topics raised in the films. The Clinic was a chance for immersion in the Polish language and culture, the development of Polish language proficiency. Portuguese was only an auxiliary language, activated not by the instructor (herself a Polish philology specialist) but a student assistant.

## 2.4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### **2.4.1. Effect of online tutoring sessions on improvement of Polish language proficiency**

Over the course of the project the samples of linguistic performance of Brazilian participants were collected to verify the assumption that participation in online tutoring sessions via social media would result in increase of both linguistic and intercultural competence. In particular, assessment of problems and errors within language subsystems (pronunciation, lexis, inflections) and pragmatics was undertaken at the beginning and at the end of the online tutoring course. The summary of results can be found below:

1. Pronunciation: Brazilian participants’ pronunciation largely improved, even though articulation errors still continued to appear in the texts and homework read aloud during sessions; improvement in appropriate realization of word stress started to be noticed (less prominent in terms of adjectives and more prominent for nouns).

2. Pragmatics: the participants showed better use of formulaic expressions for welcome and farewell, they increased their awareness of inflection by observing the behaviour of Polish names in Brazilian documents, became more eager to turn cameras on and use non-verbal means of expression to assist interaction.

3. Lexis: difficulties with differentiating nouns and adjectives persisted, however, awareness of parts of speech increased which was evidenced by

metalinguistic questions (e.g. about the position of adjectives accompanying nouns—*filologia polska* vs. *małe dziecko*).

4. Grammar: inflection problems continued to appear in learners' output, however, their metalinguistic awareness started to rise (as evidenced, for instance, by a revelation that names in Polish are declined). In one of the groups a doubt about noun-adjective agreement appeared as nouns were recognized properly but wrong gender of adjectives was selected: *Ania gotuje smaczną/smaczny/smaczne śniadanie*. At the same time, the distinction into animate and inanimate masculine nouns continued to cause problems.

On the whole, the online tutoring sessions did not lead to great increase of the participants' language proficiency mainly due to short exposure to input and lack of opportunities for the use of the heritage language outside the online class. However, the sessions showed increase in participants' metalinguistic awareness, with a greater number of questions asked and doubts raised about grammar/lexis by the Brazilian participants. Finally, the learners seemed to grow in confidence as language users since they started to turn on the cameras much more often, stopped using English as a lingua franca and resorted to imperfect Polish.

#### **2.4.2. Online tutoring in social media—organizational and methodological challenges**

Very quickly, the Brazilian participants divided themselves naturally (for family, professional or personal reasons) into two groups (Thursday and Saturday group). This meant that it was impossible to create groups of similar age or language level, and both instructors and student assistants had to cope with mixed-level (between A1 and B1), mixed-age and mixed-needs groups.

The composition of the group determined the use of the language teaching methodology. Rather than apply the Communicative Approach as previously assumed, it was necessary to adopt the Cognitive Approach with its internalization of grammar rules as a basis for independent linguistic production (Seretny). Such rule-oriented approach was well-received by both younger and older participants, who sought the solid grammar basis for their first, often imperfect, communicative efforts. It is important to note that in heritage language acquisition contexts, where opportunities for the real-life use of the target language are very limited, the Communicative Approach with its focus on authentic exchange of thoughts, ideas and discussions needs to be replaced by a more rule-oriented Cognitive Approach. This was evidenced by how much curiosity of participants was triggered by exceptions to rules, inconsistencies, aberrations from established patterns. Since the communicative needs of the

participants were very strong, it was after this grammatical basis was built over the first 6-8 weeks of the tutoring course that first attempts to communicate through building short authentic dialogues expressing opinions, feelings and preferences were noticed.

Another finding concerns the selection of topics for online tutoring classes. Since mixed-ability and mixed-needs groups mostly desired elevation of their linguistic competence, more sophisticated topics related to “high” culture were relegated to Facebook discussions where bilingual posts enabled project participants to choose the language of expression due to their liking. Greater use of internationalisms was conditioned by the fact that they facilitate communication at a very low level of language proficiency (Rabczuk and Kuś). Culture-related issues had to be embedded in “low culture” situations, focused on everyday life behaviours and customs (Piekot and Żurek). Communication during sessions was conducted on two planes—a more formal one, between the teacher and Brazilian participants, and a more informal one, where student assistants interacted with their Brazilian counterparts either in group or individual chat.

Finally, the project showed a need for a redefinition of the role of language assistants (Polish students) in the Language Clinic meetings and greater use of telecollaborative tasks. The initial assumption that Portuguese would be used only occasionally while most interactions would be conducted in Polish had to be very early abandoned when it turned out that English and Portuguese had to be used as mediating languages for heritage language acquisition. Thus, the role of Polish students changed from partners in telecollaboration to co-tutors actively explaining problems and issues related to grammar, lexis and context.

## CONCLUSIONS

The use of social media and online communication tools made it possible to bring the two cultures by the partners on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Simultaneous activity of the instructor and the student assistant enabled verification of the communicativeness of the message by the addressees, created appropriate conditions for clarifying individual doubts without distracting the whole group as well as allowed levelling out proficiency differences within the group. Whenever the student-assistant had any doubts while dealing with interpretation, the main teacher could give an additional rule, explanation or examples. Since language tutoring was interpreted live during the session, the

Brazilian learners could seek clarification orally or in writing in a chat channel, they were encouraged to be more active and creative, finally, made it not necessary to introduce an additional language for explanations. The project showed language shift and translanguaging in its course—initially, the students from Brazil used English as a lingua franca and as a classroom language, however, once they grew more confident, they replaced English with Polish as the target language.

For Polish student assistants, the participation in the project brought about many benefits: increased orthophonic awareness, gaining understanding of how careless articulation and inappropriate intonation of the utterance may lead to communication breakdown. Due to homonymy, many learners made efforts to intuitively seek help through making minimal pairs (e.g. *kasa-kasza*, see Maciołek). Activities with a focus on homophony also made Polish students more aware of the need to articulate consonants and nasal vowels more carefully.

An important part of the Clinic activity was establishing interpersonal bonds, which helped to sustain motivation and ensure engagement in the teaching-learning process. This was fostered by organizing the Clinic and managing its technicalities—students from both countries collaborated on solving technical problems, sought most functional solutions, supported less digitally-literate participants. Constant online presence of the teacher and the assistant encouraged the Brazilian participants to establish contact both through audio and video.

To conclude, virtual meetings in the Clinic turned out to be an important step towards sensitizing both Polish and Brazilian participants to linguistic and cultural peculiarities of Polish. Apart from increased metalinguistic awareness and theoretical knowledge, the Polish participants developed a multitude of skills—they learnt how to do community interpreting, shift roles from conversation partner to interpreter, teacher and moderator, solve technical problems and find creative solutions to facilitate online interactions.

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HERITAGE LANGUAGE LONG-DISTANCE ACQUISITION IN REMOTE AREAS  
—IMPLEMENTING TELECOLLABORATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA TO INCREASE  
EXPOSURE TO POLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Summary

This paper reports on a study conducted during the implementation of the Polish language and culture promotion project, run by Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and financed by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange. In this project, Polish students were involved in telecollaboration with Brazilians from the Ijuí region. The aim of this study was to investigate the possibilities of arranging heritage language acquisition through telecollaboration via social media. Due to the isolation of many communities, telecollaboration can be a useful method facilitating heritage language and culture acquisition across the world. This article used the case study method, in which the “Language Clinic” component of the project was taken under detailed scrutiny.

The project showed language shift and translanguaging as it happened—initially, the students from Brazil used English as a lingua franca and as a classroom language; however, once they grew more confident, they replaced English with Polish as the target language. For Polish student assistants, participation in the project brought about many benefits: increased orthophonic awareness, gaining an understanding of how careless articulation and inappropriate intonation of the utterance may lead to communication breakdown.

**Keywords:** heritage language acquisition; social media; telecollaboration.

NABYWANIE JĘZYKA OJCZYSTEGO NA ODLEGŁOŚĆ W WARUNKACH IZOLACJI  
GEOGRAFICZNEJ – O ZASTOSOWANIU TELEWSPÓŁPRACY PRZEZ MEDIA  
SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWE W NAUCZANIU JĘZYKA I KULTURY POLSKIEJ

Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje badanie przeprowadzone w ramach projektu „Język polski ponad granicami”, realizowanego przez UMCS na zlecenie NAW-y, w którym polscy studenci współpracowali na odległość z Brazylijczykami polskiego pochodzenia. Celem badania była weryfikacja telewspółpracy jako metody nauczania ułatwiającej nabywanie języka i kultury ojczystej w warunkach izolacji geograficznej. Badanie przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem metody studium przypadku, gdzie jeden z komponentów projektu – „Klinika języka polskiego” – dostarczył danych umożliwiających ocenę interakcji oraz zmian w świadomości językowej uczestników.

Badanie pokazało zmiany w korzystaniu z języków obcych w trakcie trwania projektu – na początku brazylijscy uczestnicy używali języka angielskiego jako *lingua franca*, a stopniowa zmiana na język polski wskazuje na zwiększający się poziom umiejętności językowych, wzrastającą motywację i zmniejszający się lęk. W przypadku polskich studentów, badanie ukazało zwiększoną świadomość językową oraz rolę poprawnej artykulacji i intonacji w komunikacji na odległość.

**Słowa kluczowe:** media społecznościowe; telewspółpraca; nabywanie języka ojczystego.