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Digital benevolence: An analysis of non-violent digital intercultural communication

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Abstract

The development of digital technology and the internationalisation of education promote foreign language learning, but also create situations where misunderstandings and miscommunication can occur. This article presents an exploratory study of digital interactions between students as part of a university telecollaboration project. The study was conducted within an international pedagogical partnership involving students in France and in Italy. The exchanges took place via both synchronous tools, such as videoconferencing, and asynchronous platforms, including collaborative writing software. Based on a corpus of 180 oral and written exchanges, the corpus was coded using a grid inspired by a framework of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). The analysis highlights markers of benevolence, areas of tension, and attempts at remediation observed in the exchanges. Participants made efforts to maintain clear and harmonious communication, but some misunderstandings proved difficult to resolve. The study advocates training in non-violent intercultural and digital communication, providing a framework for identifying and analysing relational dynamics in online exchanges. These findings offer useful insights for the design of future multilingual and digital collaboration projects in higher education settings worldwide and can inform the development of pedagogical strategies tailored to intercultural challenges.

Keywords: *Nonviolent Communication; benevolent communication; telecollaboration; digital communication.*

1. Introduction

With the development of digital technologies and the internationalisation of education, online exchanges play a central role in higher education, particularly in telecollaborative projects. These interactions, often mediated by synchronous or asynchronous tools (email, forums, instant messaging, videoconferencing), can pose challenges related to cultural and communication differences. Telecollaboration in particular offers advantages, such as the development of linguistic, intercultural and digital skills, but can also expose participants to situations of misunderstanding or conflict (Guth & Helm, 2010; O'Dowd, 2021).

Although institutions are increasingly emphasising the values of inclusivity and respect, the definition and integration of benevolent communication skills into training programmes, particularly in a digital context, remain under-researched and deserve further exploration in the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).

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2. Background

2.1. Misunderstandings in digital communication

The work of Edward T. Hall (1990a; 1990b) has highlighted the hidden dimensions of communication. The author demonstrated that the perception of space and time varies across cultures and influences interpersonal interactions. This can lead to misunderstandings, particularly in computer-mediated communication contexts, where cues may be altered or absent. In telecollaboration (Guth & Helm, 2010), intercultural differences can result in misunderstandings related to communication styles, turn-taking, or the interpretation of silences. Although these virtual exchanges allow for the development of soft skills (O'Dowd, 2021), they also introduce a certain complexity into interactional dynamics. Furthermore, visual cues, such as emojis and emoticons, can be interpreted differently across cultures, influencing interactional dynamics. Skovholt et al. (2014) point out that emoticons play a role in shaping meaning in online written communication (e.g., expressing humour, softening requests). In written digital communication, they fulfil functions similar to paraverbal and non-verbal communication.

2.2. Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), formalised by Rosenberg (2015), aims to improve relationships between individuals by promoting active listening, authentic expression of feelings and recognition of needs. It is based on a four-step process: Observation, Feeling, Need, Request (OFNR). Rosenberg also distinguishes between discursive postures: the language of the jackal (judgement, accusation, demand) and that of the giraffe (empathy, rephrasing, authenticity). D'Ansembourg (2014) extends this reflection by illustrating formulations derived from NVC: expressions of empathy, recognition and validation of the other's experience, absence of judgement, use of the first person, while avoiding the use of the accusatory ‘you’. In both professional (Koehler, 2014) and educational (Shankland et al., 2018) contexts, NVC helps to improve emotional skills and tension management. This focus on preserving interpersonal quality in communication echoes the work of Brown and Levinson (2016), who describe discursive strategies related to politeness (face-saving acts), used to preserve relational harmony in contexts that are potentially threatening to one's image (Face-Threatening Acts). Furthermore, netiquette guidelines indicate that certain practices are not recommended, such as using capital letters (associated with shouting) or ellipses, such as suspension points (Soler-Costa et al., 2021; Bartl, 2017).

2.3. Research questions

Despite the rise of telecollaboration and its potential for developing language and intercultural skills, online interactions can be a source of misunderstanding. This article presents an exploratory analysis of student interactions in the context of a digital co-writing project. It aims to identify markers of benevolence in digital exchanges and to understand the strategies used to maintain the quality of relationships despite potential misunderstandings. Three questions guide this research:

- What are the indicators of benevolent communication in online exchanges?
- What tensions emerge from these interactions?
- What strategies do participants use to resolve these tensions?

3. Method

3.1. Context

This study is based on the ROCK (Refining Online Writing Competence with WiKi) project carried out between January and May 2025 by Clermont Auvergne University (UCA), France, and Ca' Foscari University of Venice (UCFV), Italy (Blanchard Rodrigues & Hamon, 2025). Third-year students studying for a Bachelor's degree in Language Sciences and Master's students studying International Relations, all of whom were learning French as a

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foreign language, worked together in mixed groups to write articles on topics related to European language policies.

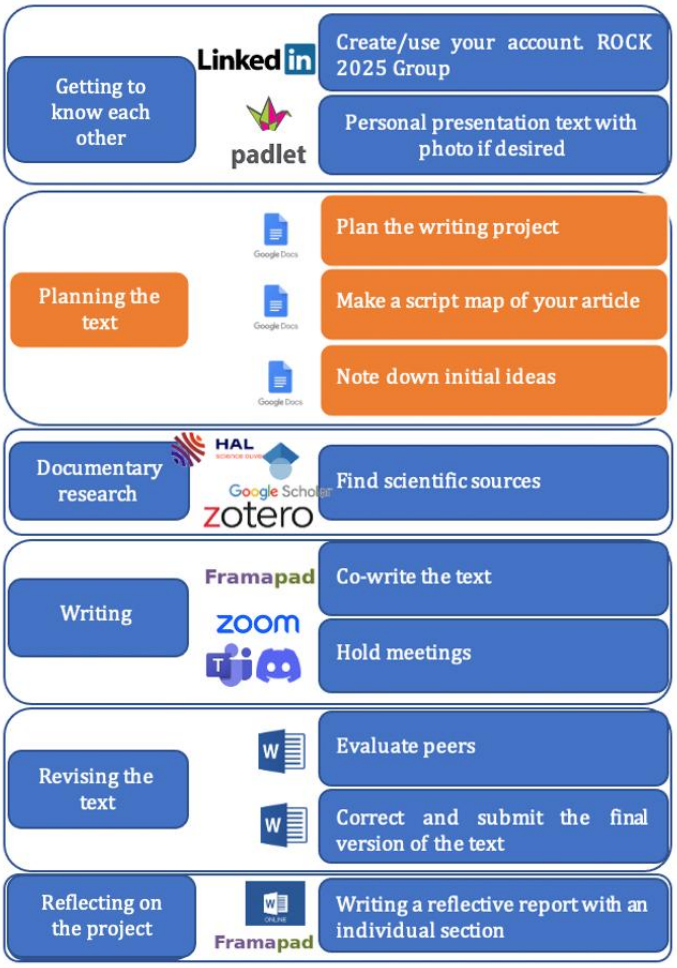


Figure 1. ROCK 2025 pedagogical scenario.

In this telecollaboration system (Kleban et al., 2024; Ensor et al., 2022; O'Dowd, 2021; MacKinnon, 2016; Guth & Helm, 2010), the groups used synchronous communication tools (video conferencing) and synchronous and asynchronous writing platforms (Framapad, Google Docs, Word Online). The study included 41 participants (25 in France and 16 in Italy), organised into seven working groups, each writing a text on one of the proposed topics (Table 1). The distribution of participants among the groups varied (from one to four Italian students per group). This organisation reflects the choice given to students to join the theme that best suited their interests. Their commitment and motivation were prioritised through the encouragement of self-selection rather than the imposition of strict numerical homogeneity.

Table 1. List of topics and participants.

Group	Subject	UCA students	UCFV students
Group 1	Languages of official documents (written)	E0101F E0102F E0103F	E0104I E0105I E0106I E0107I

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Group 2	EU member states' policies on the teaching/learning of second modern languages – evolution	E0201F E0202F E0203F E0204F	E0205I
Group 3	Discourses on multilingualism vs actual practice	E0301F E0302F E0303F	E0304I E0305I E0306I E0307I
Group 4	Linguistic landscape of the EU	E0401F E0402F E0403F E0404F	E0405I E0406I
Group 5	Languages used in debates (spoken interaction)	E0501F E0502F E0503F E0504F	E0501I
Group 6	EU languages: representation in the media (press review)	E0601F E0602F E0603F	E0604I E0605I E0606I
Group 7	EU member states' policies on the teaching/learning of second modern languages – current status	E0701F E0702F E0703F E0704F	E0705I

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The corpus comprises transcriptions of oral interactions (small-group videoconference sessions), collaborative written traces (in shared documents), and peer evaluation comments. A total of 180 interactions were coded, including 116 initiator messages and 64 responses to previous messages (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of interactions by source, initiator status, and followed-up answers.

Source	Messages	Answer 1	Answer 2	Answer 3	Answer 4	TOTAL
Videoconference	31	31	13	5	1	81
Google Doc	28	11	2	1	0	42
Peer evaluation comments	57	0	0	0	0	57
Total	116	42	15	6	1	180

An Excel-based database was constructed to code each verbatim. The coding was based on the analytical grid developed from the theoretical framework described in section 2 (Table 3).

Table 3. Analytical grid of interactional markers: benevolence, misalignment, and remediation.

Category	Sub-category	Definition	Example
Benevolence	Softener	A formulation that softens a request or opinion	"I think that…", "Maybe…", "If that's alright…"

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	Empathic reformulation	A formulation that shows active listening or an attempt to understand	"You mean that…?", "What is it you're not sure about?"
	Encouragement / validation	Explicit support / affirmation of the other person's contribution	"That's a really good idea", "Perfect", "Great"
	Collaborative proposal	An invitation to act together on something	"We could…", "I suggest we…"
	Courtesy / thanks	Clear use of polite or grateful language	"Thanks", "Please", "No worries"
	Personal expression / humility	Use of "I", acknowledgment of limitations, or modest tone	"I'm not sure…", "What I thought was…"
	Constructive feedback	Suggestions for improvement or correction between peers	"We suggest removing the brackets."
Misalignment	Order	Explicit directive without softening or nuance	"Put it here", "Do it", "Send the email"
	Indirect injunction	Request masked as a question or superficially polite but pressing in tone	"Can you do it now?", "You're going to fix that?"
	Absence of softener	Request or critique with no softener	"Why did you do that?", "That's wrong"
	Capitalisation / expressive punctuation	Graphic layout that amplifies pressure or emotional charge	"WHAT DO YOU THINK ???", "BUT WHY!"
	Reproach / implicit judgement	Critique expressed without nuance, softening or reformulation	"You don't understand", "Read it again"
	Implicit suspension / ellipsis	Intentionally incomplete formulation suggesting a withheld or unsaid element, often via "..."	"We'll sort that out later…", "You know… well…"
	Silence or lack of response	Lack of reaction or failure to provide feedback in dialogue	(No reply), "OK" followed by silence
	Interruption / abrupt speaking turn	Break in listening or uncoordinated speaking that prevents the other from expressing themselves	"Wait wait let me finish", "No but there…"
	Irony / self-disparagement	Humorous or discouraging remarks about oneself	"I'm useless", "We'll still be doing this in 5 years…"
	Critical questioning	Questioning used to undermine or judge without reformulation	"Why compare that?", "And what about regional languages?"
Remediation strategy	Reformulation / clarification	Linguistic adjustment aiming to repair or clarify the exchange	"You mean that…?", "I actually meant…"

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	Apology / acknowledgement	Expression of regret or ownership of a mistake	"I'm sorry", "That was my fault", "I don't remember"
	Reparative proposal	A suggestion to revive or improve collaborative dialogue	"I'll take care of it", "We can fix it together"
	Relativisation / calming	Relativising a problem or offering a benevolent perspective	"It's not a big deal", "We'll adjust later"
	Agreement to critique	Acceptance of a remark or adaptation of feedback	"You're right", "I see what you mean"

The 180 messages, whether oral or written, synchronous or asynchronous, were analysed using a qualitative coding grid designed to identify markers of benevolence, misalignment and remediation strategies in digital communication. Each message was examined to identify linguistic characteristics such as softeners, greetings, expressions of empathy, and signs of misunderstanding or conflict. To ensure consistency across modalities, the same grid was applied throughout the analysis. Coding was performed manually and checked for consistency and reliability.

4. Results

The analysis reveals the presence of markers of benevolence in a significant proportion of interactions (100 benevolent messages in total, including 68 initiators, Figures 2 and 3). The most frequent forms of benevolence were collaborative proposals, constructive feedback, encouragement, and personal expression.

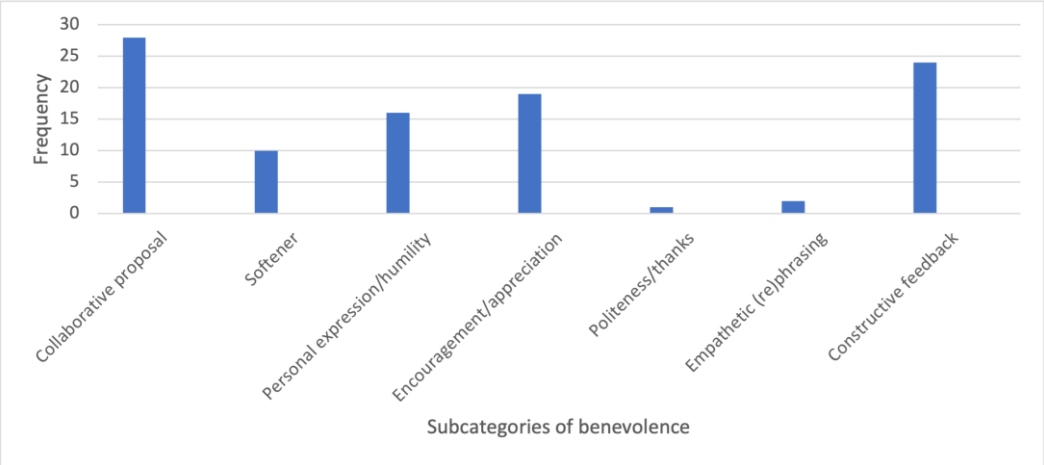


Figure 2. Distribution of subcategories of benevolence.

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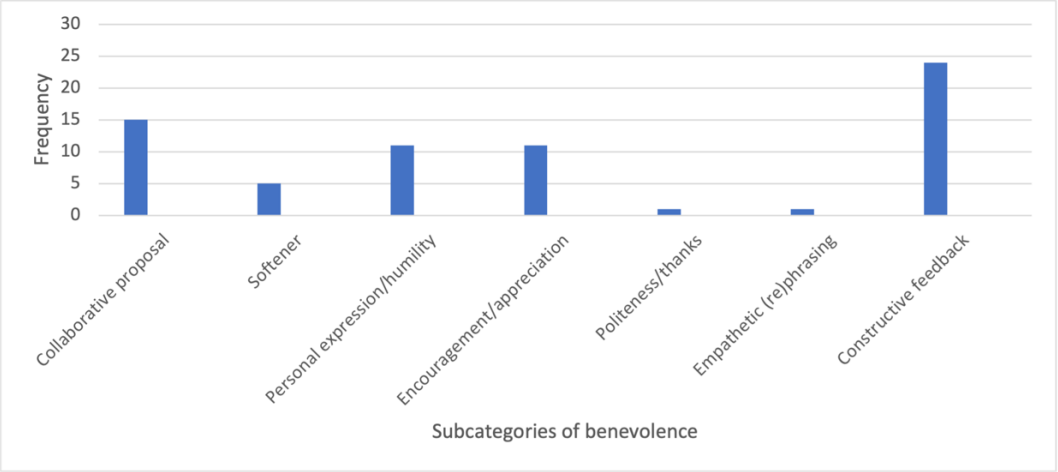


Figure 3. Distribution of subcategories of benevolence in initiating messages.

Three messages, among those that received a response, provoked misaligned feedback:

- *"I am very curious to see what you have done / Je suis très curieux de voir qu'est-ce que vous avez fait*
- *ok (followed by silence)"*

(Group 7, 17 March 2025)

- *it was my fault I'm sorry*
- *…*

(Group 7, 17 March 2025)

- *If I mark something like 'European Union', for example, the European Union recognises it, the 24 official languages, all that./ Si je marque comme truc genre sur European Union par exemple, que l'Union européenne le reconnaît, les 24 langues officielles, toute ça.*
- *Yeah, but that's what I already put/Ouais mais c'est ce que j'ai déjà mis.*

(Group 1, 20 February 2025)

Despite the overall benevolent orientation of the exchanges, occasional tensions were observed. Figures 4 and 5 show that discordant messages were primarily associated with critical questions, reproaches, injunctions and orders.

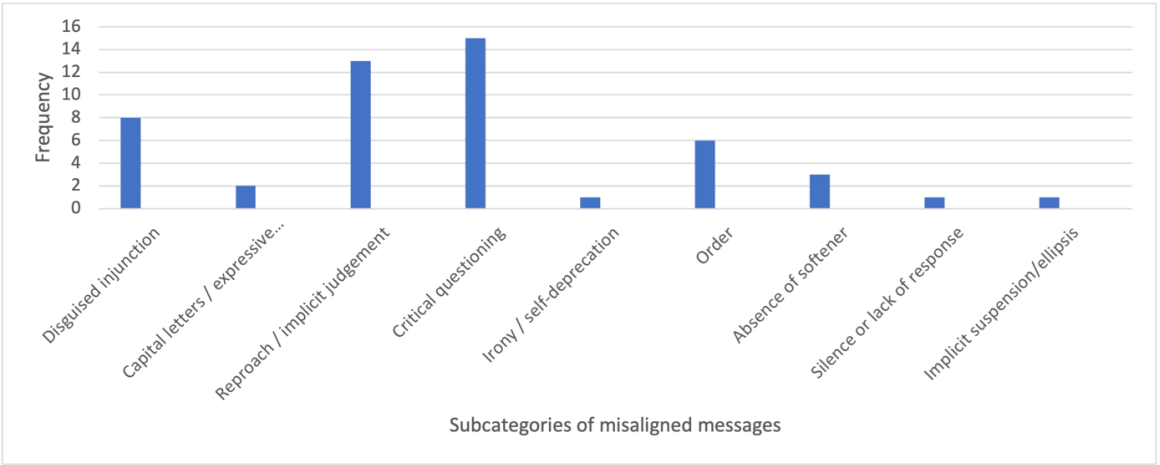


Figure 4. Misaligned interactions.

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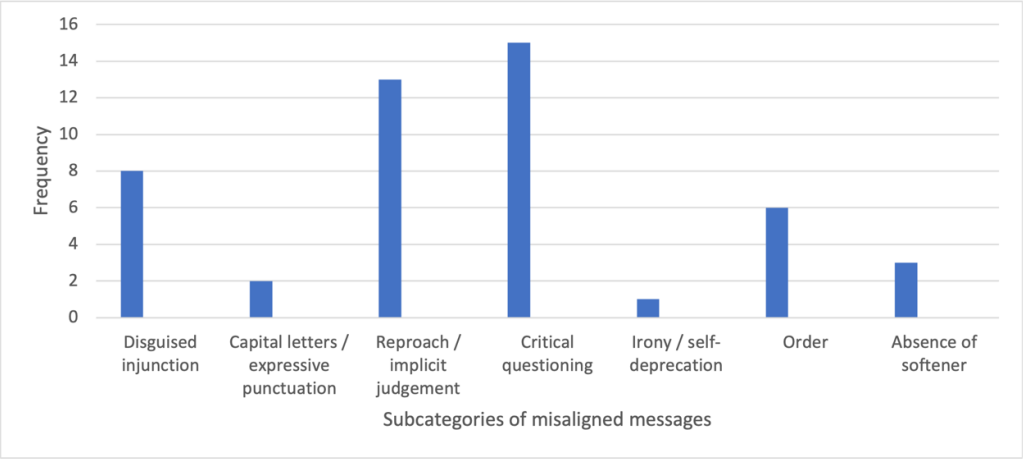


Figure 5. Misaligned interactions in initiative messages.

For ten misaligned messages, participants implemented various remediation strategies. Eight messages resulted in a reparative proposal, such as: "*Yes, I think that's a good start/Oui moi je pense que c'est un bon débu**" or *"Maybe you wrote down a lot of interesting information/Ben, peut-être que t'as noté plein d'informations intéressantes".* One message resulted in a collaborative proposal: *"the notes about the scriptural map are in one of the links on the Teams homepage/les notes concernant la carte scripturale c'est à travers l'un des liens à l'entrée sur Teams".* Another led to an apology: *"I don't know/Je sais pas."*

Three messages following these remediation attempts included implicit judgement, highlighting persistent tension in the interaction. In addition, five misaligned messages received misaligned feedback, but were subsequently followed by remedial messages. Only one exchange continued with interactions that remained misaligned.

5. Discussion, limitations, and perspectives

These findings suggest that while benevolence was prevalent, its interpretation and reception varied across interactions. This is reflected in the fact that some benevolent messages were met with silence or lacked reciprocal softeners (Figures 4 and 5), highlighting the challenge of aligning communicative expectations.

Nevertheless, students also responded with repair strategies (Table 3), demonstrating a proactive effort to preserve their interlocutors' face (Goffman, 1982), and restore relational harmony. Despite the lack of formal training in non-violent communication (NVC), they intuitively adopted strategies to maintain respectful exchanges, even though they lacked the resources to consistently prevent or manage misunderstandings. These observations confirm that NVC skills require intentional development and cannot be improvised.

It is interesting to note that exchanges between participants in France and Italy (group 7) include two cases where friendly messages received inappropriate responses, such as silence or the absence of a softener. Expectations in communication can differ in telecollaborative exchanges, even between partners who are geographically and culturally close, which further illustrates the challenge of aligning expectations in digital communication. However, the limited number of examples observable in the data suggests the need to study these aspects in greater depth in the next edition of the project.

Some limitations to the study should be acknowledged. The corpus, consisting mainly of transcripts and written productions, does not include elements related to intonation, rhythm, or gestures, which limits the ability to understand the interlocutors' intentions in detail. This study will be supplemented with an analysis of paraverbal and non-verbal elements. Furthermore, the students formed groups independently, often among peers who were already close. This relational proximity may have encouraged a certain leniency towards unkind remarks and mitigated tensions. Furthermore, the use of personal communication tools (such as WhatsApp) restricted the access to certain data, particularly informal exchanges between France and Italy. It is nevertheless interesting to note that

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the participants expressed themselves naturally, as if the teachers were not present during the synchronous remote sessions.

These results highlight the relevance of training in NVC. The work of Arieli et al. (2014) emphasises that even a brief intervention can influence the value systems of individuals from different cultures and reinforce their commitment to compassionate communication. Such training could be based on realistic situations, awareness of intercultural contexts and reflection on the specificities of digital communication. With this in mind, training in intercultural and digital non-violent communication skills (IDNVC) is currently being developed as part of the CŒUR[1] project. The initiative includes both an educational component (focused on student training in IDNVC) and a scientific component, with a follow-up study planned to build on the initial work (Grid et al., 2025; Grid, 2025).

This training programme must avoid a paternalistic or moralistic stance (Roelens, 2019). It should allow for a degree of freedom and steer clear of an overly 'technical' approach. Among known strategies for benevolent feedback, the sandwich method, which involves surrounding critique with positive remarks, is widely cited (Roy & Michaud, 2018; Bachelet et al., 2015; Blanchard Rodrigues, 2023a and 2023b). However, when used alone, it may appear predictable or even artificial: 'it's not very tasty' (Bressler & Von Bergen, 2014). The aim, therefore, is to find a balance between guidance and autonomy, ensuring authenticity remains at the heart of the communication process.

6. Conclusion

IDNVC is not only a linguistic skill, but also an ability to foster self-awareness and empathy towards others. This study highlights the possibility to identify key educational levers to support students in acquiring these competencies. By integrating IDNVC into CALL training and virtual exchanges, learners will be better prepared to engage in more mindful and effective interactions, both face-to-face and online, across diverse cultural contexts.

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