Exploring the potential to use Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

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ABSTRACT

Introducing communicative competence to classrooms in Sri Lanka has often been difficult due to the mismatch between the curriculums and tasks used (Canagarajah, 2001). While Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) projects have often promoted communicative competence in classrooms where English is taught as a second or foreign language (Chitanana, 2010), they have failed due to a lack of common conditions between the participating classrooms (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006).

This case study explores the potential to promote communicative competence in primary classrooms in Sri Lanka. It addresses (i) if two sample primary school classrooms in Sri Lanka and Australia have the classroom and socio-institutional conditions required to participate in a collaborative project and (ii) if it can be integrated into the existing primary school curriculum in Sri Lanka.

Data were gathered using questionnaires and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 participants from Sri Lanka and Australia, and online data from the websites of the participants’ institutions for triangulation purposes. Results indicated common

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classroom and socio-institutional conditions between two sample schools and a positive attitude towards the challenging conditions. The International School Award Project facilitated by the British Council (n.d.b) proved to be the most effective means of integrating a telecollaborative project into the current Sri Lankan primary school curriculum. Benefits to the Australian primary school were also revealed.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate in English in countries like Sri Lanka is considered important due to the growing role of English in education, governance, literacy, creativity and popular culture (Kachru & Nelson, 2001). This is evident in the growing number of international schools in Sri Lanka, education through the medium of English being introduced to Sri Lankan schools (Education Guide of Sri Lanka, 2010), a prominent presence in the media in Sri Lanka (ABYZ News Links, 2013) and initiatives by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka to introduce English as a life skill to schools (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka, 2011b). However, introducing communicative English tasks to classrooms has often been difficult due to the mismatch between the tasks been implemented alongside the existing curriculums (Canagarajah, 2001; Karunarathne, 2003).

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) projects have been used to promote communicative competence in English classrooms using a variety of media including email and chat (Chitanana, 2010). In Sri Lanka, the International Education and Resource Network (iEARN Sri Lanka, 2009) and the British Council (n.d.a, n.d.b) have been involved in collaborative projects in the country, but it is not evident if these projects have specifically focused on promoting communicative competence in English within the primary school curriculum.

While there is potential for a CALL project to promote communicative competence in English in primary Sri Lankan classrooms, it first needs to be properly planned (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006). In addition, both Canagarajah (2001) and Karunarathne’s (2003) studies have indicated the importance of integrating the project into the existing curriculum for it to be successful. Hence this case study
aimed to explore whether there is potential to implement a telecollaborative project between two primary schools in Sri Lanka and Australia which will promote communicative competence in primary schools in Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English as a second language in Sri Lankan schools

Despite colonisation in 1796, English was not introduced into schools in Sri Lanka until 1830, when it was felt that the 'natives' should in time 'qualify themselves for holding some of the higher appointments' (Raheem & Ratwatte, 2004, p.93). By 1832, there was a significant number of private (640) and missionary (236) schools using English as the main medium of instruction, although all 97 state schools maintained the mother tongue (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p.91). By 1948, this situation had changed dramatically, following the introduction of free education in both mother tongues, Sinhala and Tamil, to reduce socioeconomic inequality, with enrolment rates soaring, resulting in 93 percent of students in state schools using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p.91; Punchi, 2001). Thus, English became a second language in most schools across the country. In addition, some of the private schools in Sri Lanka have a choice of English medium classes where the Sri Lankan syllabus is taught in English. The Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka therefore appears to be eager to promote communicative English in all government schools. This is apparent in their English syllabus which promotes Activity Based Oral English (ABOE) lessons to promote communicative English in classrooms (NIE Sri Lanka, 2013).

Sri Lankan language policy is for Sinhala and Tamil to be recognised as national languages, with English as the 'link language' (Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1978, ch. iv). Thus, in government and legal dealings, Sinhala and Tamil are mandated, with English translations in some cases. Media is divided along linguistic and ethnic lines, and there is a strong presence of English media, both print and electronic. Most Sri Lankans conduct their daily affairs in one of the national languages; however international contact is made primarily in English. The shift in language policy for schools led to a significant shift
away from the use of English in everyday Sri Lankan society (Punchi, 2001).

**Communicative competence: Challenges for Sri Lankan schools**

Sociolinguist Dell Hymes coined the term ‘communicative competence’ to refer to appropriate language use relevant to its specific context of use (Richards & Rogers, 2001). While Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been the main approach aimed at achieving this, its goal underlies the need for language learning to develop a learner’s cultural sensitivity and ability to mediate between different cultural perspectives in communicative situations (Kern, 2006). In Sri Lanka, using the CLT approach to promote communicative English in classrooms has faced challenges. Two of the most evident studies are by Canagarajah (2001) and Karunaratne (2003).

Karunaratne’s (2003) research was based in 4 prestigious schools in Sri Lanka and Canagarajah’s (2001), in a war affected zone in Sri Lanka. They both resulted in the researchers discovering that using CLT to promote communicative competence was a challenge. These challenges can be identified using Hall’s three conditions for genuine communication to occur. He states that in order to communicate, you need (i) something to communicate about, (ii) someone to communicate with, and (iii) an interest in the outcome of the communication (Hall, 2001, p.230).

In both studies, using communicative material was a challenge. This was mostly because the students were preparing for mandatory exams which were more grammar focused. In Karunaratne’s (2003) study, the textbook was the syllabus and did not have communicative tasks. The teachers had to complete the textbook which did not have communicative tasks and there was no time to include other material during the English lessons (Karunaratne, 2003). In contrast, Canagarajah (2001) was focusing on American Kernel Lessons (AKL) which had interactive activities, but their irrelevance to the examination tasks prevented the students from engaging in them. Therefore, the students attended private tuition classes during class time which focused on grammar. However, it is now apparent that the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka has introduced Activity Based Oral
English (ABOE) lessons that include context relevant material such as lessons which are relevant to ‘The Sinhalese and Tamil New Year’ with the exception of the section ‘enrichment activities’ which include songs and material from other countries (NIE Sri Lanka, 2013).

The main reasons for the difficulty in finding someone to communicate with in English, according to Karunaratne (2003), were that the classes were large and the teachers were not always competent to speak in English. Although Canagarajah (2001) was the researcher/teacher and was highly proficient in his English, the students preferred to be passive rather than active participants during their English lessons as this was the style of learning that they were accustomed to and found it difficult to adjust to a different classroom environment.

Although the samples in both these studies are very specific, because of the mismatch between the methodology being used in the classrooms and the assessment practices with activities that could promote communicative English in the classroom, there was no interest in the outcome of communicating in English in both classrooms. Hence research is required to understand if the methodology, tasks and assessment practices that are used in the more recent programs that have been introduced by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka, 2011a, 2011b) promote communicative competence in English in their classrooms.

**Telecollaboration**

Telecollaboration refers to the use of online communication tools to bring together language learners in different countries for the development of collaborative project work and intercultural learning. This type of network-based language teaching (NBLT) covers a wide range of activities and exploits a variety of online communication tools including email, web based message boards and videoconferencing (O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004). These projects have grown exponentially during the past two decades, and although they were once almost exclusively email-based there is more variety in the tools being used now (Chitanana, 2010). This is evident by the more recent projects that
have used Facebook and Skype as platforms for telecollaborative exchanges (Aoki & Molnar, 2011).

**Telecollaboration in Sri Lanka**

CALL projects in schools have mostly been by the British Council in Sri Lanka which has facilitated *The Global School Partnership Projects* between Sri Lanka and The UK exposing the students to different cultural, political and economic perspectives (British Council, n.d.a). iEARN is another organization that has facilitated projects such as the *Lewin Project*. This project encouraged students to publish their writing and thereby write stories from their cultures (personal correspondence, V. King, December 2011).

When considering access to technology in the primary schools in Sri Lanka, the list of schools in the *Lewin Project* (iEARN, 2005) includes mostly private schools in the country. Also it is a requirement in *The Global School Partnership Projects* facilitated by the British Council in Sri Lanka (British Council, n.d.a) that there needs to be a teacher who is competent in information and communication technology. However it is not evident to what extent schools are required to have computer and internet access to participate in these programs. It has been argued that it is possible for schools with limited computer access to participate in computer assisted language learning projects. That is, schools with limited or no access to software, limited or no access to the internet, and few computers and other technologies can still participate (Egbert and Yang, 2004).

Although more research is required to identify how well equipped the primary schools in Sri Lanka are with these facilities, with the help of the stakeholders involved in implementing such projects in the schools, it is likely that students in both government and private schools would be able to participate in telecollaborative projects. This is likely to provide the students with the opportunity to interact, engage in authentic material with an authentic audience, produce creative material, offer feedback and develop learner autonomy (Egbert & Yang, 2004).
The relationship between computer competence and CALL and its potential for Sri Lankan schools

Hall’s (2001) three conditions for communication to occur can be used to understand the relationship between telecollaboration and communicative competence, and highlight the difficulties that Sri Lankan schools and other academic institutions have faced when attempting to introduce and implement communicative competence.

Firstly, when considering having something to communicate about, telecollaborative projects are often task based and have encouraged communication between students. These tasks have included interpersonal exchanges, information collection and problem solving projects (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006). It is possible that active participation could be encouraged using telecollaborative tasks which are relevant to the Sri Lankan curriculum and context. Karunaratne (2003) in particular concludes that the students were motivated to study when material such as photographs were used in the classrooms. However as the material was not always relevant to the Sri Lankan context, (for example, a teacher was not aware of the synonym for ‘snow’ and found it challenging to directly translate this to Sinhalese), active communication in the classroom was inhibited.

Secondly, when considering the condition that communication would occur if there is someone to talk to, although large classes in countries like Sri Lanka and South Korea have prevented students from actively participating in communicative activities in the classroom using the CLT approach (Karunaratne, 2001; Li, 2001), telecollaborative projects have often promoted active communication between students. Therefore students are able to actively participate in such projects (Chitanana, 2010), and the power relationship between teachers and students is less significant in telecollaborative exchanges as the teachers take on the role of facilitators (Muller-Hartmann, 2000). This would be useful in Sri Lanka where the power relationships between teachers and student can cause the students to be passive listeners (Karunaratne, 2003).

Lastly, an interest in the outcome of the communication is required for communication to occur. Because telecollaborative projects, if
properly planned, can be integrated into the curriculum (O’Dowd & Ritter 2006), they are likely to help students to be interested in the outcome of the communication. This was a problem in the Sri Lankan classrooms because the assessment practices were not compatible with the communicative tasks used in the classroom which prevented students from actively communicating in the classroom (Canagarajah, 2001; Karunaratne, 2003).

It is apparent that CALL projects in Sri Lanka could address the conditions outlined by Hall (2001) for communication to occur. The British Council (n.d.a) in particular has facilitated ICT programs that have initiated communication and integration of tasks into the school curriculum using CALL projects to promote communicative competence in classrooms. However, as an inner circle country and outer circle country would be involved in the telecollaborative exchange, it is not possible to assume that telecollaboration will promote communicative competence unless the factors that are considered important to promote it exist in the participating institutions (Hall & Candlin, 2007). Therefore it needs to be investigated if the conditions required for successful telecollaboration which have been outlined by O’Dowd and Ritter (2006) are present between the two participating classrooms; and also if the project matches the existing methodology in the Sri Lankan classroom before a telecollaborative project can be implemented.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This case study which was designed to collect data during a 4 month period in Sri Lanka and Australia was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do two sample primary classrooms in Sri Lanka and Australia have the common classroom and socio-institutional conditions needed to participate in a telecollaborative project?

2. Does the current implementation and evaluation of the spoken English curriculum in primary classrooms in Sri Lanka make it possible for a telecollaborative project to be used as a spoken activity in the classroom?
Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select three organisations and two schools in order to interview 12 adult participants who were considered to be key stakeholders for this study. This has been summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participating organisation/Individual participants</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school in Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Previous participation in collaborative projects/computer facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school in Australia</td>
<td>An interest in participating in a collaborative project/ high percentage of multicultural students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three facilitating organisations in Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Currently involved in promoting collaborative learning/language and information technology projects in Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary participants from the two primary schools</td>
<td>The Principal and 3 teachers from each school who would be able to provide information regarding their communicative English and information technology curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary participants from the three facilitating organisations</td>
<td>Stakeholders who have been previously or are currently involved in collaborative projects in primary schools in Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School profiles

The school in Sri Lanka is a boys only private school where Sinhalese is the first language, with the exception of 4 classes where the medium of instruction is English. It was chosen for its English medium classes and computer lab, and its previous participation in collaborative projects facilitated by the British Council. The researcher was confident that the school would have a genuine interest in participating in such a project.

The school in Australia is a government co-educational school with a high local media profile for promoting multicultural activities, with 58% of its students being from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Data collection

A questionnaire (see Appendix A) for the principals (translated to Sinhalese for the Sri Lankan participant) of the two schools and individual face to face semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) that were video recorded were used to collect primary data.

TABLE 2
Procedure for data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: December 2011 to January 2012</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>The principal in the Sri Lankan school was sent a questionnaire. All 8 participants from Sri Lanka were interviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: February 2012 to March 2012</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>The principal in the Australian school was sent a questionnaire. All 4 participants from Australia were interviewed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants in Sri Lanka were given the option to speak in Sinhalese. An overview of the procedure for data collection appears in Table 2.

Research ethics

The researcher obtained information from the Human Sciences Research Committee at Macquarie University (Human Research Ethics, 2013) by following the guidelines, filling in all the required forms including those relevant to collecting data overseas and online (websites) data. All questionnaires and interviews were also approved by the committee. The information and consent forms were sent out to each of the participants and they were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. All these forms, questionnaires and interviews to the Sri Lankan participants were translated to Sinhalese and they have the option to speak in Sinhalese during the interviews because the researcher was competent in her Sinhalese.

Data from student participants were not collected during this study due to time constraints. This is because the study was conducted as a requirement for a research degree which needed to be completed within one year.

Procedure for data analysis

Step 1

First, interview profiles were made for each of the 12 participants using the video recordings and the notes taken by the researcher. The results were also compared with the content which details the current communicative English language programs and primary school curriculum in Sri Lanka using the following websites of the British Council Sri Lanka (n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c), the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka (2011a, 2011b) and the National Institute of Education, Sri Lanka (2013). This was in order to triangulate different sets of data and ensure research design validity (Dörnyei, 2007, p.61). It also ensured reliability of the study because member checking was not possible, given the duration of the study.


Step 2

Secondly, *a priori* codes were used to organise the content of these profiles into different themes using O’Dowd and Ritter’s (2006) inventory of classroom and socio-institutional conditions. This facilitated the organisation of different participants’ opinions on a similar condition.

Step 3

Second level coding was applied to the data collected in order to identify whether there were common classroom and socio-institutional conditions between the two participating schools and thereby answer data collection question 1. The data were also coded to identify whether the challenging conditions could be addressed, making it possible for a telecollaborative project to be implemented between the two primary schools, following the findings of O’Dowd and Ritter’s (2006) that failed telecollaborative projects highlights the importance of common classroom conditions: teacher-teacher relationships, task design, learner matching and pre-exchange briefing. They also detail the importance of socio-institutional conditions: technology and access to it, general organisation of the course, and the differences in the prestige values of language and culture between the two participating schools.

Step 4

In order to answer data collection question 2, second level coding was applied to the responses given by the participants in Sri Lanka. In order to identify if the purpose, methodology and evaluation of the existing curriculum (Breen & Candlin, 2001, p.10) used in the sample school and the government schools in Sri Lanka would make it possible for a telecollaborative project to be integrated into the communicative curriculum in Sri Lankan schools.

Step 5

Lastly, the results from both data collection questions and questionnaires were coded using Hall’s three conditions for communication (Hall, 2001, p.30) to address the two main research questions: (1) Do two sample primary classrooms in Sri Lanka and
Australia have the common classroom and socio-institutional conditions needed to participate in a telecollaborative project? (2) Does the current implementation and evaluation of the spoken curriculum in primary classrooms in Sri Lanka make it possible for a telecollaborative project to be used as an activity in the classroom?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The five steps outlined in the research design section of this paper were applied to the data collected during the study. This was in order to qualitatively evaluate if a telecollaborative project between two sample schools in Sri Lanka and Australia has the potential to promote communicative competence in a Sri Lankan primary classrooms and be of interest to the sample Australian primary school.

During the study, it was apparent that the sample school in Sri Lanka did not follow the communicative English curriculum set by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka. Hence, data collected from the stakeholders in the facilitating organisations in Sri Lanka were also used, where appropriate, to consider how effectively a telecollaborative project could be integrated into the Sri Lankan government primary school curriculum.

The key results from this case study are discussed below, using Hall’s (2001) three conditions for communication to occur in order to answer the main research question: Is there potential to implement a telecollaborative project between two primary schools in Sri Lanka and Australia which will promote communicative competence in primary schools in Sri Lanka?

Someone to talk to

In order for there to be active communication, according to Hall (2001), one needs someone to communicate with. A large number of students in a classroom, teachers who are not always competent in their spoken English and at times have been eager for more training have often prevented communicative English from being used in the classrooms in Sri Lanka (Karunaratne, 2003). Other factors that have prevented students from having someone to communicate with during a telecollaborative project have been prestige values and cultural issues
between partner classes. This has especially been evident when some students have more access to the internet than others (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006). This study provides evidence to indicate that a telecollaborative project has the potential to provide all the participant students with someone to communicate with because of the previous experience in collaborative projects facilitated by the British Council in Sri Lanka and the support offered by the facilitating organisations which according to Egbert and Yang (2004) is required in contexts where there is limited access to technology. Also common classroom conditions between the two sample schools in Sri Lanka and Australia and a positive attitude by the stakeholders towards the challenging conditions were identified during the study. Key excerpts from the results of the study have been used to discuss this below.

**Participating students**

In Australia, the average number of students per class in years 3-6 in the sample school is 32 while the average number of students in the primary classes in the Sri Lankan school is the same. The students from the Australian school were from different cultural backgrounds. The students from the school in Sri Lanka were from English and non-English speaking backgrounds. The main classrooms that the stakeholders were interested in using for this project were the English medium classes where the students were mostly from non-English speaking homes but attended this private school to be able to speak in English. The principals in the two schools were open to pairing up students individually or as groups in order to encourage active and equal participation by all the students participating in the project.

The Principal from the Australian sample school also commented:

*This would be a project that could be used in the classrooms, with specialised groups of students such as our gifted and talented students or even as a specialised writing task. (P2: 15/03/12)*

The principal in the Sri Lankan school stated:

*We could use this project in our English medium classrooms because not all the children are from English speaking homes, so they will benefit from this project. But of course we could also use this with our collaborative project club students. (P1: 19/01/12)*
Participating teachers

The results in this study revealed that there was a general awareness among the participants that the participating teachers needed to be able to communicate in English and have specific subject knowledge, in order for a telecollaborative project between two schools to be implemented successfully.

One of the participants from facilitating organizations A, emphasised this:

*Usually for our online collaborative projects, we ask the schools to choose a teacher who can communicate well in English, an ICT teacher, and a teacher who has the specific subject knowledge of the topic.* (M1: 02/01/12)

The principals and learning support teachers in both the schools also indicated the importance of choosing a suitable teacher to coordinate the project. In Sri Lanka, it was believed that the teacher should be competent in information technology and English. In Australia, the teacher needed to have a genuine interest in coordinating the project.

It was also interesting to observe that the classroom teachers who volunteered to participate in this project fulfilled the criteria required for a coordinating teacher; and were prepared to facilitate a telecollaborative project in their schools. In Sri Lanka, the teacher was an English medium class teacher and in Australia, the teacher was a gifted and talented classroom teacher who was also involved in an environmental project in the school. She was also suggested by one of the other teachers in Australia:

*This project would be ideal for (T5) who teaches gifted and talented classrooms and has started an environmental project.* (T4: 16/03/12)

Although the participants in the schools and facilitating institutions in Sri Lanka were confident that the teachers in their schools were capable of implementing a telecollaborative project, participants were also aware of the support that teachers require, in terms of training. One of the participants indicated:
Our teachers are very capable and very involved when participating in these projects. (C1: 03/01/12)

The British Council also provides training for teachers who are involved in programs facilitated by them. One of the participants added:

The British Council has introductory workshops for teachers together with an information technology and communication workshops which introduces them to basic skills. (M1: 20/01/12)

A participant from organization B also commented:

Not only does The Ministry of Education have activity based communicative English tasks for the students, but they have designed programs for school principals and teachers because the main aim is to provide an environment for the students to use the language. (D1: 05/01/12)

Computers/internet access

The most challenging factor that could hinder communication between the students during a telecollaborative project between the sample schools was the lack of internet facilities in the primary school in Sri Lanka. However the positive attitude of the participating teachers and stakeholders was evident during this study to overcome this challenge.

The two teachers who were potential coordinating teachers for the telecollaborative project were willing to face the obstacle of the lack of internet facilities in the Sri Lankan primary school. Both these teachers considered email to be the most appropriate means of communicating; because of the time difference between the two countries. The teacher in Sri Lanka was willing to use her personal email and time to correspond with the school in Australia:

When we participated in projects with the British Council, I used my own email and time [...] I can do that with this project as well. (T1: 19/01/12)

The teacher in the Australian school also commented:

I can correspond with the teacher in Sri Lanka. I think it would be safer as well. (T5: 15/03/12)
Not only did the two teachers’ positive attitude address the challenge of the lack of internet facilities, but it also provided a means by which the students’ material could be exchanged in a timely and efficient manner.

The principal in the Sri Lankan school was also willing to address the lack of internet facilities in the school and added:

*Very soon I will be getting internet access for the teachers and a computer for the staff room.* (P1: 19/01/12)

A participant from organisation B also revealed that most government schools in Sri Lanka, in urban areas, had computers. However, it was internet access that was lacking in the primary schools. One of them added:

*The Ministry of Education provides dongles to the teachers so that they can access the internet [...] and if the schools are interested to get an internet connection, approval from The Department of Education can be sought.* (D2: 19/01/12)

It was also indicated that some of the schools in rural parts of Sri Lanka did not have access to electricity. One of the participants from organisation A revealed that the British Council provides internet and email access to teachers and students who have an organisational membership at the British Council and they are then able to use the internet facilities at their information resource centre.

A representative from organisation A, who has been involved in collaborative projects, commented:

*It is better for the schools to have email. But if they don’t, the teachers use their own personal email or internet cafes. We have advised them to use sms because the Sri Lankan teachers are not accustomed to checking their emails daily. The UK teachers send a text message to the Sri Lankan teacher when they have sent an email so that they can check their account. The Sri Lankan teachers also do the same thing. For the government, computer knowledge is a priority, so computer and internet facilities in schools in the future are certainly promising.* (M1: 20/01/12)
Something interesting to talk about

Another condition required for communication to occur, according to Hall (2001), is something interesting to talk about. Previous studies have indicated that initiating communicative English in Sri Lankan classrooms has been a problem due to the lack of interesting material (Karunaratne, 2003) or the mismatch between it and the curriculum (Canagarajah, 2001). However, this study indicated that the relevance of the project to the existing communicative English curriculum and the common topics/clubs between the participating schools could provide the students with something interesting to talk about in English in the classrooms. Although the students might not be able to communicate directly with each other due to the lack of internet facilities in the Sri Lankan primary schools; it is likely that the tasks used in the project could initiate meta-communication in English within and between the participating Sri Lankan classrooms by providing the students and teachers with material to communicate. Egbert and Yang (2004) indicate that this could help students who have limited access to technology to actively participate in computer assisted language learning projects.

Common topics/interests

The participants were aware of the importance of integrating the project into their curriculums. The most favoured common topic was Human Society and its Environment (HSIE). It was also interesting to observe that both the schools had environmental clubs and the school in Sri Lanka also had a collaborative club.

A teacher in the Sri Lankan school added:

*At the moment, we do not have a project for our environmental club, so it will be really good to use this project for that. (T2: 26/01/12)*

Another teacher in Australia added:

*I think this project would be really good for the students who are in my environmental group club. (T5: 15/03/12)*
The principals and teachers of the two schools also believed that it would be a good stimulus to encourage spoken English activities in the Sri Lankan school and written activities in the Australian school.

The principal in the Australian sample school commented:

_We often find it very difficult to stimulate boys in our school to write. We could even make this into a specialised project to encourage boys to write. There are lot of students who need a challenge and we can’t just keep putting them in front of a textbook._ (P2: 15/03/12)

The sample school was keen to use the project to promote communicative English, especially in their recently introduced conversation classrooms. It was also considered to be a relevant project to be used in their collaborative club, which at the time that the interviews were conducted did not have a project. Both these clubs used topics from their curriculum.

A teacher in the Sri Lankan school said:

_We have English medium classes but not all the students are from English speaking homes, and suddenly exposing them to a vast syllabus is quite draining for them. So an activity such as this would make it interesting for them to see what we are talking about. For example, if I refer to a lion’s mane, it might be a strange concept to them. They might know it in their mother tongue but not in English. Also in this age, they are more likely to learn using computer aided learning._ (T1: 19/01/12)

**Computer-aided learning**

The fact that the project would be ‘computer – aided’ was also considered as something that would provide students with interesting material.

Although the students might not be able to communicate directly with each other due to the lack of internet facilities in the Sri Lankan primary schools; the two potential coordinating teachers were hopeful that the tasks used in the project could be conducted using the school computer labs.
An interest in the outcome of the project

The last condition required for communication to occur is an interest in the outcome of the communication (Hall, 2001). Students are often motivated to participate in communicative English tasks in the classroom (Canagarajah, 2001; Karunaratne, 2003). However as both their studies point out, as the outcome that was expected at the end of the academic year was different to the outcome of the communicative tasks, the students did not have the time to participate in communicative English tasks. The data in this study however suggests that the relevance of a telecollaborative project to the purpose of the current Sri Lankan communicative English and information technology curriculum would gain the support from the key stakeholders in the schools and facilitating organisations – providing opportunities for government and private primary schools to participate in telecollaborative projects. This would most likely create an interest among the students to speak in English because they would be aware of the relevance and importance of the project. Also as the material in the ABOE tasks (NIE Sri Lanka, 2013) indicate, it would be interesting for the students to be able to discuss the enrichment activities with students who have first-hand experience in these contexts – making these activities more meaningful. Benefits for the Australian schools were also evident. Excerpts from the study have been used to highlight and discuss this below.

Relevance to the communicative curriculum in Sri Lanka

To begin with communicative English is being given priority in the primary schools and is also relevant to the initiatives by The Ministry of Education and the British Council in Sri Lanka to promote communicative tasks in primary schools in Sri Lanka. The participants believed that there would be an interest in the outcome of a telecollaborative project because of this.

The current Sri Lankan curriculum promotes spoken English through a variety of programs, especially because information technology and English are priority subjects under the Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse’s initiative, *Mahinda Chinthana*. This has instigated programs such as the English as a Life Skill program and the
Activity-Based Oral English (ABOE) program. One of the Directors from organisation B added:

*The ABOE program is mainly to help the teachers in year 3 to carry on teaching the students in English [...] The English as a Language Skill program initiated by The President is mainly to promote spoken English in schools.* (D1: 05/01/12)

Speaking of Mahinda Chinthana, a participant from facilitating organisation B commented:

*The plan is to make computer literacy in the schools more than 75% by 2015 and in fact 2010 was named as the year for information technology and English.* (D2: 09/01/12)

In addition to the initiatives by the Ministry of Education, it was also revealed by the participants in facilitating organisations A and B that the British Council has also promoted the *Global School Partnership Program*, and initiated collaborative clubs in government and private schools in Sri Lanka. However, these projects are with UK schools. However, the data revealed that the *International School Award Project*, which is also facilitated by the British Council, could be used by the Sri Lankan schools to telecollaborate with Australian schools. A participant from organisation A added:

*The schools choose the participating country; but if there is an opportunity for a school to participate with an Australian school, they would be happy to do it.* (M1: 2/01/12)

Next, the principal of the sample school in Sri Lanka and key stakeholders from the facilitating organisation were also willing to support the telecollaborative project because of the relevance of the project to their plans to make students familiar with communicative English tasks, which they believed to be important for various reasons.

A participant from organisation B said:

*We have been involved with school link projects [...] we are happy about these projects and in the same way we can also do this project [...] I think it is very appropriate to introduce students to communicative tasks because it is being assessed in the examination
classes, so exposing students to spoken English is a good idea. (D1: 05/01/12)

Furthermore, the sample school revealed that they promote spoken English in their school: by introducing spoken English activities to their classrooms; a rule that only English can be spoken during recess; English medium classes in years 4 and 5; and a collaborative club for programs facilitated by the British Council. The principal of the primary school added:

We have made spoken English during play time compulsory to encourage students who are not exposed to English to get into the practice of communicating in English so that they will not feel shy to make a mistake. In our culture, if you make a mistake in your mother tongue it is alright, but if you make a mistake in English, it is not. (P1: 19/01/12)

The results also revealed that it was a possibility to have the telecollaborative project assessed as an activity in the classroom or an International School Award Project facilitated by the British Council in Sri Lanka (as indicated above).

The principal of the sample school in Sri Lanka added:

No, we do not assess communicative English language tasks in the classroom at the moment, but we can certainly consider this at the planning stage of the project. (P1: 19/01/12)

A teacher from the school also added:

If there is a prize involved, the students are usually motivated to participate. (T1: 19/01/12)

General organization of the course

It was apparent that the participants were aware of time constraints when implementing additional projects in their schools. They preferred to implement the project during less busy terms and also avoid mandatory exam periods in the schools.

One of the teachers in the participating Sri Lankan school commented:
We would prefer to implement the project sometime between May and July but we are flexible. (T2: 26/01/12)

Another teacher from Australia added:

It would be better to avoid terms 1 and 4 as they are the busiest terms. (T5: 16/03/12)

Also the number of school terms is different in Sri Lanka and Australia. While the schools in Sri Lanka have 3 school terms, the school in Australia have 4 terms. It was pointed out by the participants in the sample school in Australia that they preferred to implement the project during terms 2 or 3 after their National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) exams in May. This also coincided with their less busy term in the Australian school (Term 3) and Sri Lankan school (Term 2). Since there is a common time in both sample schools to participate in the project it is likely that the students will be able to actively participate in the project and have a genuine interest in the outcome of the project.

The principals of the sample schools and stakeholders in the facilitating organisations also had a very positive attitude towards implementing the telecollaborative project as an additional online collaborative project in their schools.

It was with enthusiasm and confidence that a participant from organisation B added:

We have to make the students aware of the value and future prospects of programs such as these. (D1: 05/01/12)

The principal of the sample school also commented:

We can certainly allocate a time for the project, especially during our conversation classes. (P1: 19/01/12)

One of the teachers also added that if it was a topic which was a part of their curriculum, it would certainly help them to implement the project more easily.
Benefits to the Australian primary school

In order for the telecollaborative project to be a success, it is vital that the partner school in Australia should also benefit from the project. The data revealed that in addition to the possibilities of using this project as an environmental project, gifted and talented students or as a stimulus to encourage boys to write, the participants in the school in Australia believed that the project would especially be beneficial as a cultural experience.

One of the teachers commented:

*I have a few students in my class who might have left Sri Lanka when they were very young, so it bridges the cultural gap because we are a multicultural country. (T5: 15/03/12)*

Another teacher in Australia added:

*I think that the project will be well received by the students, teachers and parents. (T4: 15/03/12)*

CONCLUSION

The results of this case study indicate that there is potential to introduce a telecollaborative project to primary schools in developing countries where English is a second language, such as Sri Lanka, therefore setting the stage for developing communicative competence in English. This is because the classroom and socio-institutional conditions between the sample schools in Sri Lanka and Australia are common. Although the lack of internet facilities is evident in Sri Lankan primary schools, the awareness of collaborative projects, positive attitude towards the project, and support offered by the stakeholders address this challenge. Importantly, there is sufficient commonality in classroom and socio-institutional conditions between the sample schools in Sri Lanka and Australia.

There is sufficient evidence from this project to argue that a telecollaborative project can be integrated as a communicative task, or a task in a club between schools in Sri Lanka and Australia, and countries with similar profiles. The most promising way of integrating it into Sri Lankan schools’ primary curriculum appears to be as an
International School Award Project, facilitated by the British Council (n.d.b), since it is an existing primary school program addressing the conditions required for a telecollaborative activity to be successful.

However, certain things must be determined before it can be implemented as an International School Award Project in these school contexts. Firstly, whether the compulsory tasks and learning outcomes required for this project can be used between primary schools in both target contexts to potentially promote communicative competence in Sri Lankan schools and also promote targeted learning outcomes in Australian primary schools. Secondly research is required to identify the most feasible asynchronous tools that can be used between the partnering schools to exchange these tasks. Finally, it needs to be determined whether spoken English activities can be introduced in second language primary contexts such as Sri Lanka using telecollaborative projects with first language countries such as Australia.

THE AUTHORS

Thushara Ari Gamage is a Higher Degree Research Candidate at Macquarie University. She has worked with primary aged ESL/EFL students at the British Council and international schools in Sri Lanka and more recently in Australia as an online tutor. Her research interest involves understanding how Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) projects can influence targeted learning outcomes in primary schools. She is currently researching if there is potential for CALL projects to promote communicative competence in English in Sri Lankan primary schools while achieving targeted learning outcomes in Australian primary schools.

Philip Chappell is a Lecturer in the Linguistics Department at Macquarie University, Australia, where he convenes the Postgraduate Certificate of TESOL. His research interests are in classroom talk, sociocultural approaches to teacher cognition, dialogic pedagogy, and professional learning for English language teachers. He is currently working on a book on interaction and pedagogic discourse in the classroom, due to be published in 2014. He supervises research students at the Masters and Doctoral levels in TESOL-related areas. He
is Editor of the *English Australia Journal* and actively supports ELT in Australia.

**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE TO THE PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN SRI LANKA AND AUSTRALIA

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this questionnaire. Your answers will greatly benefit my research, by giving me information about your school, to follow up with you and the teachers you have nominated for the project during the semi-structured interviews. It would be greatly appreciated if you could complete and return this questionnaire either via email or post within two weeks of receiving it.

Email: thushara.gamage@students.mq.edu.au, or

Post: Thushara Gamage, Student, Postgraduate Certificate in Linguistic Research, Level 5, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Human Science, Macquarie University, NSW 2109

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students in the school</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number of students in a class</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Main language of instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a communicative English component in the English syllabus?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does the school have computer lab?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can students access the internet from school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do the students have a student portal or email?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which classes have access to computers?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which classes have access to email?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there an Information Technology subject in the school?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Which classes are taught this subject?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Could you please list 5 topics which are a part of your school curriculum that you would be interested in using for a computer assisted language learning project with a primary school in Sri Lanka?</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Class Teacher</td>
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<td>2. Information and Technology Teacher</td>
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<td>3. Learning Support Coordinator/Teacher</td>
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(1) Interview questions to the participants in the three facilitating organisations in Sri Lanka

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The reason for this interview is to discuss the programs facilitated by [name of institution] with primary aged students in Sri Lanka. This is in order to understand if a primary school in Sri Lanka has the common conditions required to participate in a computer assisted language learning project with a primary school in Australia and also how well such a project can be implemented into the current Sri Lankan curriculum. Would it be alright for me to video record our interview? If you notice me writing down notes during the interview, it is because I am highlighting something you have said and would like to discuss it in detail during the interview or because it is something that is very relevant to my study. If you would like to use Sinhalese during the interview, please feel free to do so as I am fluent in my Sinhalese.

I would like to begin by asking you some questions regarding online projects that you have involved primary aged students.

Have there been any projects that have included primary aged students in Kandy?

Was this an internet based project?

How many teachers and students were involved in this project?

How were they chosen?

Did the students work in groups?

How were their proficiency levels in English and Information technology matched with their partner schools?

What were the topics/tasks that were used in this project?

Was it a part of the curriculum?

What was the purpose of the project?

Was it assessed in any way?
Did the teachers or students require any English or Information Technology Training?

Was it difficult to find a time suitable for both schools to participate in the project?

How easy was it to allocate time for the project during class hours?

Are the collaborative projects usually for a specific time duration or are they sustained as a part of the curriculum?

Are there any difficulties that are usually apparent when implementing these projects?

I would now like to ask you your opinion on the conditions that primary schools in Kandy have to introduce communicative competence to their schools using a computer assisted language learning project.

In general, are the schools in Kandy well equipped for a computer based project?

Are the schools interested in implementing such projects?

Were you ever involved in a project that introduced communicative competence in English to their schools using computers?

Do you think that the primary school teachers are competent to coordinate a computer based project?

Does the British Council offer any support or training in terms of Information Technology and English to participating teachers?

How well does the Ministry of Education support collaborative projects?

Were there any difficulties that you encountered in integrating the projects into the curriculum?

Does the British Council support collaborative projects between Sri Lanka and countries other than England?

Would you be interested in facilitating such a project between a primary school in Kandy and one in Australia?
Is there anything that I have not addressed that you will like to contribute?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time. Your answers have been very useful and will certainly help my research.

(2) Interviews questions to the principals in the two sample primary schools in Sri Lanka and Australia

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The reason for this interview is to understand if your school has the common conditions required to participate in a computer assisted language learning project with a primary school in Sri Lanka (Australia). Because I will be using your answers to understand these conditions, would it be alright for me to video record our interview? If you notice me writing down notes during the interview, it is because I am highlighting something you have said to discuss with you during the interview or because it is something that is very relevant to my study and I am highlighting it in my notes.

To begin with, I would like to ask you some questions which specifically deal with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs in your school.

You had mentioned in your questionnaire that your school has (if the school has) participated in a collaborative project. Could you give me a brief outline of the project?

Why would you be interested in participating in a CALL project with a Sri Lankan (Australian) primary school?

You had also mentioned in the questionnaire that the students used (name of platform). Are there any other platforms that have been used by the students?
In your opinion, do you think that collaborative projects using the internet are a good way to encourage students to communicate in English?

I would now like to ask you a few questions about the participating students and their information technology skills.

In your opinion which classes/age groups would be best suited for a CALL project?

How many students does this classroom have?

Are they competent in using the computers and the internet?

What do you think would motivate these students to communicate with the students in Sri Lanka (Australia)?

I would now like to ask you a few questions about the classrooms and the communicative curriculum used in this school.

In the answers in your questionnaire, you had mentioned that there is a specific component for communicative English in the syllabus. Is there a specific time in the timetable which has been allocated for this task?

How are these tasks assigned to the students? Does it depend on a textbook or differ from class to class?

Are these tasks assessed?

Are there any other projects that the students are involved in which would be suitable to use in a CALL project with Sri Lankan students?

Could it be assessed?

You had mentioned (list of topics in questionnaire) as your preferred topics for CALL project. Could such a project fit into the current timetable?

Could these tasks be integrated into the current curriculum?

How many hours per week would be suitable for such a project?

For how long could the classroom involved commit to this project?
In terms of the teachers, would the class teachers be able to use the internet with the students and participate in the project or is there a specific teacher who coordinates such projects?

Do you think that further training for the teachers is a possibility if required?

Is it most likely that the English teacher or IT teacher would implement this project?

**Finally, I would like to discuss the socio-institutional conditions of this project with you.**

Considering the topics that we discussed which could be used for a computer CALL project, how do you think this project could be assessed as a part of the current curriculum?

Because of the time difference, it is most likely that the project would be administered via email. Do you think voice or written emails would be more appropriate?

Would it be possible for the students to communicate directly to each other or would you prefer the teacher to monitor all correspondence.

Because of the class sizes in Sri Lanka, each student in Australia might need to work with a group of students in Sri Lanka. What are your thoughts on this?

Is it likely that the parents would oppose this project?

Do you think the Information Technology teacher/ library teacher or classroom teacher would be most suited for this project?

Is permission from the government needed for such a project to be implemented in the school?

What are your thoughts on the benefits of such a project for the students of the school?

What time of the year (school term) would be most suited for such a project to be implemented?

Do you anticipate any difficulties in implementing such a project in the school?
Is there anything that I have not addressed that you will like to contribute?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time. Your answers have been very useful and will certainly help my research.

(3) Interview questions to the four classroom/learning support teachers in the sample primary schools in Sri Lanka and Australia

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The reason for this interview is to understand if your school has the common conditions required to participate in a computer assisted language learning project with a primary school in Sri Lanka (Australia). Because I will be using your answers to understand these conditions, would it be alright for me to video record our interview? If you notice me writing down notes during the interview, it is because I am highlighting something you have said to discuss with you during the interview or because it is something that is very relevant to my study and I am highlighting it in my notes.

To begin with, I would like to ask you some questions which specifically deal with Computer Assisted language learning (CALL) projects.

In your opinion, do you think that collaborative projects using the internet are a good way to encourage students to communicate in English?

Why would you be interested in participating in a CALL project with a Sri Lankan (Australian) primary school?

I would now like to ask you a few questions about the participating students and their information technology and English communicative competence.

In your opinion which classes/age groups would be best suited for a CALL learning project?
How many students does this classroom have?
Are they competent in using the computers and the internet?
Do they have access to email at school?
What do you think would motivate these students to communicate with the students in Sri Lanka?
I would now like to ask you a few questions about the classrooms and the communicative curriculum used in this school.
Is there a specific component for communicative English in the curriculum?
Is there a specific time in the timetable which has been allocated for this task?
How are these tasks assigned to the students? Does it depend on a textbook or differ from class to class?
Are these tasks assessed?
Are there any topics/tasks which you think would be suitable to use for a CALL project? Would there be a possibility to assess these projects?
Are there any other projects that the students are involved in which would be suitable to use in a CALL project with Sri Lankan students?
Are any of these projects assessed?
How well would a CALL project fit into the current timetable?
Could such a project be assessed?
How many hours per week would be suitable for such a project?
For how long could the classroom involved commit to the project?
Finally, I would like to discuss the socio-institutional conditions of this project with you.
Because of the time difference, it is most likely that the project would be administered via email. Do you think voice or written emails would be more appropriate?
Would it be possible for the students to communicate directly to each other or would you prefer the teacher to monitor all correspondence.

Because of the class sizes in Sri Lanka, each student in Australia might need to work with a group of students in Sri Lanka. What are your thoughts on this?

Is it likely that the parents would oppose this project?

What are your thoughts on the benefits of such a project for the students of the school?

What time of the year (school term) would be most suited for such a project to be implemented?

Do you anticipate any difficulties in implementing such a project in the school?

Do you think the class teacher, library teacher or Information Technology teacher would be more suitable for this project?

Is government approval required for this project?

Is there anything that I have not addressed that you will like to contribute?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time. Your answers have been very useful and will certainly help my research.

(4) Interview questions to the two information and technology teachers in the sample primary schools in Sri Lanka and Australia

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The reason for this interview is to understand if your school has the common conditions required to participate in a computer assisted language learning project with a primary school in Sri Lanka (Australia). Because I will be using your answers to understand these conditions, would it be alright for me to video record our interview? If
you notice me writing down notes during the interview, it is because I am highlighting something you have said to discuss with you during the interview or because it is something that is very relevant to my study and I am highlighting it in my notes.

To begin with, I would like to ask you some questions which specifically deal with the facilities and use of computers and the internet in the classrooms and schools.

Did you use the internet or any other platform for this?

Why would you be interested in facilitating in a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) project with a Sri Lankan (Australian) primary school?

Do the students have access to email or a student portal?

Are there any other internet platforms like Moodle that the students have used or use?

In your opinion, do you think that collaborative projects using the internet are a good way to encourage students to communicate in English?

I would now like to discuss the participating students and their Information Technology proficiency levels with you.

In your opinion which classes/age groups would be best suited for a CALL project?

How many students would this classroom have?

Are they competent in using the computers and the internet?

What do you think would be the most suitable platform for them to communicate?

What do you think would motivate these students to communicate with the students in Sri Lanka?
I would now like to ask you a few questions about the use of the internet as a part of the school curriculum.

Are there any projects that the students are involved in where they use email or chat to communicate?

Which subject areas of the curriculum do they cover?

Are these projects assessed in any way?

In your opinion, which of the communicative tasks or projects that the students are involved in could be used with the students in Sri Lanka (Australia)?

How could such a project fit into the current timetable?

How many hours per week would be suitable for such a project?

In your opinion, what would be a good duration for a CALL project?

Would you be willing to use a platform which you have not used before if training is provided?

Finally, I would like to discuss some of the socio-cultural conditions which could affect this project.

Because of the time difference, it is most likely that the project would be administered via email. Do you think voice or written emails would be more appropriate?

Would it be possible for the students to communicate directly with each other via email or would you prefer to handle all the correspondence?

Because of the class sizes in Sri Lanka, each student in Australia might need to work with a group of students in Sri Lanka. What are your thoughts on this?

Is it likely that the parents would oppose this project?

What time of the year (school term) would be most suited for such a project to be implemented?

Do you anticipate any difficulties in implementing such a project in the school?
Is there anything that I have not addressed that you will like to contribute?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time. Your answers have been very useful and will certainly help my research.