

PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF AN ONLINE DISCUSSION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ISRAEL, TAIWAN AND THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether and how online discussions used in learning situations help to develop interactive intercultural communication. Undergraduate university students in the US, Taiwan, and Israel engaged in an online discussion about gender stereotypes. This study examines their perceptions of the interactions. There were 31 undergraduate participants from the US, 119 participants from Taiwan, and 28 participants from Israel. The study compares pre- and post-assignment questionnaires with a mixture of scaled responses and short narrative responses to determine the participants' perceptions of the assignment as a learning activity and as interactive intercultural communication. The analysis identifies and evaluates technical, logistical, and linguistic issues which can be used to refine this assignment to better meet the goal of developing interactive intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Online Discussion, ESL/EFL, Technology and Education.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the Internet has evolved from an information source created and maintained by those who are Internet experts to an interactive tool which can be used by almost anyone with a computer, Internet access, and something to say. Therefore, the Internet as an interactive tool has broad implications for education. Students and teachers can now not only access the Web as an information resource, they can also "digitally disseminate their ideas and experiences" (Richardson, 2004, p. 3) to a world-wide audience. Students' online work, which can readily be accessed by others, allows the students to learn not only from their teacher, but from each other. This connection moves outside the classroom walls, so that the students and teacher actually have the ability to "connect and collaborate with others locally and globally" (Wikia, Inc., 2007). Studies of international collaborations using online tools (Belz, 2003; Domingues Ferreira da Cruz, 2008; Liaw, 2006; Solem, Bell, Fournier, Gillespie, Lewitsky, & Lockton, 2003) demonstrate that these activities, when carefully designed to be pedagogically sound, are effective for developing not only technology and various literacy skills, but cross-cultural relationships as well.

Teachers of English also value the Internet as a teaching

tool (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Johnson, 2006; Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva, 2006; Tomei & Lavin, 2007; Zha, Kelly, Park, & Fitzgerald, 2006), and recognize that it offers "authentic opportunities for students to practice English and develop computer literacy" (Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva, 2006, p.34). For the English learner, typical classroom language tends to be structured in a way that authentic communication, the natural use of grammatical, syntactical, and lexical structures, which is used in real-life situations, is not (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Therefore, for the English language learner who has little or no contact with native speakers, the Internet offers numerous opportunities for them to engage in authentic communication in English (Johnson, 2006; Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva, 2006; Tomei & Lavin, 2007). Interactive communication, such as offered by email, blogging, wikis, and podcasts, can help non-English speakers and English speakers to refine communication strategies (Gass & Selinker, 2001) so that they are able to communicate effectively. However, to be completely effective, teachers must take an active role in designing pedagogically sound online activities.

The purpose of this research project is to examine an online discussion assignment which took place between university students in the US, Taiwan, and Israel. The goal of the

assignment was to foster interactive intercultural communication through the online environment. The objective of the assignment was for university students, native and non-native speakers of English, to engage in an online discussion about a serious social topic.

The research project related to this assignment seeks to answer the question: How do the participants perceive their experience of the assignment? In order to answer this broad question, data analysis focuses on participant responses which address these two questions:

What do university students identify as problems with and limitations of engaging in an online discussion with university students from another country?

What are the university students' perceptions of what they learned from engaging in an online discussion about a serious topic with university students from another country?

This article outlines the steps that were taken to answer these research questions. First, a review of the literature examines research related to intercultural communication using technology. The literature review also examines the use of online technology in language learning, in general, and in ESL/EFL situations, in particular. Next the rationale for the research study is explained as it relates to the literature review. Then the research design is outlined, including the method used, the sample, data collection strategies, and methods of analysis. A discussion of the findings and how these findings fit into the theoretical framework which was established through the literature review follows. Then limitations of the study are explained and how the project will be expanded for further research. Finally, there is a discussion of the significance of the study to the field of English language teaching and learning.

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the perceptions of university students in the US, Taiwan, and Israel who engaged in an online discussion about gender stereotypes in order to determine their perceptions of this type of technology-assisted learning situation. The literature review includes resources which focus on the role of technology, specifically online technology, in intercultural communication, and in teaching and learning, specifically of language. It offers a foundation for determining the role

of technology in intercultural communication, its potential challenges and benefits, and how such assignments can enhance the development of interactive intercultural communication among the participants.

Language Learning and Technology

The use of computers in language learning has begun to evolve from only using computer programs for grammar and vocabulary drills to being more interactive. Especially with the increased presence of the Internet and its expanding capabilities, specifically the evolution of Web 2.0 and the interactivity it allows, language teachers are finding a multitude of uses for Internet technology.

In his introduction to English Language Teaching in the Internet-Assisted Environment Krajka (2007) tells the reader that foreign language learning in the present day must take into account the rapidly changing environment created by technological change. The focus of education must move from a teacher-centered learning environment to one in which the learner is actively "searching for necessary knowledge and acquiring it" (p. 19). The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), such as the Internet, for teaching and learning allows learners to take responsibility for their learning by making decisions about the content, to foster learner autonomy, and to create more realistic learning environments by using the Internet as a source of materials and a medium to communicate with others (p. 20).

Early in the 21st century, as Krajka (2007) points out, many of the problems such as affordable Internet access and teacher training in using such technology are being addressed, and now that the novelty of the Internet has worn off, serious consideration must be given to how it can be used effectively as an educational tool "based on pedagogically sound principles ensuring the effective exploitation of the medium and sufficient integration with and reinforcement of face-to-face coursebook-based teaching" (p. 18) in what he characterizes as a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) classroom, one which is less teacher-centered and more student-centered. In this way the CLT becomes more of a collaborative learning environment which supports communicative language learning.

Using blogging as an example, Krajka (2007) cites a study by Wrede (2003) who points out the process-oriented nature of blogging and "Piontek (2004) [who] draws attention to the collaborative nature of blogs" (as cited in Krajka, 2007, p. 101). He emphasizes that in order for the blog to be an effective language teaching tool it must "be skillfully interwoven with the contents of the course" (p. 101) to create a two-way relationship of teacher structure and student input.

Warschauer (1996) compared the "equality of student participation in two modes: face-to-face discussion and electronic discussion" (p. 7). The research literature he cited supported his findings: electronic communication tends to promote more and more equal participation. He concluded that the electronic forum allows shyer students to feel more comfortable, and "that lack of oral fluency (or confidence in oral fluency) and discomfort in speaking out are important factors in determining students' relative participation in face-to-face and electronic mode" (p. 21). Even though the language was more complex, he found that "the electronic discussion had fewer of the interactional features — such as questioning, recasting, confirmation checks, and paraphrasing — that are often found in face-to-face interaction and which are viewed as important for language learning" (p. 22). He also found that teachers have other motivations for using it in the language classroom, "including the desire to provide authentic communication partners (Cohen and Miyake 1986; Paramskas 1993), the recognition of the importance of cultural exchange (Soh and Soon 1991), and the desire to teach new learning skills to language minority students (Cummins and Sayers 1990)" (as cited in Warschauer, 1996, p. 9).

A later study by Zha, Kelly, Park & Fitzgerald (2006) examined the use of asynchronous online discussion boards by elementary-aged ESL students. They wanted to see if the students used language appropriately for social purposes and if there were any improvements in the participants' communicative competence in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments. In this qualitative study the researchers coded the students' messages using the national ESL Standards for PreK–12 Students to examine

ESL students' communicative competence.

Zha et al. (2006) indicate that CMC and online discussions, in particular, lend themselves well to a communicative approach for language teaching and learning. The researchers based their study in the work of Vygotsky and connected to his notion that "learning is facilitated through interaction with the social environment (interpersonal learning)" (as cited in Zha et al., 2006, p. 350) and to Piaget's cognitive development theory. Based on the work of other scholars they said that "in CMC, peer interaction can be used to help learners acquire new strategies and strengthen their own ideas by engaging in peer dialog through written communication (Beauvois, 1994; Forman & Cazden, 1985; Gellin, 2003; LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004; Miller, 1995)" (as cited in Zha et al., 2006, p. 350). They write that "electronic discussion boards are now being used to provide a natural language learning environment by promoting learners' social interaction and creating an authentic discourse community (Al-Jarf, 2004; Lam, 2000; Singhal, 1998)" (Zha et al., 2006, p. 350).

Although Warschauer (1996) and Zha et al. (2006) did not state it, this type of interaction seems to lower the affective filter so that learners are more willing to take chances. Krajka (2007) points out that one advantage to the asynchronous format is that it gives students the opportunity to think what they are going to write and give them the chance to revise before posting. There are other advantages, according to a 1997 article by Anderson (as cited in Krajka, 2007) to this format. Time is less of a factor. Participants have more flexibility about when and where they can participate. It also gives them time to reflect on what they are writing and to find support for their opinions.

From the foreign language teacher's view, such Internet-based communications can open up opportunities for their students to experience authentic communication with native speakers as well as providing "a real communicative purpose to target language use" (Krajka, 2007, p. 229). Krajka (2007) suggests a re-structuring of the curriculum so that this type of instruction becomes "an integral part of the curriculum" (p. 236). He points out that the teacher must keep in mind that using such an activity is not just a replacement for face-to-face activities. The teacher and

students must have adequate IT knowledge, skills and access, and such instruction may have to be built into the curriculum or lesson.

Intercultural Communication and Technology

Intercultural communication is an embedded part of such authentic communication. In explaining "intercultural communication," (IC) Liaw (2006) states that the use of the term "intercultural" reflects the view that foreign language students need to gain insight both into their own culture and the foreign culture, as well as be aware of the meeting of cultures that often takes place in communication situations in the foreign language (Kramsch, 1993). After all, the learner's interpretation of the target culture is done through the lens of his/her own cultural background and knowledge (p. 50).

However, Liaw (2006) also points out that the teacher has a role to play in developing IC in her/his students. She uses Byram & Fleming's (1998) definition of intercultural teaching as being a recognition by the teacher "that language and culture are intertwined and that by adopting an inquiring and reflective approach to language learning, students can be "intercultural speakers" (p. 59), people who can see and accept cultural differences. She also points out that approaches to teaching culture in the EFL classroom have evolved so that in today's language learning environment, the notion of intercultural competence has taken hold.

To study the development of IC and as well as its connection to technology use, Liaw (2006) designed a project which aimed at fostering "EFL students' intercultural competence via English language development" (p. 54). The Taiwanese students used electronic forums to discuss their culture with students in the US after reading articles about their own culture in English. Liaw (2006) wanted to "ascertain the development of intercultural competence (or lack thereof) of the Taiwanese EFL learners within the framework of Byram's model (1997)" (Liaw, 2006, p. 56).

Liaw (2006) identified four types of intercultural competences in the students' interactions: "(i) interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others, (ii) ability to change perspective, (iii) knowledge about one's own and others' culture for

intercultural communication, and (iv) knowledge about intercultural communication processes" (p. 57).

She found that (iii) "knowledge about one's own culture and others' culture for intercultural communication" (Liaw, 2006, p.57) had the most responses. The students liked "reading English articles on their own culture and having the chance to describe and explain their own culture to others" (p. 57). The second highest number of responses related to "interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others" (p. 57). They expressed their excitement about the opportunity to communicate with the other students. The other two categories has fewer responses, with "ability to change perspective" (p. 57) having the fewest. Liaw (2006) attributes this to the fact that "the transpacific e-pals shared common views on most of the cultural issues in the articles, which left little room for the need to change perspectives" (p. 57). She also found that they easily bridged communication misunderstandings.

Overall, the students enjoyed the activity and thought they benefited from it. Many thought that communicating using English and corresponding with students in the US was exciting. Liaw (2006) also commented that "due to familiarity with the discussion topics, the EFL students found the intercultural communication exciting yet not intimidating" (p. 57). The two drawbacks that students reported were that there were problems with technology and the different academic calendars in the two countries created a shortened timeframe for the activity.

Effective intercultural communication depends on the communicators recognizing that there are cultural similarities and differences and that effective communication depends on a negotiation which acknowledges and is able to take advantage of the fact "that differences and similarities are cultural constructions which may improve personal and interpersonal development" (p. 100). Shi-xu and Wilson (2001) assert that effective cross-cultural communication occurs when the interlocutors are knowledgeable about and skilled in the language and culture of the other with whom they are communicating (as cited in Domingues Ferreira da Cruz, 2008). However, the participants in Shi-xu and Wilson's study

(as cited in Domingues Ferreira da Cruz, 2008) did not seem to demonstrate a strong knowledge of the other. Their negotiations seem more related to a knowledge of the differences between their cultures and languages, and it seems they used that knowledge, rather than a knowledge of the other, to negotiate linguistic and cultural meaning.

Of more interest for the scope of the current project was what Domingues Ferreira da Cruz (2008) wrote about chats as synchronous communication which can be characterized as a written conversation, and can be used as a means of informal communication. He points out that synchronous communication is an ideal way to create opportunities for the foreign language learner to have communication experiences outside the classroom walls. He goes on to write

This awareness and the ability to negotiate representations dovetail with Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence. Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence is based on "five distinct but interdependent components" (Belz, 2003, p. 71) - attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction - all of which "can in principle be acquired through experience and reflection" (p. 33), and critical cultural awareness which comes about when the other four have come into play.

The Assignment

During Spring 2008 three groups of students participated in an online discussion about gender stereotypes. They were EFL students from Taiwan and Israel, and students from the United States who were enrolled in a pre-methods Diversity & Education course. The format of this assignment was based on data from previous assignments that the instructors had used in prior semesters.

The students used a commercial blog technology selected by the Taiwanese which they had used for a previous assignment. They thought it would be fairly easy for everyone to learn to use. The students were instructed to introduce themselves, and then had a choice of discussion topics to select from, all related to gender issues, a topic chosen by the Taiwanese students. The topics were: female

stereotypes in the country; male stereotypes in the country; gender stereotypes and the media; and gender equality/inequality. In that way, groups were self-determined by the students according to the topic of interest in rather than groups being pre-determined by the instructors. Therefore, even if some students did not participate, or did not participate actively, there were enough participants to carry on a discussion.

Another strategy that was implemented was that the students in Taiwan and in Israel were given the assignment earlier than the American students so that they could have extra time to prepare their posts. These students were also supposed to post their initial comments before the American students. There are two reasons for doing this. Based on previous experiences, the instructors assumed that the non-native speakers' posts will be shorter and the English at a lower level than the native speakers'. The instructor also thought that the non-native speakers would be less intimidated if their posts were first, since they would not be able to compare them at this point to the native speakers' posts. The second reason was to give the American students a chance to see the level of English they were dealing with. The students from the US were not given specific instructions on how to write their postings, so that the instructor could see if there were any "natural" alterations in their language.

Before engaging in the assignment, the students were asked to volunteer to take part in a research project regarding this assignment. Those who volunteered to participate completed Pre-Activity and Post-Activity Questionnaires.

Sample, Data Collection, and Analyses

This research project of the online discussion activity uses mixed method, relying on a combination of written qualitative and quantitative survey questions, allowing data to be categorized to provide appropriate direction for the analysis. This section defines and identifies the sample for this first phase of the study, and outlines the method used.

Project participants were undergraduate students at a small public regional campus in the Midwest, and students in undergraduate English classes at a private university in

Taiwan, and at a small public university in Israel. The sample population was 178 participants who volunteered to be part of the study. The research project conforms to Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards regarding consent, confidentiality, and privacy. Because of the narrow focus of this project, the participants must meet the criteria of the project precluding a random sample.

There were 31 undergraduate participants from the US enrolled in Diversity & Education classes, a pre-methods teacher education course, ranging in age from traditional college-age, 18-25, to older students. The 119 participants from Taiwan were primarily traditional college-age students enrolled in a Freshman English class. The 28 participants from Israel were in an Advanced English course and were all in their mid- to late-20s. There were male and female participants from all three universities, with female participants predominating since the population of all three settings is predominately female. The participants from the United States were a mixture of races and ethnicities, but primarily White. Most of the participants from the United States were native English speakers, but a few were non-native speakers, whose first language is Spanish, with native or near-native fluency in English. The participants from Taiwan were mostly Taiwanese who consider themselves ethnically Chinese, who speak Chinese. Most of the participants from Israel were Jewish and most speak Hebrew as their first language. None of the participants from Taiwan or Israel are native English speakers (Table 1).

The overall project goal is to determine how educators can better promote interactive intercultural communication by preparing online assignments that meet the linguistic and communication needs of their students. This article reports on the first phase of the data analysis, examining participants' perceptions of the assignment, and seeks to answer the question: How do different groups of participants perceive their experience of the assignment? In order to answer this broad question, data analysis focuses on participant responses which address two questions:

- What do university students identify as problems with and limitations of engaging in an online discussion with university students from another country?

Country	Israel	Taiwan	United States	Total
Number of participants	28	119	31	178
Gender - Female	24	95	22	141
Gender - Male	4	24	9	37
Age range - <20	0	93	11	104
Age range -20-29	28	25	11	64
Age range ->30	0	1	9	10

Table 1. Demographics

- What are the university students' perceptions of what they learned from engaging in an online discussion about a serious topic with university students from another country?

This project consists of mixed research methods, relying on survey techniques, specifically written questionnaires that collected quantitative and qualitative data. Research project participants completed three questionnaires. The first asked for demographic information, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and language, as well as information about their use of computers and the Internet. The second was a Pre-Activity Survey. Nine questions which used scaled responses were designed to determine how knowledgeable the participants were about using computers, in general, and their perceptions of the upcoming activity. The questions were also designed to determine their comfort level with the activity. There were two narrative questions allowing them to express what they thought they would learn and what concerns they had about the activity. A post-activity questionnaire used a combination of scaled responses and short answers to determine what the participants learned from the activity, how they perceived the activity, and what challenges they faced. The Post-Activity survey contained 14 scaled-response questions and 5 narrative questions about the completed activity.

Demographics and the scaled responses were analyzed to provide descriptive statistics, such as frequencies. A content analysis of the brief narrative responses provided patterns of responses, which were analyzed for patterns, and broad categories assigned, such as language issues, technology issues, and logistical issues. The quantitative data's role is to guide and support the qualitative data. Analysis of the scaled responses focused on frequency in order to guide which narrative responses would provide supporting data. The narrative responses were analyzed for patterns, and related back to corresponding quantitative

data as necessary. The pre- and post- questionnaires have been analyzed separately before making a comparison of the responses on the two questionnaires.

Results

The data that focused on answering the two research questions were analyzed. The data analysis focused on what difficulties the participants thought they would have or had, and what they thought they would learn and reported they had learned. Questions were isolated which specifically addressed these issues.

Pre-Activity Questionnaire

In the pre-activity survey the participants responded to 2 narrative questions:

- What do you think you will learn from this activity?
- What kind of problems do you think will have with this online activity?

The students from the US reported that they would learn more about other cultures and worldviews. Only 3 (10%) respondents referred to anticipating learning something about the other students' level of and ability with English. About 18% of the Taiwanese respondents reported that they thought would learn more about other cultures and their views, but more (27%) responded that they would practice and/or improve their English. The Israeli participants not only saw this activity as a way to practice and improve their English (28%) and to learn about another culture (71%), but also as a way to meet new friends (25%). (Note: the percentages reported will not equal 100% because some respondents did not reply and others provided more than one answer)

In the pre-activity questionnaire, students from Taiwan identified using English (61%), the concern that their English skills would not be good enough to communicate effectively, and the technology (31%) as being their biggest concerns. The students from Israel (71%) were more concerned about being able to communicate effectively in English. The American students (58%) identified "communication" as their biggest concern. The participants from the US were most concerned about not being understood by the other participants. In addition, 13% of the American students were concerned about the

time needed to complete the assignment.

Post-Activity Questionnaire

In the post-activity questionnaire the participants responded to these questions:

- What was the most interesting aspect of this online activity?
- What was the most difficult aspect of this online activity?

What many of the respondents found most interesting was actually communicating with people from other countries and learning about the other cultures. The Taiwanese and Israeli respondents expressed an interest in actually communicating with someone from another country and learning about the other cultures. In general, the participants from the US responded that they were interested in hearing the other students' opinions on various issues and learning how they were similar to or different from their own.

In the post-activity questionnaire, about the same number of Taiwanese responded that technology was a problem (28%) as reported in the Pre-Activity questionnaire, but many more identified using English as their biggest problem (93%). They responded that various language issues were the most difficult, from not understanding to not being able to express themselves well. The Israeli students also showed a difference. The Israeli respondents were concerned about language issues, but also mentioned technology and time issues. In the post-activity about 23% of them stated that using the technology was the biggest problem, and 34% reported using English. The American students (39%) reported various technical and technology issues as being the most difficult. Another 19% reported that another issue was that no one responded to their posts and 10% indicated that there were some language issues. They could not understand what some of the other students had written.

The language issues for the groups were different. As might be expected, for the Taiwanese and Israeli participants language issues were one of their greatest concerns before starting the project and were reported as being one of their major difficulties. The students from the United States

were aware that there might be communication issues based on language and were concerned about how to handle them.

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Activity Responses.

In comparing what the participants reported before and after the activity, the Taiwanese respondents reported that they were more concerned about technology issues before the activity and this was the second largest difficulty they reported on the post-activity questionnaire. The Israeli participants did not report much concern about technology issues before the activity, but reported it as their second largest difficulty once it was completed. Although the American students had reported little concern about technology in the pre-activity questionnaire, it was reported as their largest difficulty.

An analysis of what the participants learned versus what they thought they would learn shows some differences among the groups as well. The American respondents reported before the activity that they thought they would learn about other cultures and the views of others. They reported after the activity that they did learn about the views of others and learned about similarities and differences among the three groups. The Taiwanese participants reported that they would practice and/or improve their English while learning about other cultures. However, after the activity, they reported learning more about the other cultures and making contact and reported less about practicing English. The Israelis had reported that they thought they would learn more about other cultures while practicing English. They reported afterwards on the communication among the different groups.

The data from these questionnaires shows that there were some differences in the ways that native and non-native speakers of English reported what they learned and their concerns. The Taiwanese and Israeli students expressed concern about their use of English in general. However the students from the United States view the language issues as "communication" issues. In the pre-activity questionnaire they expressed the concern that they might not be understood. However, in the post-activity questionnaire, they expressed that they were not able always to understand what the others wrote, and they were unsure

how to handle these communication breakdowns.

However, an analysis of their responses elicit the conclusion that the fact of communication among the three groups took on more importance than the fact that it was an English exercise for the Taiwanese and Israeli students. Therefore, all groups considered the activity an intercultural communication exercise.

An analysis of two scaled response questions provides further information about how much participants thought they learned (Table 2). The two questions are:

- Q11: How much did you learn about the other group members' country?
- Q12: How much did you learn about the other group members' culture?

Somewhat was the most frequent response on both of these questions by all three groups, although some students in each group gave negative responses and a similar amount gave positive responses. The Israelis reported learning somewhat more about the other countries than the other cultures, 64% v. 54%. The Taiwanese more evenly reported learning about both, 40% and 41% respectively. The American students on the other hand reported learning somewhat more about the other cultures than about the other countries.

A final question that illuminates the problems and what students learned from the activity is Q19: What would improve this online activity? A large number, 31%, of the students from Taiwan did not answer this question, and quite a few of them, 20%, liked the activity as it was. Some suggestions were to involve more participants (4%), create a chatroom (1%), add pictures (2%), have more interesting

Question	Israel, n=28	%	Taiwan, n=119	%	US, n=31	%
Q11: 0=None	0	0	7	6%	2	6%
Q11: 1=Not very	4	14%	23	19%	6	19%
Q11: 2=Somewhat	18	64%	48	40%	15	48%
Q11: 3=Very	8	28%	19	16%	6	19%
Q11: 4=N/A	0	0	1	0.8%	0	0
Q12: 0=None	1	4%	5	4%	1	3%
Q12: 1=Not very	2	7%	22	18%	4	13%
Q12: 2=Somewhat	15	54%	49	41%	18	58%
Q12: 3=Very	6	21%	24	20%	5	16%
Q12: 4=N/A	0	0	1	0.8%	0	0

Table 2. Q11 and Q12 Responses

topics(5%), have an easier to use format (12%), and better structure of the activity to enhance their use of English and improve their learning (13%). While 9% of the students from Israel were satisfied with the project, they identified some of the same issues as the Taiwanese students: create a chatroom (14%), add pictures (9%), have more interesting topics (5%), have an easier to use format (9%), and better structure of the activity to enhance their use of English and improve their learning (38%). The students from the United States identified some of the same issues, with 3% suggesting having a different topic, and 6% identifying time issues, and 13% saying that the format needed to be simplified. However, the largest numbers of American participants identified the need for more structure in the activity, with 10% suggesting that partners be assigned and 19% requesting more structure to the assignment, in general. Table 3 shows some of the students' comments.

The students by and large mentioned various ways in which the structure and set up of the project could be improved. Some specific suggestions were to spread it out over the entire semester, assign groups, have a set schedule, and to have a set objective rather than a timeframe.

Discussion

The problems reported by participants in this online assignment included technical issues, logistical issues, and linguistic issues which are similar to those were reported in several previous studies. In addition to problems, participants in previous studies and in this study reported enjoying doing the project and felt successful when they actually communicated with another person from the other culture. This study also correlated to previous studies in that the participants perceived that the assignment was successful intercultural communication.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis of these data is that technology issues are important and must be addressed. No matter what the nature of the assignment, students need to be able to engage comfortably. When preparing them for such a project, it is important to ensure that they have knowledge about and access to the technology being used and are adequately prepared to communicate using it. Some of the issues that the participants reported which related to technology

Category of Comments	%	Sample Comments
Good as is		
Israel	9%	It's a great activity. I do not think that we have to improve anything.
Taiwan	24%	I think the situations are now enough. I think everything is ok now.
US	6%	I thought it was set up well, nothing.
Different website/format		
Israel	9%	That the computer use need to be more efficient
Taiwan	12%	I feel the operation system was very complicated. Hope the interface of website could be more clear.
US	16%	The set [up] could be improved
Assignment structure		
Israel	38%	Not be required to write certain number of paragraphs/subjects.
Taiwan	13%	Improve to know how to practice English. How to let my response more active and interesting and how to grasp the usage of language.
US	51%	Assign specific people to specific people in another country. Giving time in class to go online and do the discussion. If there was a daily objective more than a timeframe to be completed. I think more discussion would take place.
Time		
Israel	9%	Maybe doing it during 2 months. That way we can have enough time to make more deep conversation with these members.
Taiwan	0%	
US	10%	Spread out over semester

Table 3. Q19 Sample of Responses

hindered the interactivity of the communication.

However, technology issues were not the only hindrances to interactive communication. The instructors from Taiwan and Israel, as English educators, wanted to offer their students an opportunity for authentic communication with native speakers. While many of the Taiwanese and Israeli students assumed that they would learn and practice grammar and vocabulary, in actuality they were practicing other language skills, such as pragmatics, using language socially. In assignments such as these, clearly identified language objectives that focus on pragmatics (language behavior and context) could help the teachers design a project that supports interactive intercultural communication between native and non-native speakers of English.

It is also evident from the data that planning must take into account the different needs and expectations of native and non-native speakers of English. The inclusion of language objectives which promote greater interactivity could help native speaker participants to pay more

attention to and act upon the language issues they experienced, while offering the non-native speakers concrete ways in which to participate in a more natural given-and-take of ideas.

Therefore, in future projects of this sort, the suggestions from students to create a project with more structure would be taken into account. As some students suggested, perhaps putting students in groups rather than having them respond randomly would create more interactivity. Creating an assignment which focuses on objectives could create a stronger pedagogical framework, while offering more flexibility for when and how the participants interact.

Implications for Further Research

The significance of this project is that participants from three quite different cultures engaged in an online project, and were asked to give their perspectives of what went on in the interactions. Although this first phase of the analysis looks only at participant perceptions, the data from this project has potential for further analysis. The scaled responses on the questionnaires could be correlated with demographic information to determine what other differences and similarities there are among the different groups. Data about computer usage and familiarity with online could also be correlated with the scaled responses.

A qualitative analysis will examine the participants' posts and analyze them from a sociocultural perspective. A comparison of data, including participants' posts, to Byram's (1997) model, much in the way that other studies have done, could attempt to identify instances of intercultural communication, where it occurred and where it broke down. The participants' posts on the online discussion could also be examined linguistically to see how and, perhaps why, certain interactions occurred. The data could also be examined from a constructivist perspective to look at the assignment from the viewpoint of educational theory and philosophy. A qualitative analysis could also be used to determine whether and how this assignment being an online assignment impacted the how it was implemented by the students. What at first seemed like a simple online communication assignment now has taken on the character of a much more complex intercultural phenomenon.

Liaw (2006) identified four types of intercultural competences in the students' interactions: "(i) interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others, (ii) ability to change perspective, (iii) knowledge about one's own and others' culture for intercultural communication, and (iv) knowledge about intercultural communication processes" (p. 57). The responses from the questionnaires for this study do not provide enough data to determine whether it supports her findings or not. However, an analysis of the postings could be analyzed using the categories to determine the level of intercultural competence.

Conclusion

From this research it has been shown that, many university students are proficient in using computers and the Internet for their daily, work, and school lives, and many of them are eager to participate in academic assignments that require the use of technology such as online discussions, blogs, and wikis (Wikia, Inc., 2007; Johnson, 2006; Richardson, 2005). This project offers insights into designing online coursework which effectively use online tools for interactive intercultural communication.

Because this project was designed initially as an action research project by an instructor, the goal was to use the results of this study to redefine and redevelop further iterations of this assignment so that it better meets the goal of developing interactive intercultural communication. However, the literature review and further development of this research project has demonstrated the complexity of the issues that are involved in this project.

In today's world the development of intercultural competence is very important, and improved opportunities for interactive communication is key. If well-designed and well-executed, an assignment such as this one can help it develop; otherwise, the assignment is just another online discussion. Many teachers see the usefulness of this type of assignment in developing intercultural competence, in many types of situations, not just the language classroom, but may not have a clear picture how to carry it out most effectively.

The online environment offers enough flexibility that some of the logistical and structural issues of intercultural and

international communication can be easily addressed. Time zone and schedule differences become irrelevant when engaging in asynchronous online discussions such as this one. The asynchronous nature of the discussion also offers students time to prepare, review and revise their postings. As Liaw (2006) points out, if the teacher plans with developing intercultural communication in mind, the online environment can offer a stage on which it can effectively be acted out by the participants. In order to go beyond being just an enjoyable and interesting activity such an assignment needs to be carefully designed so that students are aware of their role as communicators. Part of developing intercultural competence is recognizing one's own role in communication, such as how to engage in a give-and-take that provokes discussion and moves it beyond the initial interaction.

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