

Intercultural Communication: Saudi, Ukrainian, and Russian Students Online

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Abstract

This paper describes an intercultural online writing project in which three EFL college instructors in Ukraine, Russia and Saudi Arabia and their undergraduate students participated. The aim of the project was to develop students' writing skills in EFL and to develop their awareness of local and global cultural issues and events. 13 discussion threads, 20 external links, 9 documents, 3 assignments, a photo gallery and Powerpoint presentations were posted in the Nicenet coursesite. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the students' messages and reactions are reported.

Keywords: *cross-cultural communication, EFL, writing, exchange, online instruction, global issues, culture.*

1. Introduction

Interest in cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural awareness, and cross-cultural understanding among politicians, economists, businessmen, educators and other partners is increasing. L2 students no longer need to travel or leave their homes to meet people from other countries and learn about their culture. Foreign language educators in countries like Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Germany, and South America are making use of information and communication technologies to connect L2 students with students of the target language in the USA, UK or Canada. Online collaborative and interactive projects are being used to develop students' cross-cultural awareness, communication, and understanding. A review of the L2 literature has shown that web-based video, e-

mail, audio and video conferencing, web-page design, internet-based resources, culture portfolios, online newspapers and online chat rooms have been integrated in the teaching of target culture to junior and senior high school and college students learning English, French, German and Spanish as a second or foreign language.

E-mail exchanges between four American and Canadian college preparatory ESL students were found to be effective in teaching intercultural awareness, in creating a positive affective climate, and in making the English-for-Academic-Purposes (EAP) curriculum more relevant to the students (Ruhe, 1998). In another study by Schoorman and Camarillo (2000), 56 pairs of university-school partners participated in an e-mail-based project. Pre-service teachers and middle school students corresponded with each other for ten weeks. Analysis of the letters written during the ten-week period, end-of-semester pre-service teacher project reports, weekly instructor field notes, faculty/pre-service student dialogue journals, and a questionnaire completed by middle school students at the end of the project revealed positive outcomes including a broadening of multicultural awareness and improvement in L2 skills. In a similar project conducted by Cifuentes and Shih (2001), forty pairs of American pre-service teachers and Taiwanese university students corresponded by e-mail. Findings of pre- and post-connection surveys, midterm surveys, reflective journals, final reports, and interview transcripts indicated that Taiwanese participants were positive about online ESL acquisition and cultural learning both before and after the connection. They preferred the one-on-one e-mail exchange to the web-based environment.

Many other studies combined e-mail with other forms of technology. For instance, Singhal (1998) reviewed several studies and projects on computer-mediated communication used for enhancing L2 learning and culture education, and examined their impact on elementary, secondary, and college students. She found that e-mail and teleconferencing provided authentic communication and fostered awareness of languages and cultures. In addition to the studies reviewed by Singhal, 45 French and American middle school students corresponded via electronic mail on a daily basis and participated in several teleconferences (Shelley, 1996). In the second year of the project, both groups produced a bilingual play, describing various sociolinguistic and cultural elements of the respective cultures. Shelley found that target language usage and interest increased over the duration of the project. Electronic exchange between French and American students

was found to be an effective networking activity that enhanced the language learning skills of all students involved in the project.

Moreover, two studies by Lee (1997) and Osuna and Meskill (1998) reported that use of Internet resources was a meaningful way to integrate language and culture and to provide opportunities for students to learn about the target culture while using e-mail to discuss cultural aspects with native speakers. Internet resources were used as a means of gaining a deeper sense of Spanish culture by college students. Findings of those two studies demonstrated that the web was a suitable tool for increasing linguistic and cultural knowledge, as well as a means of increasing motivation.

Furthermore, e-mail, web page design, and audio and video conferencing were effectively used in an intercultural communication project that allowed French and American foreign-language students to learn language as a part of culture. Students in a U.S. undergraduate French class and in a French post-graduate engineering course pursued an intercultural stance via electronic interactions concerning cultural differences, focusing on childhood socialization (Kinging, Gourves-Hayward and Simson, 1999).

However, a constructivist computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environment, consisting of web-based activities and a U.S. e-pal activity used in teaching English writing to 29 freshman Taiwanese students did not help enhance students' attitudes towards American culture (Chen, 2001). Results of the surveys, quantitative observations, and phenomenological interviews indicated that Taiwanese students' attitudes towards cultural learning and the learning styles did not undergo any significant change.

Other technologies that proved to be successful in helping college students bring insider's views of other cultures into the foreign language classroom were Internet-based culture portfolios. Abrams (2002) divided 68 intermediate students learning German at a Midwestern university into a traditional and experimental groups. Students in the experimental group carried out online interviews with native informants in order to explore the stereotypical views of the cultures of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Responses to a post-project questionnaire indicated that most of the students in the experimental group were better able to view culture with an insider's perspective, reflected a developing sensitivity to diversity within the cultures of German-speaking

countries, and showed an awareness of the idea that political boundaries are inadequate for determining cultural boundaries.

To develop students' cultural knowledge and language skills, Lee (1998) used online newspapers and online chat rooms with college-level advanced Spanish students. Pre- and post-program surveys indicated that the program enhanced students' cultural knowledge, reading and oral skills.

From the above studies, it can be concluded that the integration of different forms of technology such as e-mail only, e-mail and teleconferencing, audio and video conferencing, web-page design, internet-based resources and culture portfolios, online newspapers and online chat rooms in the teaching of target culture to middle, high school and college students learning English, French, German and Spanish as a second or foreign language resulted in significant gains in student cultural knowledge and positive attitudes towards the target culture. E-mail was the most common technology used even when combined with teleconferences or internet culture portfolios. The integration of online courses in the teaching of the target culture and their effect on EFL students' cultural awareness was not investigated. Most of the studies reported above focused on inter-cultural collaboration between L2 and L1 students and/or pre-service teachers. Online collaboration between EFL students from different countries was not the subject of any research.

The present study describes an intercultural online writing project in which three EFL college instructors in Ukraine, Russia and Saudi Arabia and their undergraduate students participated. It describes how Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi instructors and their students were connected, how they interacted and shared knowledge and experiences. The study also investigates the effect of intercultural online project on writing skills development in EFL, attitudes towards the global and cultural issues discussed. It explores problems of intercultural communication in EFL learning environments. Through online instruction, students in the present study used e-mail, WWW links, online documents, a photo gallery, and Powerpoint presentations. They practiced reading and writing skills and discussed global and cultural issues. The type and amount of online tasks and activities encouraged the students to acquire information about current global events individually as well as interactively. The impact of the intercultural online project on EFL Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi students' attitudes

towards online collaboration and global and cultural issues was based on qualitative analyses of students' responses to the post-project questionnaire, as well as instructors' observations and comments. A content analysis of students' reactions to the discussion threads in terms of frequency and paragraph length are reported below.

2. Subjects

24 Ukrainian students from Lviv National Ivan Franko University, Ukraine; 15 Russian students from Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences; and 22 Saudi students from the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia participated in the online project in Spring 2003. All the students were sophomore. Saudi students were all females. Ukrainians and Russian students were history and sociology majors, whereas Saudi students were translation major. All the students were learning English as a foreign language. Saudi students had prior experience with online writing instruction with Blackboard from home and were concurrently enrolled in an online course with Nicenet which was used a supplement to the British and American culture course they were taking. Ukrainian and Russian students had no prior experience with online learning. They were enrolled in an English for history and sociology (2 hours per week), whereas Saudi students were enrolled in a course about British and American culture (3 hours per week). The English for history and sociology course consisted of a general English and an ESP component. Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi students' proficiency level in English ranged between low and upper intermediate. Ukrainian and Russian students share similar Eastern European, Roman Orthodox, and former Soviet cultures, whereas Saudi students share the same Arabic and Islamic cultures, live in a conservative society and study in a segregated educational setting.

My Ukrainian and Russian colleagues (Halyna and Julia) had no prior experience in online instruction. They attended a workshop on teaching EFL writing online using Blackboard and Nicenet that I gave at the TESOL Ukraine conference in January 2003. Halyna showed an interest in sharing an online course with me.

3. Procedures

3.1 Creating the Course

Halyna created an online course with Nicenet called “*Writing Across the Borders*”, which was used as a supplement to in-class instruction. The aim of the project was to develop students’ writing skills in EFL and to develop their awareness of global and cultural issues and events. The aim of the course was explained to the students, they were given the class key, and then they enrolled themselves. Ukrainian and Russian students accessed the Nicenet course from their college computer labs and checked the online course during and after the class session. Saudi students accessed the online course from home, as they had no internet access from campus.

3.2 Online Course Components and Content

The online course consisted of 11 conferencing topics (discussion threads), 20 external links, 9 documents, 3 assignments, an online photo gallery and Powerpoint presentations. The discussion threads covered the following: *Netiquette, beliefs, rumors and prejudices, cultural shock; impressions about the USA; voices on Iraq; cultural awareness and mass media; man and civilization; education; man against women;* in addition to the *International Women’s Day celebrated on March 8th* and *Easter celebrated on May 27th*. The Documents covered the following topics: *Netiquette Rules* by V. Shea; *Ancient Men and Women; Cross-Cultural Problems; Cultural Dimensions; Fog of War; Truth is Victim of Collateral Damage; Political Leaders on the War in Iraq; Voices on Iraq; Saddam Defies U.S. Demand to Leave; Coalition for the Immediate Disarmament of Iraq; The Difference in News Coverage by The US Mass Media and Mass Media in Other Countries* from Eugene Weekly. These documents were written, abridged or modified by the instructors. The external links included the following: *International Writing Exchange; Learning English on the Net; Cindy’s Computer Clinic for Beginners; Pictures of King Saud University; Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences; Lviv and Lviv National Ivan Franko University, A Fish out of Water* by Duncan Mason; *Thinkquest: Cultural Connections; Take the Shock out of Culture Shock* by Charlotte Thomas; *A Mini-Lecture on Culture Shock* by Randall

Davis; *The Problem Of Adjustment to New Cultural Environments*; *Culture Shock* by Carmen Cuanipa; *Language and Gender*; *On-line Netiquette*; *Netiquette Rules*; *Uncle Sam* (a cartoon published by the students of the McConnell Center for Political Leadership); *Events Leading to the Brink of War* (a timeline); *Bush: Leave Iraq within 48 hours* (a transcript from CNN of President Bush's Monday night televised address to the nation); *Postwar Plans* (a cartoon published by startribune.com). The Photo galleries and Powerpoint presentations showed pictures of Ukraine, Russia and Riyadh and the three institutions.

For Ukrainian and Russian students, the content of the online course was not related to the textbook used in class (*Reward Intermediate* from Macmillan). It was used as a supplement. The online material was an obligatory part of the ESP component. Ukrainian students could print the documents from the “*Documents*” section and study them at home. They discussed the conferencing topics in class, studied the new vocabulary items and took the quizzes. Some of the questions on the final exam covered the online course materials. Halyna took the amount of participation in the Nicenet course into consideration when she gave each student a mark for the course.

As for Saudi students, the content of the online course was not related to the British and American Culture course they were taking. I wanted to give them the opportunity to communicate and share knowledge with students from other countries, which was unprecedented in Saudi Arabia. Participation in the project was optional, as the students were psychologically inhibited to participate. My students were shy, apprehensive and hesitant to register as they are used to learning in a segregated environment (female students and female instructors only). They thought it would be like a chatroom where male and female students chat rather than study. Some wanted to conceal their identity by registering using a male’s name, using their first name and initials, deleting their e-mails, using “anonymous” instead of their real names. I had to assure them that all course activities were monitored by the three instructors and that Ukrainian students are respectful and serious. I told them about my visit to Ukraine and experience with Ukrainian students. I encouraged them to register using their real names and gave them extra credit for participating in the online course. Material in the online course was not brainstormed in class. Quizzes and the final exam did not cover any

online material. The students read the online documents, checked the links and posted responses to the discussion threads whenever they wanted.

3.3 Instructors' Role

My Ukrainian and Russian colleagues had to provide training in using the Nicenet online course. Before online instruction began, we agreed on a list of discussion threads to be posted in the online course. However, as the course progressed, there were changes in the topics posted. Halyna and Julia had to brainstorm discussion threads before and after the students posted their responses. They selected and posted the documents and external links. Due to my experience with online writing instruction in EFL, I helped in planning and managing the online course and provided my colleagues with feedback and suggestions on how to phrase discussion topics, how many topics to post per week, when to post, how to respond to students, what external links to post before and during the project. Halyna always asked me questions. Although Halyna and Julia did not do the same things in class, they were writing to each other on a regular basis about what their students were doing and what they were going to do next. All of us gave feedback and encouraged the students to participate.

Shortly after the beginning of the semester, Halyna and I were on special assignments, as a result of which substitute instructors had to teach our courses. Before leaving, Halyna talked to her substitute instructors, and gave them suggestions. She did not require that they be involved in online teaching, partly because they did not know much about online instruction, and partly because that would involve too much effort on their part. Hence the substitute instructors served as facilitators only. It was a real online course for Halyna, because she was in the USA, and could only learn about what the students were doing from what they were writing. Halyna checked Nicenet several times a day. She wrote to her students personally. Providing feedback and checking class participation were difficult for Halyna, because she had many things to do in the USA. Since she did not have a computer at home, she had to do everything in the office. She came to work earlier and went home late. This taught her to manage her time better. A bigger challenge for Halyna was the course documents, finding related links and providing feedback. Preparing the documents was an improvisation, and she thought about the content along the way. Looking for material was time-consuming. Halyna

wished she had more communication with the substitute instructors. Had she been physically present in class, Halyna thought she could have done more, because she knew more about the course.

My substitute instructor was not involved in online instruction at all, so my students continued to learn autonomously. In the first six weeks when I was teaching, I used to thank my students for registering and ask them about what they thought of Ukrainian students. But after I quit, I had no face-to-face contact with the students. I just checked the online course once a day and sent students private messages. Managing the online course was not a burden for me because of my prior experience with online teaching. The only challenge was to keep the students interested, while being away and having no control over grades and exams.

3.4. Post-Project Questionnaire

At the end of the course, all of the students answered an open-ended questionnaire, which consisted of 20 questions. Russian students and their instructor did not answer the questionnaire. Qualitative analyses of the questionnaire, and instructor comments and observations are reported below.

4. Project Outcomes

4.1 Description of Student Posts

Analysis of the students' messages and reactions showed that all the students posted a total of 168 responses (posts) under the discussion threads. Ukrainian students posted 67% of the posts, Russians posted 23%, and Saudis posted 10%. 24% of the students did not post anything (one Ukrainian, 5 Russians and 11 Saudis). The typical Ukrainian student posted between 1-11 responses (mdn=5), Russian students posted between 1-7 responses (mdn=3) and Saudi students posted 1-4 responses (mdn=1). None of the students took the initiative to post any conferencing topics or links related to any global or cultural issue.

The discussion threads with the highest number of responses were: *Welcome* in which the students introduced themselves (27%), *voices on Iraq* (21%), *culture shock*

(15%), *man against women* (11%), *beliefs, rumors and prejudices* (10%), and *netiquette* (9%). These percentages reflect familiarity with the topic, relevance to current global events, interest, relationship of the topic to students' personal experiences and knowledge, and degree of abstractness.

The responses that Ukrainian students posted under '*Welcome*' ranged between 12-195 words (mdn=82), those posted by Russian students ranged between 110-215 words (mdn=178) and those posted by Saudis ranged between 27-140 words (mdn=53). The conferencing topic with the longest responses was '*Voices on Iraq*' due to exposure to a flow of information in the media. Students were also emotionally involved in the event. Russian students were the most proficient in writing and their posts were the longest, as they were enrolled in a British-Russian university. Most of the responses posted by Saudi students were under '*Welcome*', one was posted under '*culture shock*', and two under '*Voices on Iraq*' probably. Saudi students' posts were short and brief. They just gave their name, age, major, name of institution, thanked their instructor for giving them the opportunity to participate and expressed their interest in the cultural exchange. There was not much variety among their posts. On the contrary, Ukrainian and Russian students talked about their towns, jobs, and personal experiences.

4.2 Difficulties

Ukrainian students had limited access to the computer lab and none of them had a computer at home. They had difficulty connecting to the internet, which made browsing slow, tedious and sometimes impossible. 30% did not have time to respond to the discussion threads, 20% could not access the Nicenet course, 20% found the documents difficult to understand, as they came across difficult words and spent a lot of time looking up their meanings, 30% were not familiar with the discussion topics and could not generate ideas and 10% had little experience with the internet. 10% of the Saudi students were slow in typing, 20% did not have time to check the website. As the number of documents and posts increased, 10% found reading the posts and documents a chore and could not keep up with them. 20% lost interest, as I was not physically present. They posted few responses after I quit teaching them, because I had no control over quizzes and grades and some participants told me that they only write for credit.

Others could not probably generate ideas. However, they continued to check and read the documents and responses posted by Ukrainian and Russian students.

4.3 Effect on Attitude and EFL Skills

As to students' attitudes towards the online intercultural exchange, all of the students enjoyed reading, discussing, and expressing opinions about global and cultural issues and events. They thought the course helped them understand some aspects of "world life" and gave them a feel of "live" English. Ukrainian students were very enthusiastic and found the exchange project exciting. The documents helped many generate ideas for their messages, learn new words, and enhance their reading and writing skills. Although Saudi students were apprehensive and hesitant to participate in this project, they found it informative and their experience clarified the misconceptions and fears they had about learning and interacting with students from other countries. Saudi students were impressed by how fast Ukrainian students responded and how much they wrote. It was fascinating for Ukrainian as well as Saudi students to communicate with their teachers who were abroad and meet people from other countries. Saudi students reported that their English improved as a result of reading what and how other students write and think. They acquired new information and exchanged ideas with students from the West. They found Ukrainian and Russian students respectful and interested in discussing global issues, which they found educational and enriching.

Halyna noticed that Ukrainian students' proficiency level in English improved, because of the online course and the amount of reading and writing they were exposed to. Halyna did not see her students for two months, and when she got back, they were speaking, reading and writing better. As for Saudi students, the positive effect was more manifested in attitude towards communicating and learning with students from other countries rather than language skills.

All the students expressed an interest in continuing the project in the future or participating in similar projects. The following semester, Ukrainian students used the online documents, discussion materials and postings for a sociology class and Halyna shared a Nicenet course with a Japanese counterpart. I am currently sharing an online grammar course with a Japanese instructor and her students.

The positive effect of intercultural online collaboration on Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi EFL students' attitudes obtained in the present study is consistent with findings of other intercultural collaborative projects between L1 and L2 students and/or pre-service teachers using other forms of technology. For instance, Ruhe (1998) reported that e-mail was effective in teaching intercultural awareness, created a positive affective climate, and made the English-for-Academic-Purposes curriculum more relevant to students. In addition, Schoorman and Camarillo (2000) noted that e-mail exchanges between university pre-service teachers and middle school students broadened their multicultural awareness and improved their skills. Target language usage and interest increased over the duration of the project. Electronic exchange between the schools enhanced the language learning skills of all students involved in the project (Shelly, 1996). Web resources proved to be a suitable tool for increasing language and cultural knowledge, as well as a means for increasing motivation (Osuna & Meskill, 1998; Lee, 1997). They were a meaningful way to integrate language and culture and to provide opportunities for students to learn about the target culture while using e-mail to discuss cultural aspects with native speakers. E-mail increased students' interest and motivation. Likewise, Lee (1998) reported that online newspapers and online chat rooms enhanced college-level advanced Spanish students' learning, improved their language and reading skills, and increased their cultural knowledge.

By contrast, findings of the present study are inconsistent with findings of Chen's study (2001) who found that Taiwanese freshman students exposed to American culture in a constructivist CALL environment. Chen's results indicated that college EFL learners' attitudes towards learning American culture and learning styles did not undergo any significant change. The more the subjects participated in the CALL environment, the less they felt that information on the Internet helped them better understand American culture, and the less they liked exploring American culture via the Internet.

5. Conclusion

Online instruction in EFL is not widely used in Ukraine, Russia and Saudi Arabia. So the *Writing Across the Borders* online course is a pioneer project in those countries. The interaction between instructors and students who belong to two

completely different cultural, political, linguistic and educational backgrounds, and different majors: Saudi vs Ukrainian-Russian was impressive and our experience was effective and successful. It showed that students from different countries have common interests and common points of views regarding certain global cultural issues. It helped the students develop a global perspective as well as language and communication skills. They developed a positive attitude towards other cultures and learnt to accept and respect differences in points of view, beliefs and traditions. Such an effective project did not need any financial support, no special hardware or software, no re-scheduling. Intercultural communication was enriching for EFL students in the present study. EFL Students and instructors in low-tech learning environments can still use collaborative online instruction with Nicenet or OWCP effectively even as a supplement to in-class instruction. They can share experiences, instructional materials and try out new teaching techniques together.

For intercultural online projects to be even more effective in enhancing students' attitudes and skills, collaborating instructors should teach the same skill, can pre-plan the course and agree on cultural topics; select cultural topics that cover local cultures, the target language culture (American and British cultures), and then global issues; give the students an overview of the course in the '*Assignment*' section at the beginning of the course; write in the '*Documents*' section and post discussion threads on a regular basis; make the course more structured and make deadlines more rigid; and brainstorm discussion threads face-to-face before and after the students post their responses. Students must be encouraged to take the initiative to post their own discussion threads and links. To help students take it more seriously, the online course should be part of the final exam and course credit. Studies that investigate intercultural online projects that are fully delivered online and which have identical content and pre- and post-project assessment are called for.

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