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Free telecollaboration 2.0 tools and activities for enhancing intercultural communicative competence

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Free Telecollaboration 2.0 Tools and Activities for Enhancing

Intercultural Communicative Competence

by

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Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my beloved daughter, Tran Anh Minh Khoi, for her

endless love and unobtrusive encouragement during her mom's study and completion of

this thesis manuscript.

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness and relevance of some free telecollaboration 2.0 tools and the IT-HELPS activities to the participants' enhancement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in reference to Byram's (1997) ICC definition and its five principles. In-depth qualitative data were collected from six semi-structured interviews with students and teachers of the eight-week online intercultural exchange between a Second Language Acquisition class at Eastern Michigan University in the United States and an English as a Second Language class at Tan Tao University in Vietnam. Despite the failed communication in some collaborative tasks due to some deficiencies in motivating, facilitating, and managing the exchange activities, the study results showed the informants' positive changes of ICC and the Vietnamese students' significant improvement of English language skills. New avenues and suggestions were also discussed for further research into the benefits of using free telecollaboration 2.0 tools and activities for intercultural learning via online exchanges.

List of Abbreviations

CALL: Computer Assisted Language Learning

CMC: Computer Mediated Communication

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

EMU: Eastern Michigan University

ICC: Intercultural Communicative Competence

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IT-HELPS: Seven suggested topics for the exchange activities: Identity, Taboos and

Stereotypes, Holidays, Education and entertainment, Language, People and

places, and Social issues.

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

LMS: Learning Management System

NSs: Native Speakers

NNSs: Non-native Speakers

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

TTU: Tan Tao University

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement and Background

In today's global context, with the rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICT), the thirst for knowledge access and mutual understanding transcends the limitation of geographical boundaries and the different educational and administrative systems between the superpowers and less influential countries. In education, this pressing demand, in turn, draws on an establishment of a networking system that can help people share knowledge and information as well as deliver different types of educational services. Recent developments in ICT have heightened the need for using computers and the Internet in today's classes in general and in language classes in particular. Information overload, rapid changes in communication technology, globalization, and new knowledge-acquisition modalities make a computer-based learning environment more important than ever. Referring to the chaos of information and texts on the Internet, Kol and Schcolnik (2000) state, "The profession is witnessing increased availability of academic and professional texts (both books and articles) on the Internet" (p. 67). Understandably, rapid evolution of communication technologies has changed the instruction and use of a target language, enabling new forms of interaction and ways to participate in academic communities (Kern, 2006). Likewise, James (1996) points out, "Educational technology is often presented as a potential means for making the students' learning experiences richer and the teacher's job easier" (p. 20). With more online opportunities, learners can surely reach out to the world and hence create better chances for language and culture exchanging and learning. According to Warschauer (2000), globalization and the increasing advent of new information

technologies further the spread of English and change English language in use. In other words, technology contributes to transforming or at least to changing the teaching and learning methods, and eventually empowering learners and teachers with more flexibility. Along the same line, technological tools should be used in a context such as the one in Vietnam because technology can "offer students a venue for additional interesting and engaging activities, ensure student-centeredness and autonomy as well as interaction and connectivity" (Pop, 2010, p. 1186).

To fill the gap in using technologies for teaching and learning in general and in language education in particular, the administrators of the education sectors in countries where English is a foreign language (EFL) have called for practical applications of technology in curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation. In Vietnam, for example, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) invested significantly in computers in schools and encouraged teachers to use computers in their teaching. The MOET created the Directive on Promoting Teaching, Training and Applying ICT in Education – Period 2008-2012 (MOET, 2008) for all schools across the country to improve the education system in general and the teaching of EFL in particular through the application of computer technology in education between 2008 and 2012. Learning Management Systems (LMS) are also available at higher education institutions. However, questions have been raised about the appropriate use of technologies in language education because it is generally limited to teachers' use of PowerPoint presentations to partly replace chalk and blackboards in language classrooms. Unfortunately, not many language educators can fully explore the available technological tools to connect different language learners across boundaries due to the high cost of educational software and technologies, the

moderate technological skills of the users, and the lack of task management skills by teachers (Perren, 2001). There are many contexts for the best e-lessons using MS PowerPoint, but not many language teachers know how to explore the free technologies online, especially to connect learners across countries.

In these EFL countries, it is obvious that the classroom is the only environment for English language acquisition and practice; thus the fact that the teaching and learning of EFL has become extremely significant resulted in the mushrooming and extensive proliferation of many English-language classes. Nevertheless, the quantity of English classes and importance of EFL education do not guarantee a compatible level of teaching quality because of some existing problems. For instance, in Vietnam, one of these challenges is how to teach learners to use English effectively in communication with other people in real-world situations (Le, 1999). Many institutions and foreign language centers are willing to pay high salaries to recruit native speakers of English for teaching positions, even those without proper education or teaching training in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). In this context, however, cultural teaching in English language classes is ignored, and intercultural exchange programs are mainly used as study-abroad tours, which reach only wealthy learners or high-paid private foreign language centers.

With the aforementioned issues, simply providing access to ICT will not completely make educational systems better, but exploring their full potential in online exchanges for specific situations and educational goals may. In fact, it is urgent to focus on the meaningful integration of inexpensive ICT into intercultural exchanges in order to fill the gaps of learners' different ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, ages, educational backgrounds and geographical locations. Many intercultural exchanges have

tried to link the native speakers of English (NS) and the non-native speakers of English (NNS) using study-abroad tours and online tools; however, free Web 2.0 tools which have many dominant features to Web 1.0 have not been explored effectively, especially in developing countries. Therefore, this research study focused on examining the possibility of using free telecollaboration 2.0 tools and relevant intercultural exchange activities to effectively enhance language learners' intercultural communicative competence. Figure 1 can best illustrate this purpose in using telecollaboration 2.0 tools to connect NS and NNS in online exchange:

Figure 1. The adaptation of Kachru's (1985) circles of Englishes

Justification and Significance

The importance of conducting this research is manifold. First, this study is specifically beneficial for language teachers and learners at Tan Tao University in Vietnam as well as at Eastern Michigan University. Actually, the results of this research can help teachers create more interesting class activities and authentic communication with speakers from other cultures. The findings from this research are helpful for all English language teachers because all of the exchange activities and materials are based on the TESOL technology standards for language learners and teachers (Healy et al., n.d),

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most notably Goal 2, which focuses on language learners' use of technology in socially and culturally appropriate, legal, and ethical ways. More specifically, this goal has two standards to follow: (1) Language learners have the ability to understand different communication conventions across cultures, communities, and contexts, and (2) Language learners become respectful for others in using information personally and publicly. Therefore, if the application of these activities in this research shows good results, then the student outcomes are met. In fact, if these activities can be used as originally designed, the participants implicitly and easily meet these standards. In addition, participants have a good chance to learn the target language and increase their intercultural communicative competence with less pressure in a virtual world with free hi-tech support. Students can learn another culture and language authentically for free without being afraid of losing face. Consequently, the study paves a smooth route to better serve the broader population of EFL learners in Vietnam with effective communicative English and intercultural learning. The research results may also give multiple applications and a vast array of self-improvement opportunities for better English learning in other developing countries in South East Asia with situations similar to those in Vietnam where a virtually and culturally enriched environment to develop the language and culture knowledge rarely exists for free.

Second, this research is unique in Vietnam in the field of online intercultural exchanges and may lead to a trend in using a culturally inclusive curriculum for language learning. Some exchange programs have been developed in Vietnam, but no previous program was done online with many activities that could be embedded into the existing ESL/ EFL curricula of the participants to enhance ICC. Therefore, examining the

relevance and effectiveness of the designed activities and the chosen technologies in this research may open a new door to curriculum reform for better English language learning in Vietnam. Especially since most of the U.S. participants in the study from the Second Language Acquisition class at Eastern Michigan University will become language teachers, this project is very beneficial for them. Indeed, these participants learned first-hand about the advantages and disadvantages of online materials and tools in English language education. They were able to learn how to effectively communicate with learners of English as a second language, and this is of great benefit for their future English language teaching.

Moreover, despite the increasing popularity of research on intercultural exchange programs in the world and the fact that network-based learning and telecollaboration have been in use for a long time, very few studies have focused on evaluating the cultural learning outcomes in the digital world (Kern, 2002). Thus, this study will contribute some evidence to enrich this field of study.

Finally, it is relatively unclear how online exchanges can actually contribute to intercultural learning (O'Dowd, 2007). Therefore, this study serves as another stepping stone for further research into the field of telecollaboration 2.0. Indeed, this research provides more evidence on the possibility of enhancing intercultural communicative competence through online exchange programs for free, especially in developing countries like Vietnam.

Purpose of the Study

In this online intercultural exchange program between ESL students at Tan Tao University in Vietnam and students in a Second Language Acquisition class at Eastern Michigan University, the researcher targeted the following two objectives:

Objective 1 – Determining whether the participants have enhanced their intercultural communicative competence in this online intercultural exchange.

Objective 2 – Examining the effectiveness and relevance of the selected free technological tools and the IT-HELPS activities in enhancing the participants' intercultural communicative competence in the asynchronous and synchronous exchanges.

Research Question

How relevant and effective are the IT-HELPS activities and the free telecollaboration 2.0 tools in enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence in the online intercultural exchanges between students of Tan Tao University and Eastern Michigan University?

Theoretical Framework

The notion of "Intercultural Communicative Competence" (ICC) is used with various meanings and may be referred to under other labels. In the general literature, the two terms *"intercultural communicative competence"* and *"intercultural competence"* are often used interchangeably. However, a thorough theoretical grounding for this research was based on Byram's (1997) definition of "Intercultural Communicative Competence" as the ability to establish and maintain relations with members of other cultures in *a foreign language.*

This model of ICC, which consists of the five principles of the two skills of interpreting/relating and discovery/interaction, knowledge, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness, is considered to be the most suitable starting point for developing a framework for the various goals of telecollaboration even though it was not developed for telecollaboration contexts (Helm & Guth, 2010); therefore, it was used in this study with the goal:

> To develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity. (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002, p. 9)

It is believed that the learner will develop his/her awareness through explicit recognition and real experience of one or more interdependent factors that are overtly inclusive in the class activities. Figure 2 visualizes this important interrelationship among learning, awareness, and experience in the language and culture teaching process that this study aimed to investigate.
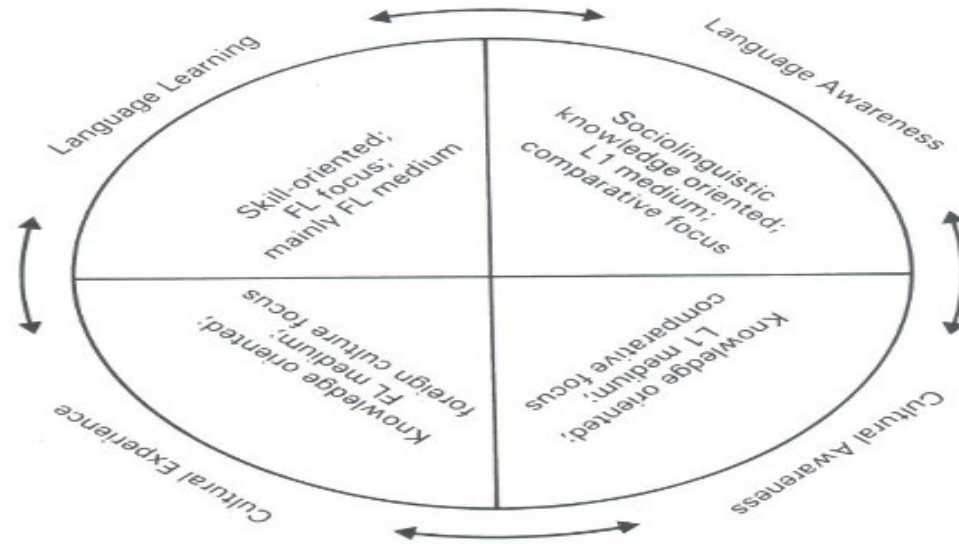
Figure 2. The language and culture teaching process (Byram, 1990, p. 20)

Based on the above framework demonstrating the relationship between language and culture, the IT-HELPS activities were designed to purposefully develop learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the online intercultural exchange. The IT-HELPS activities used both asynchronous and synchronous telecollaboration 2.0 tools to facilitate the discussions, collaborative projects, video/movie/article sharing, video making, language learning, and video conferencing of seven topics abbreviated under the IT-HELPS:Identity, Taboos and Stereotypes, Holidays, Education and Entertainment, Languages, People and Places, and Social Issues. These activities are theoretically based on the five principles of Byram's (1997) ICC model: Knowledge, Skills of Interpreting and Relating, Skills of Discovery and Skills of Interaction, Attitude, and Critical Cultural Awareness. It was believed that the design of these culturally inclusive activities that explicitly focused on developing these five principles of Byram's ICC model could eventually enhance the participants' ICC. More detailed descriptions of these activities are presented later in Chapter Three, but the design can be visualized as follows:
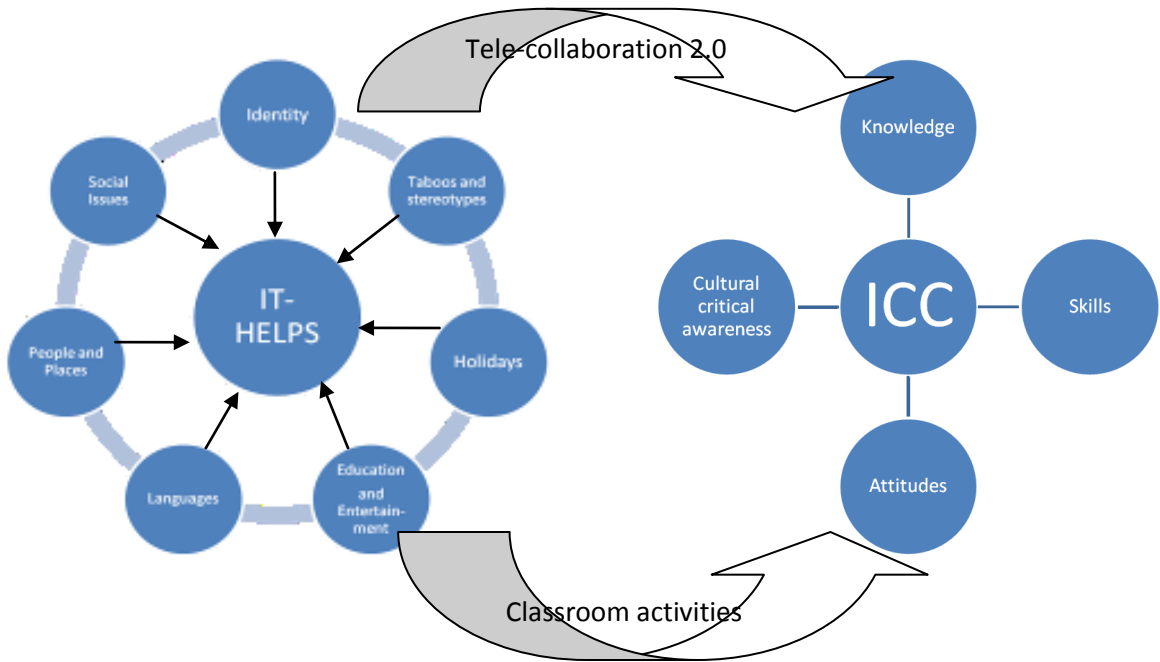
Figure 3. The design of the online intercultural exchange

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Definition of intercultural communicative competence. The notion of

intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is used with various meanings and may be

referred to under other labels. For instance, several terms used interchangeably are global

competence, international competence, multicultural competence, intercultural maturity,

communicative competence, cross-cultural competence, cultural competence, intercultural

interaction, transcultural communication, and intercultural cooperation (Fatini, 2006).

In the general literature of intercultural learning, the two terms "intercultural

communicative competence" and "intercultural competence" are often used as synonyms.

However, Byram (1997) and other authors refer to intercultural competence as the ability

to establish and maintain relations with members of other cultures, but it is not necessarily

linked to *foreign language competence,* while intercultural *communicative* competence

implies that the learner can do this in a foreign language (Helm & Guth, 2010).

The definition of ICC is neither clear nor comparable internationally (Vogt, 2006).

Many language-teaching professionals commonly view intercultural communicative

competence (ICC) as an extension of communicative competence. For example, Beneke

(2000) explained:

Intercultural communication in the wider sense of the word involves the use of

significantly different linguistic codes and contact between people holding

significantly different sets of values and models of the world … Intercultural

competence is to a large extent the ability to cope with one's own cultural

background in interaction with others. (pp. 108-109)

However, Fantini (2000) analyzed ICC in a more complex way. He described ICC

as "complex abilities that are required to perform effectively and appropriately when

interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 1).

"Effective" usually reflects one's own view of one's performance in the outsider's view of

the host culture, and "appropriate" relates to how one's performance is perceived by one's

hosts. He also discussed the multiple elements of ICC such as a variety of traits and

characteristics (i.e., flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy,

tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgment, among others); three areas or domains

(the ability to establish and maintain relationships, the ability to communicate with

minimal loss or distortion, the ability to collaborate in order to accomplish something of

mutual interest or need); four dimensions (knowledge, [positive] attitudes/affect, skills,

and awareness); proficiency in the host language; and varying levels of attainment

throughout a longitudinal and developmental process. Slightly different, Byram's (1997)

model of intercultural communicative competence requires certain attitudes, knowledge,

and skills in addition to linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence. The

attitudes include curiosity and openness as well as readiness to see other cultures and the

speaker's own without being judgmental. The required knowledge is "of social groups and

their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the

general processes of societal and individual interaction" (p. 51). Finally, the skills include

those of interpreting and relating, discovery, and interaction, in addition to critical cultural

awareness/political education. Because of its usefulness and clarity, Byram's (1997)

model of *intercultural communicative competence* with its five principles of skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, knowledge, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness are used in this study to specifically refer to "the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 149). The five principles can be visually understood as shown in Figure 4:

	Skills interpret and relate *(savoir comprendre)*	
Knowledge of self and other; of interaction; individual and societal *(savoir être)*	**Education** political education critical cultural awareness *(savoir s'engager)*	**Attitudes** relativising self valuing other *(savoir être)*
	Skills discover and/or interact *(savoir apprendre/faire)*	

Figure 4. Factors in intercultural communication (Byram, 1997, p.34)

The importance of enhancing intercultural communicative competence (ICC).
There are many reasons to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in language learners. First, having the ICC to sustain effective communication across cultures can help learners "heighten the language learning experience" (Lomicka, 2006, p. 211) and motivate learning in authentic language communication. Second, empowering language learners with ICC can improve their proficiency of the target language because language and culture are inseparable. Even writers such as Guest (2002), who did not believe in the purpose of direct teaching of culture, agrees that we tend to transmit the values of English culture in teaching English. Valdes (1990) remarked that if culture is an unavoidable part of language teaching, then "recognizing the culture lessons to be learned

for what they are and making the most of them enhances the learning experience" (p. 20).

In language learning, culture is the fifth skill following reading, writing, listening, and

speaking (Tomalin, 2008); thus proficiency-oriented instruction that overlooks the

important role of empowering learners with ICC in the curriculum would "lead to an

impoverished version of language teaching" (Byram, 1988, p. 15). Additionally,

obtaining ICC serves the learners better in their adult life because the development of ICC

has recently become "the mainstay… of foreign language learning in a number of

contexts" (Mueller-Hartman, 2006, p. 66). Most human beings are or will be dealing with

outsiders in their community, travelling abroad more, and contacting overseas partners or

friends. Thus the ability to communicate with people from different cultures and ethnic

backgrounds is a vital competency, both domestically and abroad (Lustig, 2005).

Obtaining intercultural communicative competence is not only important for

English language learners but also native speakers of English. This issue has been widely

and diversely recognized. The report of the Modern Language Association in 2007 (from

MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages) points out that "our whole culture must

become less ethnocentric, less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less Manichaean in

judging other cultures and more at home with the rest of the world" (p. 1). Further support

comes indirectly from a survey by Timmis (2002), in which the results also suggest that

not only English-speaking cultures should be taught but also other cultures need to be

examined. In particular, learners need to develop an awareness of their own and other

cultures and this can be done better in culturally inclusive learning environment.

From a more practical perspective, ICC is considered a fundamental skill for

success in the job market of today's global economy (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner,

2004). In fact it has been demonstrated that people with high ICC are often effective

leaders (Abbe, Gulick, & Herman, 2007; Mol, Born, Willemsen, & Van Der Molen,

2005), better at dealing with and managing stress (Selmer, 1999), more effective in their

job performance (Abbe et al., 2007; Mol et al., 2005), and more empathic to otherness

(Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). Previous studies show that one's ability to work

effectively with people from different cultures is highly associated with intercultural

communicative competence (Abbe et al., 2007). Therefore, intercultural communicative

competence has been increasingly valued by many employers (Lehtonen & Karjalainen,

2008).

Issues in assessment of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The

importance of evaluating intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is increasingly

recognized, especially in foreign language education. Deardorff's (2006) study found that

it is possible to assess degrees or levels of intercultural communicative competence. In

fact, there are different indirect and direct assessment tools for assessing intercultural

communicative competence in the literature. Examples of the existing indirect assessment

tools consist of self-reports (surveys) with a focus on multiple dimensions of the overall

construct of ICC. For instance, the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC)

developed by Fantini (2000, 2006) focuses on Byram's five principles of ICC (knowledge,

attitude, skills of interpreting, skills of discovery, and awareness), characteristics of

intercultural competence, domains of intercultural competence (relationships,

communication, and collaboration), language proficiency, and developmental level. One

exception to this generalization is Koester and Olebe's (1988) BASIC (Behavioral

Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence), which includes pre-specified guidelines

and scales for assessment by others. Another exception is the IDI (Intercultural

Development Inventory), which measures an individual's ICC development along a

continuum rather than within dimensions of an overall ICC construct (Engle & Engle,

2004). In contrast to the above-mentioned indirect assessment tools, direct tools include

performance assessment (Byram, 1997), portfolio assessment (Byram, 1997, Jacobson et

al., 1999), and interviews (Fantini, 2006). In addition, some researchers prefer the

combination of direct and indirect assessment methods to provide more comprehensive

results of intercultural competences (Fantini, 2006; Straffon, 2003).

However, a closer look at the content of existing ICC assessment tools shows a

dilemma: some assessment tools focus on linguistic rather than cultural aspects; others

stress international instead of intercultural elements. Still more are ambiguous and their

purposes are unclear (Fantini, 2009). For example, a list of 44 different ICC measurement

instruments was provided by Fantini (2006), but most of these instruments do not refer to

language or lack other aspects of ICC and are not relevant to educational goals and

objectives. Similarly, ten pitfalls of ICC assessment efforts have been identified, among

them not defining what is being measured, blindly borrowing other assessment tools,

having no goals/objectives, using only one tool, assessing too much at once and so forth

(Deardorff, 2009).

Additionally, the existence of different ICC models causes difficulty in choosing

appropriate instruments to measure the diverse ICC components. For example, Spitzberg

and Changnon (2009) listed five types of models: (1) Compositional Models, which

include such components as traits, characteristics, and skills; (2) Co-orientational Models,

which measure intercultural understanding and its variants, such as accuracy, clarity, and

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empathy; (3) Developmental Models, which emphasize time dimensions and stages of progression and intercultural maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005); (4) Adaptational Models, which have two distinctive characteristics: multiple interactants and mutual adjustment; and (5) Causal Path Models, which reflect specified interrelationships among components and formalize into testable propositions.

With such chaos in the aforementioned assessment tools and ICC models, it is obvious that ICC can be assessed better and more concisely if it is contextualized and conceptualized appropriately for each specific situation and purpose. Particularly for the realm of digital literacy, Helm and Guth (2010) considered Byram's (1997) model of ICC to be "the most suitable starting point for developing a framework" (p. 70) for the various goals of telecollaboration (i.e., communicating and negotiating effectively in multilingual, multicultural global networks and communication types) even though it was not originally developed for telecollaboration contexts.

Since assessing intercultural communicative competence is a particularly difficult task with many challenges in terms of ethical, practical, and pedagogical issues (O'Dowd, 2010), the qualitative interview technique was used in this study in keeping with the preferences of the top intercultural experts who respectively ranked case studies, interviews and a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures as the best three among the top ten direct and indirect ICC assessment methods (Deardorff, 2009). Indeed, ninety percent of a panel of expert interculturalists in Deardorff's (2009) study agreed that interviews and case studies received the strongest agreement for methods of assessment. In addition, interviewing the participants towards getting their opinions and experience of

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the process has proved to be very effective for small samples as Moustakas (1994) explained:

> Subject and object are integrated – what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am. My perception, the thing I perceive, and experience or action, interrelate to make the objective subjective and the subjective objective. (p. 59)

From this view, the subjective perspectives of the participants in this study regarding their development of intercultural communicative competence are valuable for data analysis because "perceptions are the only ways that we can understand the experience of others" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 54). Qualitative interviewing also "opens new doors to learn what others think and feel" (Lichtman, 2010, p.152). Therefore, in this study, interviewing was used as the main research instrument to withdraw the participants' viewpoints for the thick descriptions of their experiences of the online exchange.

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) use the term "qualitative" to indicate subjective participation with data collection. They stated, "Qualitative methodologies refer to research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior…is not reduced to an isolated variable or to a hypothesis but is viewed instead part of a whole" (p. 2). It describes many types of techniques "which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520). Similarly, Rubin and Rubin (2005) supportively claimed that "you can understand experiences in which you did not participate" and "explore new areas and discover and unravel intriguing puzzles" (pp. 3-4). Hence it was expected that

the qualitative data collected in this study would provide more insights of the discussed

issues and show more evidence and suggestions for improving the IT-HELPS activities.

Telecollaboration 2.0

     Definition of telecollaboration 2.0. Telecollaboration has been defined as

internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (Belz &Thorne, 2006) and

online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2007). More specifically, Helm and Guth (2010)

referred to telecollaboration as "internet-based intercultural exchange between people of

different cultural and/or national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the

aim of developing both language skills and ICC through structured tasks" (p. 14).

     Telecollaboration 2.0 refers specifically to telecollaboration with the educational

shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 - a network environment in which users can rate, share,

respond, and comment on other users' contributions (Steele & Cheater, 2008) and hence it

creates "a dialogical conversation" in a globalized and "flat" world (Friedman, 2005).

Likewise, Helm and Guth (2010) critically and concisely noted these benefits of using

telecollaboration 2.0:

> As well as increasing the different modes in which learners can communicate,
>
> exchange, compare and contrast information, telecollaboration 2.0 facilitates the
>
> collaborative construction of knowledge in the form of what can be seen as new
>
> cultural practices or artifacts such as blogs, wikis and virtual worlds, to name just a
>
> few. (p. 22)

    Web 2.0 tools for telecollaboration. Recent use of Web 2.0 shows its effectiveness

for online exchange in language education. In fact, Web 2.0 focuses more on

collaboration, participative elements, and the notion of "Web as a platform" (O'Reilly,

2005); therefore, Web 2.0 provides a social networking system in which participants have

interactive space to create and distribute the content for communication in the way that

Web 1.0 simply failed to do in comparison (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007).

It has been noted that "Telecollaboration can best support the enhancement of ICC

when a combination of different online tools is used" (O'Dowd, 2007, p. 148). However,

Web 2.0 should not be about specific technologies but about people's desire to connect

with each other (Steele & Cheater, 2008). Similarly, Helm and Guth (2010) stated, "in

particular Web 2.0 is not merely a tool for mediation but a significant social phenomenon

which has generated a multiplicity of new contexts in which people interact" (p. 20).

Hence some recent intercultural exchanges have applied different Web 2.0 tools,

depending on the purposes and the content or activities of the exchange. Some of them are

listed in the study of Guth and Thomas (2010): (1) Media Sharing (Flickr, YouTube); (2)

Social bookmarking (Delicious, Connotea, CiteULike); (3) Feed aggerators (Bloglines,

GoogleReader); (4) Social networks (Facebook, My Space, Ning, Twitter); (5) Wikis; and

(6) Blogs to create collaborative working-space and writing exchanges. Therefore, this

study paid more attention to the relevance and effectiveness of the selected technologies in

facilitating the activities that support the content and help to achieve the objectives of the

intercultural exchange.

Advantages and disadvantages of using Web 2.0 tools in telecollaboration. The

benefits of using Web 2.0 tools in online intercultural learning have been mentioned in

many recent studies. The most important benefit is that Web 2.0 technologies enable

social interactions with learners' active participation in learner-centered activities to own

the content of language production on the Web (Stickler & Emke, 2011, p. 147) and to

respond, share, and edit information overtly in public. In addition, Web 2.0 tools allow

dynamic and collaborative learning environments (Sclater, 2008) and create "the

perceived similarity to a real setting" with the use of video-conferencing for

telecollaboration (Yamada & Akahori, 2009, p.19) and recent software. Especially, using

Web 2.0 tools in intercultural exchanges makes communication more natural and socially

rich for younger learners, i.e, "tech savvy" and "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). For

example, Ivanic et al. (2007) claimed that students who have low literacy competence in

educational settings can be highly literate in digital practices. Moreover, O'Dowd (2007)

found that Web 2.0 tools provide learners with different types of knowledge (i.e., online

literacy, language, socio-cultural and professional knowledge) that contribute to the

development of cultural awareness when they explicitly compare the two cultures and

react directly to the submissions of others in online exchange dialogues. Finally, Web 2.0

tools for telecollaboration can potentially support the development of students' ICC in a

way that traditional culture learning materials would not be able to achieve. Indeed, from

an educational standpoint, telecollaboration 2.0 is a tool to "promote reflection,

understanding, criticism, equality and transformation" (Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 23). In

short, the Web 2.0 mindset and technologies "enrich the sociocultural potential of

telecollaboration" (Helm & Guth, 2010, pp. 21-22) because they facilitate the

collaboration and participation in the form of cultural practices and online literacies.

However, not all people can successfully create and maintain a Web 2.0 site due to

its newness, potential vandalism, copyright issues, information credibility, and so forth.

Additionally, using Web 2.0 tools in telecollaborations may cause problems and lead to

negative and unintended results. For example, there may be tensions due to the social and

cultural differences in expectations, motivations, time constraints, attitudes, and beliefs that may lead to misunderstandings and "a reinforcement of stereotypes and a confirmation of negative attitudes" (Belz, 2002, p. 138). In fact, due to the essence of the online exchanges and the limited direct communications with other people from the target culture, the participants may come to consider their online partners as the representative of all people in the target culture. In addition, there are always potential technological problems, unexpected time-consuming issues, and practical constraints due to time difference and/ or academic calendar (e.g., Ware, 2005). Partners may also feel little responsibility for repairing misunderstanding. For some sensitive questions or when they do not have the answers and ideas for the discussion, they can simply turn off the computer. Moreover, mismatches between collaborative online activity and individually assessed outcomes are noticed, such as in Greenfield's (2003) study on an email exchange between 10th grade ESL class in Hong Kong and 11th grade English class in Iowa.

Trends in Telecollaboration

Students in a few studies seem to prefer virtual worlds for language learning and intercultural exchange. For example, many projects have been conducted using Second Life, which is a publicly recognized 3D multi-user general purpose virtual world created and maintained by Linden Lab since 2003. Young (2008) reported that 25% of academic institutions in the United States used Second Life compared to 16% in 2007 because it allows the content creation of all participants, not limited to teachers, and thus it provides learning autonomy and growing interests in participants. It also creates "a sense of place" and a more "human" experience (Erard, 2007, p. 1). The *Virtual Harlem Project*, created by Bryan Carter as a part of his doctoral studies, used Second Life so that participants

could build cultural settings for specific uses; this facilitated the development of a learning community that was not limited in formal learning. Most recently, Sloodle, which is the combination of a Learning Management System (LMS) and Moodle, allows both asynchronous and synchronous activities and anticipates a sudden increase of a new form for online exchanges.

Another trend is the creation of commercial online language learning communities. *Livemocha*, founded in 2007 by Shirish Nadkarni and Krishan Seshadrinathan, is a typical example that provides a platform where speakers can interact with each other to learn a new language by using its learning materials provided in 38 languages. Among its 12 million registered members from 196 countries, the majority of them are from outside of the United States. In general, this social networking site has features similar to Facebook where registered foreign language learners can engage in synchronous and asynchronous communication, create a personal profile, connect with a circle of friends, exchange information and review other members' work, contribute translations, and help expand the base of available languages.

However, it is claimed that "much acquisition of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is tutored and takes place within an educational setting" (Byram, 1997, p. 43) and for real communication purposes because formal education with specific attention to the intercultural aspects will politically, religiously, and socially enhance the ICC of participants. Similarly, it has been suggested that "online exchange should be integrated into the regular classes in the way which the teacher finds most effective. ….When students are left to themselves they lose interest in the process fairly soon" (O'Dowd, 2007, p. 8). Therefore, recently there has been development of many formal

intercultural exchanges such as Transatlantic Collaborative projects (Kotter, 2002), Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language exchanges (Thorne, 2005), Cultura (Furstenberg & Levet, 2010), and LITERALIA (Stickler & Emke, 2011). Generally, in these intercultural exchanges, a combination of asynchronous and synchronous media, text, audio (or video), and virtual classrooms is used in mono-modal or multimodal platforms. In foreign language education, the goal of these exchanges is not only to promote authentic language practice to help learners achieve native-like fluency but also to develop participants' intercultural communicative competence through interaction and exchange (Belz & Thorne, 2006). Social networking and file-sharing sites, as well as virtual worlds, are creating joint content and developing online exchanges (Helm & Guth, 2010). Moreover, LMSs such as Moodle, Blackboard, or other web-based classrooms on Wikispaces, Webs, or Pbworks also offer a range of collaborative tools for engaging in the shared community of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Such technological tools are organized around people and structured as personal networks in which the user is the center of his or her own community. For example, the new Web 2.0 tends to link people more so than information (Waeschauer & Grimes, 2007), and the well-known asynchronous online forum in *Cultura*, an intercultural web project designed at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1997, is entirely led by students, not the teacher. Therefore, Web 2.0 tools have more dominant features than the previous generation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies (O'Reilly, 2005) and are potentially more effective for online exchange than ever.

However, it is astonishing that not many free Web 2.0 technologies have been fully explored to enhance online English learning communities (Mullen et al., 2009) even

though social networking tools such as Facebook, MySpace, and blogs are popular among computer users. Studies report that language teachers have only recently begun to integrate technologies into their teaching process but have not really tried to include network-based learning, telecollaborative projects, or social networking software (BECTA, 2008; Dooly, 2009). This strongly suggests that there is a gap between the awareness of urgent need for using these tools in reality and the actual use of these tools effectively in teaching. Hence Web 2.0 tools have the potential in telecollaborative contexts to build on the previous generation of CMC technologies (Carney, 2006). Similarly, Steele and Cheater (2008) raised the question "Web 2.0: education without the university?" (slide 96), which points to the new trend of online intercultural exchanges in which learners can communicate across countries in online forums, online exchange programs, and via other educational services but not on campuses.

The Availability of Computer-Assisted Language Learning Tools in Vietnam

The use of technologies in language learning environments in developing countries of South East Asia such as Vietnam has been neglected. Vietnam is in the initial stages of ICT integration, and studies and applications of CALL in education are embryonic and limited (Peeraer & Van Petegem, n. d). It is still very true that "even when teachers do believe that technology has empowering potential, they do not always know how to make this happen in the classroom" (Egbert et al., 2002). Even when telecommunication technology is applied in some places, the activities are very limited due to the high cost of educational technologies (i.e. software) and moderate technological skills of the users. In fact, one of the reasons for the unsuccessful application of these tools in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam is that many Vietnamese EFL teachers, especially

teachers of older generations, have not only moderate computer skills, but also different perspectives on computer applications. Similar to some other teachers around the world, they think, in the words of Hubbard (2008), "They have been successful in the past… they will aim to continue along the [same] path" (p. 177). Therefore, many language teachers are reluctant to apply the new technologies substantially throughout their careers and ignore chances for renewal. Some of them are even afraid that computers and new technology, specifically tutorial language programs, will replace human teachers (Hubbard & Siskin, 2004). Even at the academic institutions with well-equipped computers, the teachers do not explore them fully. With plenty of options to choose from and use in language classes, teachers might be confused about what technologies should be selected to equip language teaching (Stockwell, 2007). Likewise, as Quach (2005) points out, though all Vietnamese higher education institutions have Internet connection and their own websites, the actual level of Internet use for educational instruction is low. This is compatible with Hoang et al.'s (n. d.) finding that the ICT application capacity of Vietnamese teachers and administrators, especially older people, is limited.

In addition, according to Hoang et al. (n. d.), information and communication technology (ICT) equipment and software applications are not evenly distributed in many areas although schools across the country were equipped with computers by the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training and with free Internet in 2010 with the help of *Viettel*, a communication and information technology company in Vietnam. In reality, schools in bigger cities are equipped with many modern devices and wideband Internet access while the availability of equipment and Internet is limited in rural schools or those located in mountainous areas.

Moreover, learning English online and using an LMS were not common in Vietnam until recent years. In fact, the combination is still quite new. Indeed, with the use of descriptive and exploratory methods for data collection from the literature reviews, analysis of books, the Internet, articles from journals, and conference paper proceedings, Le and Lin (2008) report that some LMSs such as *EduNet*—the Education Network of Vietnam organized by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), Moodle, Blackboard/WebCT, and BlackCT (the merged Blackboard and WebCT) now exist in higher education institutions in Vietnam though they are not publicly recognized or effectively used. This can be blamed on the fact that applying and integrating new ICT tools in schools requires ongoing financial support for maintenance and operation as well as funds for training ICT applications (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). Therefore, it would be beneficial if teachers could use the free, user-friendly, and familiar technologies to easily facilitate their teaching practices in EFL/ESL classes.

As mentioned above, there may be some difficulties in applying computer-assisted language-learning (CALL) tools in EFL teaching in Vietnam; however, the advantages can outweigh the barriers. Indeed, the fact that all the schools across the country were connected to the Internet for free in 2010 supports the government's interest in applications of computers in education. With the Vietnam government's investment in computers in schools, it is possible to apply the suggested technological tools of this study for a broader population of learners of English at higher education institutions in Vietnam.

Telecollaboration in Vietnam

Telecollaboration in Vietnam is not common now but is needed. In fact, many learners want to have "more access to English through the mass media, the [online]

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availability of native speakers of English and English printed materials [because] this not only helps them study English more effectively, but also enriches their knowledge about the world" (Do, 1999, p. 5). Thus CALL should be used for telecollaboration to "enhance globalization and international exchange of information…" (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p.218). Due to the fact that the closed-door policy was terminated in Vietnam in 1986 after the Reform and the government has allowed more investments from different foreign companies and partners in the world, it is obvious that intercultural communication should be an integral part of English language teaching in Vietnam. In this context, English is significantly recognized as an international language to create more chances for Vietnamese learners of English to be involved in intercultural communication with English-speaking countries. However, intercultural communicative competence is still a new term, and not many exchange programs are publicly recognized. There are only a few studies specifically focused on assessing the intercultural communicative competence of the Vietnamese participants in exchange programs. For instance, there is an intercultural exchange called IC3 (Intercultural Communicative Competence) learning platform (Erb &Wessner, 2007; Ngo, 2007) between native speakers and non-native speakers of English and an email exchange project between Japanese and Vietnamese students (Perren & Vu Thi, 2001). Nevertheless, none of them can directly relate to the online intercultural exchange programs or can embed the intercultural activities into an existing curriculum without seriously interfering with stated goals and objectives. Furthermore, the opportunities for students to develop their cultural learning are limited. This is partly due to the fact that English is actually just a foreign language and Vietnamese students of English normally have few chances to improve their intercultural communicative

competence outside the classroom in authentic conversations. Opportunities for learning independently with native speakers are even more limited to wealthy learners only because there is no free chance to be exposed to a foreign environment and no available resources to support this process. Therefore, this supports the need for students to be involved in free online exchanges to master skills in cross-culturally appropriate communication and behavior.

In summary, most foreign language universities/colleges in Vietnam have recognized the role of intercultural communication for enhancing communicative competence in language education. Teaching culture in formal language education is recommended; however, Vietnamese students of English are still facing difficulties in intercultural communication because it belongs to the cognitive domain. Cognitive development involves obtaining knowledge with greater complexity and taking into consideration multiple cultural perspectives (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Kelly, 2012), but most Vietnamese students do not have chances to communicate directly with people from other countries to really experience the diverse cultures. In this case, telecollaboration would be a good choice for language instructors at higher education institutions in Vietnam because it connects learners across boundaries as a blended approach to language teaching and learning with both online and classroom components. The available literature focuses exclusively on the online aspects and ignores the classroom activities. Therefore, in this study, the researcher has designed the activities for both online and classroom activities that use only free and user-friendly telecollaboration 2.0 tools to fill the gap in the literature of ICC research and to develop more online exchange programs in Vietnam. These activities revolve around seven suggested topics that are abbreviated with the name

"IT-HELPS" curriculum: Identity, Taboos and Stereotypes, Holidays, Education and Entertainment, Language, People and Places, and Social issues. Details of these activities can be found in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Study Design

This research study was conducted with native and non-native speakers of English in an online intercultural exchange between Tan Tao University (TTU) in the south of Vietnam and Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in the Midwestern United States. This 8-week online exchange, which began in February 2012 and ended in April 2012 as detailed in the timeline (see Appendix A), is a web-mediated model of telecollaboration that focuses on developing the participants' online intercultural communication with free Telecollaboration 2.0 tools and the IT-HELPS culturally-inclusive activities designed by the researcher.

This research used qualitative methods to collect data. Four participants in the study were approached for an in-depth interview of their self-reflection of their intercultural communication, experience of the online intercultural exchange, and suggestion for the improvement of the online exchange activities IT-HELPS that utilized free Web 2.0 tools. It was expected that the culturally-inclusive IT-HELPS activities with free technologies could be effective for and relevant to enhancing participants' intercultural communicative competence.

Participants

This research involved 22 students of a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) class at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in the United States and eight Vietnamese students from an ESL (English as a Second Language) class at Tan Tao University (TTU), although the IT-HELPS website also had two other members: an out-of-class student in TTU and a Chinese visiting scholar at EMU.

The study setting. *Tan Tao University (TTU)* is a newly-established nonprofit international university in the South of Vietnam. TTU provides full-tuition scholarships, housing, and living compensations for all admitted students in their first academic year. Each TTU student is provided a laptop and textbooks to ensure the quality of teaching and learning. Seventy percent of the faculty members are international and all of the teaching staff has been selected for their strong academic credentials and the high quality teaching ability; thus TTU is a 100% English-language environment.

The ESL course at Tan Tao University was a special class designed specifically for this IT-HELPS online exchange. Since it was the first academic year at TTU with only about 100 admitted students, all eight participants of this course were volunteers. They considered this exchange a new way to improve their TOEFL scores. It is mandatory for all TTU students to get TOEFL scores of 600 from an institutional TOEFL after one year studying English in TTU in order to follow the academic courses of their major.

Eastern Michigan University (EMU) is a public university located in Ypsilanti, Michigan, in the United States and has a total enrollment of about 23,000 students. EMU offers degrees and programs at all levels from the bachelor's, master's, and specialist's, to doctoral. There are more than 200 undergraduate majors and minors and more than 170 graduate programs. EMU also offers online courses and degrees through EMU Online and it has e-library, e-facilities and new technologies; therefore, it was expected that there would be no technical problems during the exchange.

The Second Language Acquisition class at Eastern Michigan University aims to help students examine the nature of learning a second language simultaneously with, or subsequent to, one's first language. It required a project in which class members needed to

profile and describe the second-language-learning experiences of an English language learner. The current project, therefore, was included as an option for students in the course; the EFL Profile was worth 20% of the SLA students' grade. This course was not the first choice for this project, however. Initially, a course of freshmen and sophomores in Intercultural Communication had been selected and the activities were being worked into the course. As Perren and Vu Thi (2001) noted, it is difficult to insert an online collaborative project such as this into an established curriculum. Thus the instructor of the Intercultural Communications course eventually decided she could not participate and this SLA course was chosen for this online exchange instead. Problems that arose from this last-minute change are discussed below.

Demographic data. The EMU subjects are between18-25 years old. There were 16 females and six males. Among them, there were two Japanese, two Brazilians, and 18 Americans.

The eight participants from Tan Tao University were Vietnamese learners of English and majored in a range of disciplines, but were all placed in the same high-intermediate English as a Second Language (ESL) course at Tan Tao University based on their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores. Thus, there was no document analysis or further proficiency test to classify the Vietnamese students' English proficiency level.

All of the participants were full-time university students who volunteered for the online project while taking other courses at their university. Below are details of the participants' backgrounds:

Table 1

Background Information of the Participants

Categories	Number of people
Classes	ESL at Tan Tao University: 8 SLA at Eastern Michigan University: 22
Age	18-19 years old: 8 20-22 years old: 19 older than 22: 3
Gender	Female: 20 Male: 10
Cultures	Vietnamese, American, Spanish and Japanese
Languages	English: 30 Vietnamese: 8 French: 1 Spanish: 7 Chinese: 1 Japanese: 5 Others: 3
Full-time Status	30
Studying or working experience overseas	5

Twenty-one out of 23 respondents (91.30%) of the background questionnaire stated that they use a computer every day, and two (8.70%) use a computer two or three times a week. Chatting (82.61%) and presentation (73.91%) are among the most familiar activities to the participants. Most of them are not familiar with Jing, ThinkFree and PodOmatic before the exchange as detailed in Table 2:

Table 2

Participants' Ability in Using the Free Technologies Before the IT-HELPS Exchange

	Number of Respondents	Percent
Skype	20	86.96%
YouTube	19	82.61%
Email	22	95.65%
Microsoft PowerPoint	19	82.61%
PodOmatic	0	0.00%
Blogs	6	26.09%
Jing	1	4.35%
Google Docs	11	47.83%
ThinkFree	0	0.00%

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The IT-HELPS Activities

The IT-HELPS activities were used to sustain diverse online intercultural exchanges such as online discussion forum, videos/documents sharing, movie discussion, foreign language learning, video conferencing, and local community/service-learning research. These activities concentrate on enhancing the participants' intercultural communicative competence through the use of seven suggested topics which result in the acronym "IT-HELPS": Identity, Taboos and Stereotypes, Holidays, Education and Entertainment, Language, People and Places, and Social Issues. Because "Research has proven that the negotiation of meaning and the resultant learner modification are much more prevalent in goal-oriented, task-based interaction than in usual conversation" (Pellettieri, 2000, p.64), the IT-HELPS activities focused more on tasks for regular negotiation of meaning to learn more about other cultural perspectives and provided opportunities for the development of learners' social identity and cultural awareness.

Summary of the weekly activities of the online exchange.

Week 1 -- Identity: Participants created self-introduction videos on YouTube and shared the links on the IT-HELPS website. Later in the week, students from both universities had a video-conference to discuss what they learned from their online partners' videos, shared their own identity and showed some cultural artifacts that personally and culturally represented them. The main purpose was to get to know each other and to create a harmonious environment of mutual understanding for the exchange.

Week 2 -- Taboos and Stereotypes: In the discussion forum of the IT-HELPS website (on Webs), participants watched a short YouTube video about the popular custom of eating *baluts* (fertilized duck eggs) in the Philippines and then discussed issues related to taboos

and stereotypes in different cultures. This activity aimed to develop participants'

"Curiosity, openness and readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief

about one's own" (Byram, 1997, p. 50) and thus "identify areas of misunderstanding and

dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems

present" (p. 52). Eating *baluts* is a common cultural practice in many Asian countries

including Vietnam; however, the video was about this practice among the Filipinos (not

Vietnamese people) to lessen any conversational and cultural conflicts that might arise

among some participants about their online partners.

Week 3 -- Holidays: Participants were grouped to work collaboratively on small group

projects. Each group (6-8 students from both Tan Tao University and Eastern Michigan

University) was required to discuss the ideas in order to create a screencast that presented

the similarities and differences of a holiday that the group members have in common

(between the two cultures or more). Many technological tools were suggested to share

info and discuss ideas among group members of this collaborative project such as email,

discussion forum, Meebo bar (on the IT-HELPS website), Skype, Google Docs, ThinkFree

and Dropbox. Jing software was recommended as part of the project for making a

screencast, which was the final product of the project. It is similar to a real MS

PowerPoint presentation with a slide show, animations and real voices of the presenters

recorded in tandem with the mouse movements on the slides. This activity targeted the

enhancement of participants' ability to "Interpret a document or event from another

culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own" and "Acquire new

knowledge of a culture and cultural practices" (Byram, 1997, p. 52).

Week 4 -- Entertainment and Education: On the IT-HELPS website, participants were asked to watch a YouTube video clip about a Vietnamese student in an exchange program in the United States. After that, in the discussion forum on the website, participants shared insights and opinions about the video, educational and cultural values that reflect a national identity, the relationship between education, culture and entertainment, and the effect of media on personal beliefs or knowledge/ learned lessons of another culture. The aim of this activity was to increase the participants' ability to "Mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena" (Byram, 1997, p. 52).

Week 5 -- Language: (With the use of language attempt videos + Discussion on YouTube and Webs): Each group of EMU and TTU students (2-3 members in small groups from the same institution) were required to find time/technologies, which was suggested on the tasks for week 3, to communicate and learn from their online exchange group members, not from the same institution, to speak at least 4-6 phrases or sentences in language other than English. After learning this, each group recorded their actual speaking of these expressions in that foreign language and explained in English why and when to use them. Then they were asked to make a two- to five-minute podcast (using PodOmatic) or to upload their video on YouTube and share the link on the Discussion forum of the IT-HELPS website. This activity was intended to develop opportunities for authentic conversations among speakers of the target languages.

Week 6 -- People and Places: Each group of 2-4 participants from the same culture chose an article in English about a famous place for tourism or a hometown that typically reflects the regional identities of a country or state or province. After sharing the link of the article in the discussion forum of the IT-HELPS website, group members were asked

to explain their choice and make additional analytical comments on the people and language varieties, dialects, typical regional rituals, or local customs activities of this place. This activity targeted the development of the ability "To evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 63). By doing this task, students were expected to increase their knowledge of a geographical space and its people in another country, make critical evaluate the document in reference to their explicit perspective and have critical awareness of the landmarks of significant places and of the markers of internal and external borders within the same country.

Week 7 -- Social Issues: Each group of 2-3 students from the same institution were asked to make a three- to five-minute YouTube video clip of a trend, local community issue, social activity, or community service and then discuss the causes, effects, and popularity of the issue(s) as well as solutions. To facilitate the online discussion, they shared a link to their YouTube video in the Discussion Forum of the IT-HELPS website. Some examples are: (1) Trends in the local community: A video about the public acceptance of LBGT (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual,Transexual) through special days, events, or posters on a campus or in a local community; (2) Social activities/ community service: "Green Summer Volunteer Campaign in Vietnam"; an orphanage visit/fund raising event for the homeless of a local community; Tree Planting event and Habitat for Humanity; (3) Local issues (i.e, a polluted area, lack of parking spaces, advertisements) and local solutions; (4) Effects of globalization on the local community (in various brand names of clothes/ food products/ fast food restaurants, wide spread of internet use in the local community). This activity aimed to help participants develop the ability to question the values of their own cultural

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and social environment and critically evaluate a phenomenon of their society. When answering their online friends' questions, it was hoped that participants would develop the ability to consider conflicting interpretations of phenomena.

Principles of the IT-HELPS Online Intercultural Exchange. According to Dooly (2009), it is hard to determine if the tools or the activity paradigm comes first in designing the telecollaboration project. In addition, information and communication technology (ICT) is constantly changing and developing at an astonishing speed. Therefore, in this case, the researcher designed the activities first in anticipation of what might happen in the classes selected for the study and then selected technological tools that are free, user-friendly and relevant to the activities to enhance the efficiency of the designed tasks.

The theoretical foundation of this online intercultural exchange is grounded in the idea that language and culture cannot be separated and, therefore, embedding the nature of culture into language education in the virtual world will foster intercultural communicative competence. Also, it is believed that learning a foreign language in authentic and virtual communication with native speakers of that target language is more effective, rewarding, meaningful, and relaxing than in a traditional classroom.

The researcher also acknowledges the belief that exposure to culture-embedded activities will develop cultural competence, which involves not only having knowledge of another culture, but the ability to negotiate meaning, to view the selfness by looking at the otherness, and critically understand different perspectives of the same issue. Using the distinct but interdependent principles of Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, all of the activities were designed based on the objectives

indicating the emphasis on skills, knowledge, attitudes and cultural awareness other than those which are primarily linguistic. Since most of the language teaching curriculum tends to focus on the dominance of the culture of the target-language culture only, these IT-HELPS activities intended to localize the learning materials and activities to suit the socio-cultural context of the foreign language learners. It is hypothesized that linking students of diverse cultures through tacit-explicit intercultural and linguistic lessons will nurture empathy for diverse perspectives because participants can learn cultures critically.

Technological Tools

This online intercultural exchange included asynchronous and synchronous delivery of activities. In fact, many of the activities are designed to foster intercultural communication, for example, an online forum discussing cultural topics and cultural movies or TV programs on Webs, real-time chatting on Meebo, blogging on Webs, sharing videos and documents on YouTube and Google Docs, podcasting collaborative projects on PodOmatic, speaking in foreign languages on ThinkFree and YouTube, exchanging email, presenting projects on Google Docs, video-conferencing on Skype, and webcasting local community or holiday on Jing. These tools are free and also have functions that potentially facilitate the targeted activities well. These are described below.

Synchronous and asynchronous tools. In this exchange, Skype was used twice, at the beginning and at the end of the exchange with pre-set meeting times and discussion content. High-quality bandwidth was used to keep interruptions of online conversations to a minimum. Moreover, a Meebo bar was in use for real-time chat among the online members. This widget on Webs is linked to Facebook chat, AIM, Google Talk, Windows Live and Meebo chat to enable authentic online conversations.

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The IT-HELPS online exchange made the most use of asynchronous tools for the threaded postings in the discussion forum, as well as the collaborative group projects and presentations because it decreased any anxiety due to instant responses and peer pressure. Below are good features of some technological tools used for asynchronous delivery:

Webs, a free website-development tool, was used to create the IT-HELPS website, which can be accessed at http://www.it-helps-exchange-program.webs.com. The participants of this online exchange were registered members on this website, which was the main site for all asynchronous activities such as sharing links to YouTube videos, posting weekly discussion threads, photos or videos, and so on. Especially, this website provided space for an organized online forum which was intended to facilitate class discussion. It provided with compatible and professional features for managing the ongoing posting and responding of the participants. The users also had their own profiles and personal pages as a social network and were culturally grouped for the collaborative projects. This website had free professional features and allowed privacy settings for the ten pages of the site including the homepage, discussion forum, videos, blogs, photos, calendar, learning materials, members, and so on as seen in Figure 5.
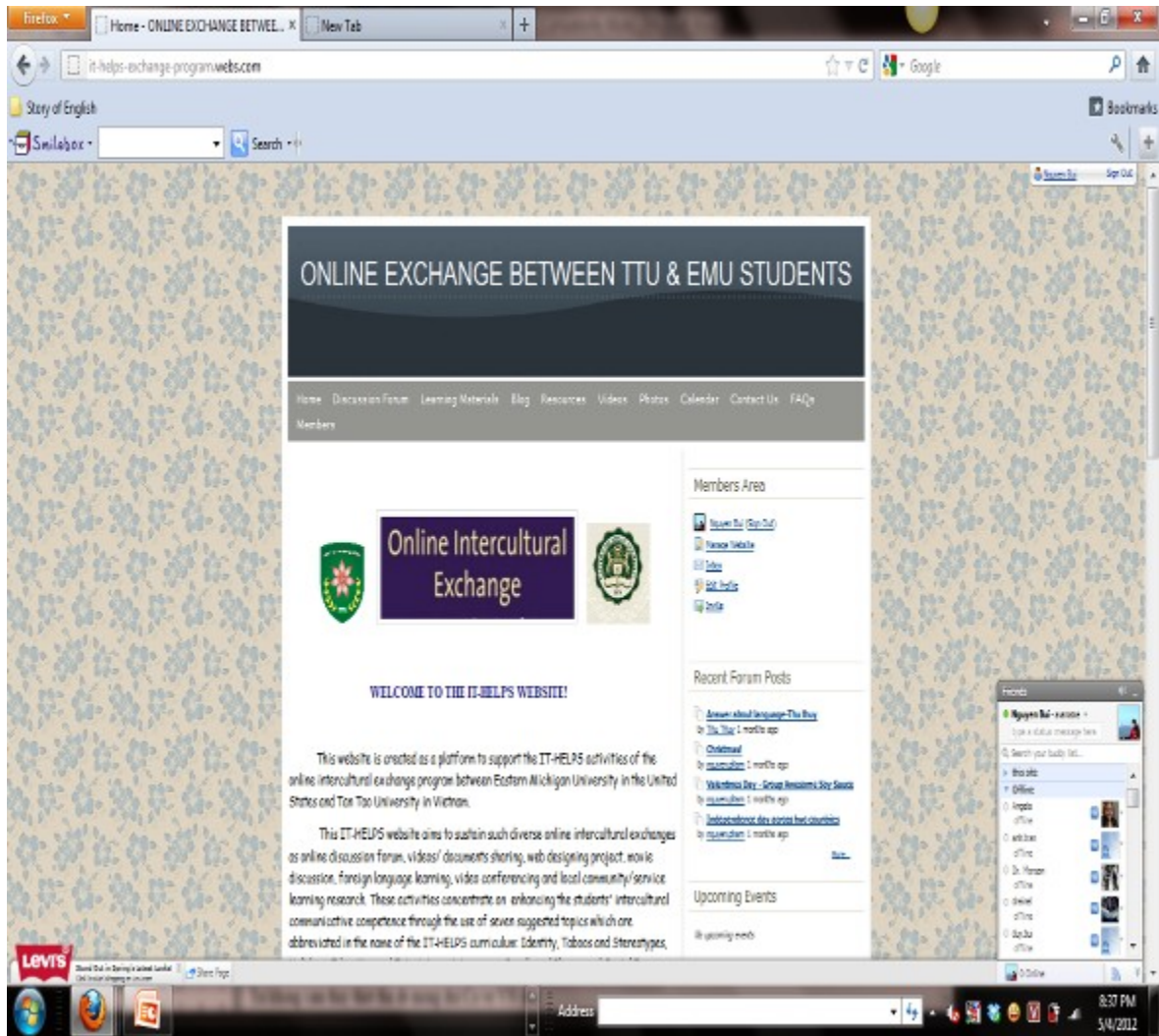
Figure 5. The homepage of the IT-HELPS website

Jing was used to create the screencasts that capture everything that happens in the selected

area, including the entire oral presentation. Visually recording everything one sees and

does on the screen with just simple mouse movements, Jing helped users capture and share

the screencast instantly. After simply pasting the link into any forum post, email or an

Instant Message, users could maintain authentic and lively asynchronous communication.

PodOmatic was used for recording, creating, distributing, and listening to podcasts and

vodcasts because this website provides each user 500MB of storage and 15GB of

bandwidth per month for free. Uploaded assignments and other files can be stored locally on the user's computer or other devices for offline use.

YouTube allowed users to upload, view, and share videos worldwide. Participants made very professional videos for their assignments and shared the links on the online forum of the IT-HELPS website. The other members of the exchange watched the videos and commented in the discussion forum.

ThinkFree was suggested for the collaborative group projects that were to be carried out in weeks 3, 6 and 7 of this exchange because ThinkFree Online lets users collaborate on documents, and publish to a blog or the web. The WorkSpace on ThinkFree Online has a variety of features to access and manage stored documents and keeps track of the changes that are made to help the group members manage their assigned tasks easily. Moreover, it keeps documents on the desktop, online, and mobile workspaces automatically updated. It also provides a free web office suite with 1 GB of online storage and is compatible with Windows, Mac, and Linux.

Google Docs served as a free collaborative tool for editing documents and creating online presentations of the IT-HELPS members. Documents can be created, shared and edited by multiple users synchronously and asynchronously. Indeed, Google Docs enables the creation of documents, spreadsheets, and presentations to be imported through the web interface, or sent via email just with its web links. Users cannot be notified of changes as in ThinkFree, but can see the changes made to a document because of the writing in specific colors used by different editors. In addition, it is accessible because of its compatibility with all operating systems.

DropBox was suggested when students had to transfer heavy files for collaborative products because the shared folders allow members to work together on the same projects and documents even offline. This software helps users see other people's changes of the same documents instantly and create photo galleries of folders of shared files viewable by selected viewers.

Technical support. On this website, there were tutorial videos and a discussion forum to provide technical support for the suggested technologies in the exchange. The participants could also easily ask for help by filling in the Contact box on the IT-HELPS website which automatically sent the questions to the mailbox of the researcher. In addition, the online members could chat directly with the researcher by using the Meebo bar at the lower right corner of the IT-HELPS website.

Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentations

After getting approval from the University Human Subject Review Committee for the thesis proposal (see Appendix B) and the Thesis Proposal Approval Form (see Appendix C), the research was conducted based on the following procedure and instruments:

Background information questionnaire. The questionnaire (See Appendix D) with 14 items in the form of multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank answers had been used before the study started to provide the researcher with the student participants' emails, names, first and second languages for matching virtual groups, so that she could sign them up as members on the class website as well as to collect information on other variables that may have affected the results of the study such as age, gender, motivation, computer skills, general opinion of online exchange and English background. The website

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www.quia.com was used to administer this questionnaire, which also aimed to collect the demographic data of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews (See Appendices E and F.) Near the end of the exchange, the researcher sent out an email to all participants asking for volunteers for the interviews. The researcher explained that they would be asked to participate in a one-to-one interview that would last from 45 to 60 minutes to share their experience with and opinions on the online exchange. Eventually, an online in-depth interview was conducted with two students from Tan Tao University in Vietnam and two students from Eastern Michigan University at the end of the online exchange. The two TTU students volunteered for the interview while the two EMU students were invited. One EMU informant was chosen for the interview because she was a very active member of the IT-HELPS website; the other EMU student was the closest online friend of the Vietnamese students with many out-of-class conversations seen on her personal page and profile of the IT-HELPS website. She was very active online at the beginning of the program but then did not continue her active involvement in the activities after week 3.

A total of about 10 open-ended questions in the semi-structured interview with student participants (see Appendix E) with follow-up questions based on the five principles of Byram's (1997) ICC model (knowledge, skills of interpreting, skills of discovery, practice, attitude, and critical cultural awareness) were used to obtain more detailed opinions from the student participants about the effectiveness and relevance of the selected technologies and the designed activities in enhancing their intercultural communicative competence. The content-collecting process (using Sound Recorder from Microsoft Office accessories, Skype and Audacity) was used in conducting this interview.

Since all of the informants preferred using English in the interview, the Vietnamese language was not used in the interview except for clarification. However, the fact that not many follow-up questions were asked to support the emerging themes slightly affected the results.

A semi-structured interview with the two teachers of the online exchange (see Appendix F) was also conducted (via Skype with the Vietnamese teacher) at the end of the exchange with the same content–collecting process as in the interview with students. The eight open-ended questions focused on the instructors' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of using the designed asynchronous and synchronous activities as well as the selected free technologies to facilitate students' intercultural communication.

Data Analysis Procedure

After conducting the interviews with the students and the two teachers, the researcher transcribed the data with assistance and identified common themes and patterns related to the enhancement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The transcripts were then reviewed by participants for their comments to guarantee the accuracy of the collected information. The emerging patterns in the collected data were then highlighted using different colors for different categories and then summarized and analyzed. Once the researches identified preliminary themes and patterns, focused coding took place. New themes that emerged during focused coding through categories of words, phrases or statements were also analyzed in reference to Byram's (1997) ICC model.

Measures to Ensure Safety and Confidentiality for Human or Animal Subjects

The consent agreement (see Appendix G), the research question and other required documents for the "Request for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects"

application form were submitted to the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects

Review Committee for review and was approved (see Appendix B*).* Permission for

selecting research samples via the signed consent form was also sought from the

instructors and the participants of the two classes. Moreover, the data were collected with

two to three weeks, notice and the participants remained anonymous in this research.

Participants also reviewed the transcribed data and could ask for a duplicate copy of the

research results if desired. They were also informed from the beginning of the exchange

that if the participants did decide to participate, they could change their mind at any time

and withdraw from the study without negative consequences.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Adopting the method of content analysis, this study analyzed the textual information of the collected data based on the five principles of Byram's (1997) ICC model. Although qualitative content analysis involves a process of using inductive reasoning to categorize raw data into themes or topics with valid inference and interpretation of emerging patterns, it may also include deductive reasoning (Patton, 2002). Based on the degree of involvement of inductive reasoning, directed content analysis, which uses initial coding from the relevant theory or literature at the inception of data analysis to allow themes emerge from the raw data, is one of the three approaches to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Therefore, this study applies this approach in which the researcher "begins with predetermined key words, categories, or variables (based on relevant literature or other resources) and sifts the data using these variables" (Kondracki, 2002, p. 225). In fact, to some extent, some interview results of participants' ICC enhancement were reported based on the predetermined concepts and categories which were modified from Byram's (1997) ICC model although the other four common themes were generated within the course of the analysis when new categories or patterns emerged. These four major themes are also supported by verbatim data that emerged from the transcribed interviews of the current study.

In this chapter, the four main themes are presented in a clear order after the researcher describes the informants' background: (1) First, participants' positive feedback on the IT-HELPS exchange is presented with examples; (2) Next, from these indications, the researcher shows the participants' positive perceptions of the relationship between the use of the IT-HELPS activities and their ICC enhancement, and then demonstrates that the

effectiveness and relevance of the technological tools used in IT-HELPS activities also enhanced participants' ICC. The five predetermined principles from Byram's (1997) ICC model are used to interpret the data and identify many subthemes; (3) Following that, problem from the informants' perceptions of the IT-HELPS online exchange are analyzed; (4) Finally, suggestions for future online exchanges are discussed based on the opinions drawn from the interviews.

Informants' Demographic Details

The interviews were conducted with the two teachers of the exchange and 4 student participants of the online exchange, two from Vietnam, and two from the U.S.. All of the names have been changed to maintain confidentiality. All excerpts are verbatim, and include all grammatical and vocabulary errors that participants made; however, the researcher added punctuation marks to show pauses and other information in the informants' talks.

Nam is a male Vietnamese student from Ca Mau province (a province in the Mekong Delta) and is about 18 years old. He is taking the ESL class to follow his major in Finance and Banking at Tan Tao University (TTU) in Vietnam. He has never been abroad but obtained a paper-based TOEFL score of 507 before taking part in the online exchange. His favorite English skill is speaking. At the beginning of the semester, he had to take an English test and two interviews with the teachers in English and Vietnamese in order to be placed into an appropriate class. He was the student with the highest entrance exam grades of his high school; thus he received the Hoa Trang Nguyen full scholarship to become a student of Tan Tao University.

Lan is a female Vietnamese student from Khanh Hoa province (South Central Coast of Vietnam) and is 18 years old. She is taking the ESL class at TTU for her major in international business. As a classmate of Nam, she also received a full scholarship for her study at TTU and has never been abroad. Her TOEFL score before the online exchange was a paper-based TOEFL score of 503.

Anne, a female American student of the SLA class at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), is from Stockbridge, Michigan. As a role model to her younger sibling in her twenties, Anne is a good student who received a Presidential Scholarship from EMU. She also went to Italy for a study-abroad tour in 2011. She was very active during the online exchange.

Cathy is a female American student of the SLA class. She is in her twenties and from Grand Rapids in Michigan. She was an active member of the IT-HELPS website at the beginning of the exchange and had the most online contacts and conversations with the Vietnamese students. She was not very active toward the end of the exchange for reasons that the researcher wanted to explore. She loves photography and shared her photos with the Vietnamese participants on her personal page of the IT-HELPS website.

Dr. Mai and Dr. Edwards are the two teachers of the courses in which the study took place. They both obtained their doctoral degrees from institutions in the United States. The curriculum of the Vietnamese ESL class was designed based on the IT-HELPS activities while these activities were used as an add-in component in the SLA class syllabus because it was difficult to integrate them into the existing curriculum of the SLA class.

Participants' Positive Feedback on the IT-HELPS Online Exchange

       The exchange is good, interesting, and helpful. It is interesting to note that all six participants of the interviews spoke highly of the exchange. Nam stated directly, "I think this program is very good and very helpful for us to have a chance to work with foreign people" and later confirmed "All the things are helpful for me." Similarly, Lan said, "I didn't know that we have so many interesting topics to work on like it. I had imagined that we simply got together, talked and shared things with each other and didn't have social activities like this" and complimented the exchange. She mentioned that her schoolmates not involved in the study wished to be part of the online exchange. She continued:

> …this online exchange is very good and fits within the level of Tan Tao
>
> University… some students who do not access to this program are jealous with us
>
> since not all of students can do so….You can see that some other friends from other
>
> classes asked you to access to this course because they find it very interesting.

  In the same way, Anne shared her excitement about the exchange: "I told my parents about this. I was like oh I talked with the Vietnamese students this week, and they were really good… and they danced really well." Along the same line, Cathy said: "It was interesting that I involved myself with different people from different cultures. It was fun when we were in Michigan and they were half way across the world. It was really cool getting their viewpoints in the world and talking to them." Moreover, the two teachers thought this exchange was a good opportunity and experience for the participants to get involved in virtual learning. Dr. Edwards thought that "My students will always remember the connection and that in itself, to provide opportunities is something they don't get

anywhere else so they can remember sitting in a little room talking with them and writing

back and forth." Commenting on the exchange regarding the IT-HELPS activities in

formal education, Dr. Mai stated:

> I think that even though it was the first attempt, I really appreciate this and I know
>
> that my students also appreciate this. So if we keep doing it and initiate more
>
> projects like this and put into regular courses and university curricula, then it will
>
> be good. We have a course in the other side, a virtual cultural exchange course like
>
> this. Here and there I think we're gonna build some crucial learning and virtual
>
> learning. I read about virtual learning. It is happening and becoming more popular
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> because not all students can afford to travel to another country, so it is a good way
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> for them to learn about other people because there are so many tools and
>
> technologies that can motivate them. We can actually talk like this. I think that it
>
> should be suggested to put into the curriculum of the university.

Participants' willingness to join the next exchange. Before the end of the

interview, Nam asked, "Do you have any plan for the next program next year?" His

interest in participating in the next exchange was even clearer when he directly stated his

willingness to join the next exchange:"Yes, of course, if I can still study at TTU." With

the direct question about the possibility of joining another online exchange, Lan

confidently said "Of course. I like it." She was not alone in this opinion. When the

interviewer asked Cathy if she would like to have another opportunity to try the IT-

HELPS exchange again and when there may be some funding to go to Vietnam, Cathy

immediately exclaimed "Yeah yeah are you kidding me? Yes… yes... I would love to do it

again!" Cathy also mentioned her wish before that: "We did a very good job! I seriously

want to be in the next exchange if you're gonna do it again." Likewise, Anne added, "Yeah I would. I think that would be really cool."

The Effectiveness and Relevance of the Technological Tools and IT-HELPS Activities in Enhancing Participants' ICC

  Participants' perceptions of the relationship between the use of the IT-HELPS activities and their ICC enhancement. Telecollaborative tasks can be grouped into three main areas: Information Exchange, Comparison and Analysis, and Collaboration and Product Creation (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009), and should be used in this specific order. The IT-HELPS activities included these task types but were used with no specific order or sequence; nevertheless, participants of the IT-HELPS online exchange enhanced their ICC quite well. In fact, from the interview data about the participants' perceptions after the exchange, some changes in their knowledge, attitude, skills, and cultural awareness (Byram, 1997) can be observed.

  Knowledge. The IT-HELPS activities were designed in order to gain specific knowledge as suggested by Byram (1997). For example, the activity of Week 2 aimed to provide knowledge about "Conventions of communication and interaction in their own and the foreign cultures, about the unconscious effects of paralinguistic and nonverbal phenomena, about alternative interpretations of shared concepts, gestures, customs and rituals" (Byram, 1997, p. 60). The activity of Week 6 about people and places, moreover, helped participants "Know about perceptions of regions and regional identities, of language varieties (particularly regional dialects and languages), of landmarks of significance, of markers of internal and external borders and frontiers, and how these are perceived by others" (p. 60).

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However, the findings show more insights of the obtained knowledge due to the essence of the virtual activities. First of all, participants gained knowledge of things they had not talked about before. Though participants did not individually know each other long enough to build deep knowledge of the other's culture, they indeed developed at least knowledge that one cannot obtain due to geographical distance. For American students, knowledge about the Vietnamese culture and country is something they learned from their online friends. Cathy revealed that her online partner: "was saying how her house from TTU was a day and a half [away]. I didn't realize Vietnam was that big. Oh, I didn't realize Vietnam was that large. Like really?" She continued, "A few things like cultural ceremonies I've never known about, just like the taboos I didn't know what *baluts* [duck egg fetuses] were beforehand" and "I've never known that in Japan it [abortion] is outlawed, the abortion you do not do. Well cannot be a big deal but you can't live together before marriage." More generally, Nam disclosed that he developed knowledge that gave him some confidence to search out friends beyond the classroom: "I think the program bring to me so much knowledge and I can learn from my friend on Facebook… I can make friends with other people from other countries. I did make friend with an Indian girl and I learn some culture" and "I did [learn] a lot about different areas, culture…I have a good knowledge about the culture."

Interestingly, the students gained insights, had new experiences, and expanded their knowledge of not only the other culture but their own culture as well. For example, Lan said:

It's really good opportunity for me because through assignments and presentation about places of interest, videos, making me learn more about my culture and there

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is something that I've never known about before such as some festivals of ethnic minorities in my country and through the presentation of my classmates I studied a lot of Vietnamese culture.

Nam admits that he did not know much about Vietnamese culture even though he is a Vietnamese; however, he now knows that: "… in Vietnam there are many holidays and I know clearly about Vietnam Independence Day." Anne says "But uhm, for all of the things that I hear the Vietnamese students talking about the holidays… they're really interesting to me. They seem really community-based and a lot more fun." This knowledge also helped Anne in the skill of interpreting and relating when comparing what she learned about Vietnam with her own cultural practice: "Things we do here... I'm like our holidays here are so boring [laugh]."

In addition, there are some kinds of knowledge about things that participants cannot find on the Internet. This made them change their attitude and increased their curiosity about other cultures. A good example of this can be found in Anne's comment:

I made a comment to my friend like "Is it bad because the only thing I know [about] the modern Vietnam is from the movie Good morning Vietnam?" When I said that to myself I was like …oh… my gosh…I know nothing about Vietnam. You know I think it's common for me not to know about different cultures. But then through this I really got a better understanding of like what it's like to be a normal person living in modern day Vietnam especially with the festivals the students presented to us and some of them posted articles about their hometowns provinces. Like you can tell that they have a lot of national pride. You know and they're like this is the festival… sounds like a lot of fun. It's a really great place to

live especially when we see the students in their videos they would be in like kind of a tropical campus and I think we all got a little jealous. How beautiful it is there and we're stuck inside the snow. But it really increases… probably the way I... it really makes me realize how much I don't know which a really good learning experience is. I realized I didn't know anything about Vietnam at all.

Cathy also shared her new knowledge of a new kind of food which was gained from personal conversations with her online Vietnamese partner on Skype: "Oh gosh…There was the food [in Vietnam] that "T" [one of the participants] was talking about that I really want to try now it's like a cake… it was really interesting" From this online talk, Cathy also found it "interesting" to know that "in Vietnam they don't have McDonald's. They have KFC though." This knowledge changed her idea of her "America" because she said that:

> …it was interesting to know about that because in my head I think it's everywhere. It's like Coca Cola everywhere. That's what I see a very big American culture item. It was interesting to see how it was weird for her [the online partner] to hear the phrase "McDonald's fast food." She asked "Why do you eat it?" "What! Don't you eat it all the time?"

The informants clearly showed their increased knowledge of not only the cultural practices and customs of the other countries but also their own culture because of the less pressured virtual environment. These cannot be correctly learned from the Internet and the respondents did not even think about exploring this type of information before the program, but they did during the exchange.

Attitudes.

Openness, curiosity and fun. Byram (1997) claimed that the attitudes of openness and curiosity are vital predictors of good intercultural learning outcomes because they help to build and develop good social relationships for successful intercultural communication. The participants' curiosity and openness are those that appeared the most clearly in the verbatim data. For instance, one of Lan's experiences in the online exchange that helped Lan become more open towards American people is described below:

> After watching "Mai's America," I thought that American students are quite practical and they are not friendly with foreigners. I felt uncomfortable about that and I am so scared that I study in America in the future. But some American friends said to me in the last video conference that now I shouldn't be worried about that because they always welcome foreigners and foreign students to come to study in America. They showed us enthusiastically and asked me if I had something to ask. I would ask them about America and American people, something like that. They were willing to ask me all of the things.

Lan thought that "we need to adapt to a new environment and maybe something I learn about American life may change my mind and as such I can change the way I behave." This change of behavior marked her openness in communication that she did not demonstrate previously. She stated:

> It [her attitude] changed a lot and that impressed me a lot. The last time three students at EMU [in her group] didn't talk much. But they sent me email and we have kept close contact from then. In comparison with the first meeting, the second

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one was much more open and friendly and we even not only talked but also had some fun with each other.

Also discussing her ideas of Vietnam, Anne discussed her openness in her view of the notion "overseas people." She said:

…because it was Vietnam not a country that is considered Western, like it's not a part of a western world… I think that was really important. Because a lot of American when they think about overseas they think about Europe, and just because that's… what the media… what it's focus on the most. And so I think it's important because it gave me insight something that I don't see every day."

Likewise, this openness is mentioned through Cathy's sharing of her feelings: "I am more open-minded and being able to talk about differences." Cathy also stated, "It was really fun to actually talk to somebody. It was really exciting to get their first comments back and have them talk to me" and confirmed her opinion later: "It is really fun to have friends to care and talk to me. I like meeting new people. It was kind of new because I don't really meet people online." Talking about fun as Lan and Cathy mentioned previously, Dr. Edwards said, "I found it fun and easy to comment on students' posts and learning. I learned a lot about my students actually and about Vietnamese students. I worked back and forth with about four Vietnamese students. That was interesting." And she talked about this later: "I think the introduction's fun…. I think they got creative students on from both sides of the Pacific. It was really fun."

Curiosity can be seen in Lan during the exchange as she said, "I am just curious about American culture, so I keep looking up stuff on the Internet and read books in my university's library which has a lot of books about America and American history. I tried

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to read them." Cathy also changed her attitude about Vietnam. She said without hesitation:

> I think people living in Vietnam are not really accepting of Americans because of the Vietnam War. And about the perceptions of people outside the U.S., they don't like Americans. It was really cool to see that they are super willing to learn and just want to interact with us. So that kind of stuff changed my viewpoint.

Fantini (2000) considered humor, openness, and curiosity as signs of the multiple elements of ICC in addition to patience, interest, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgment. Thus it can be inferred that these informants showed their ICC in the exchange.

Respect and trust in a friendly relationship. According to Deardorff (2009), a central component of developing ICC is developing authentic relationships that include trust, respect, and dialogue about cultural differences. This type of relationship can be found in this study. For instance, Anne stated her respect for the Vietnamese students:

> I have more respect for them as second language students studying at university and their English are all excellent. I'm a terrible language learner. But yeah I think I'm more respectful … consider the time difference. They have to wake up early to come to this extra class for them. I became really interested more about Vietnam than I've ever been before.

Cathy also expressed her wish to go to Vietnam even though she was scared of thinking about this before the program. She said about this trust after the program: "I just want to go to Vietnam, just beautiful I saw in the program." And later she confirmed, "Yeah yeah I really want to go to Vietnam." She admitted this change of attitude in her

mind: "Just my idea of Vietnam changed: not a country to be scared of. I don't think they hate me."

This respect can also be found in the perspectives of Vietnamese students about their virtual friends. Lan showed her positive perceptions of Americans after communicating with her online friends of the IT-HELPS program: "The thing that I had to rethink was Americans now are really friendly and not only open-minded but also direct in talking and something in their thoughts is more modern than Vietnamese people." Later she said:

> I think that is the biggest point that I have to learn that they are open-minded from the culture. They think in a modern way and they are confident with all the things they have planned to do. It is very different from the Asians. Moreover, that's sort of the attitude when communicating with other people. They always talk in positive attitude and rarely complained or did something badly. Although they may have some bad thinking but they knew how to express themselves in a positive and polite way making the audience comfortable to continue the conversation.

In this exchange, Nam wanted to go to America after the program even though he said: "Before the exchange, I don't want to go abroad, especially when I watch the video "Mai's America." This short video clip about student life of a Vietnamese student in America caused conflicts in his thinking; however, conflicts in online communication may not necessarily be an obstacle but lead to co-construction and co-mediation of shared space (Schneider & Von der Emde, 2006). This is true in Nam's case because Nam did not hesitate to confide with laughter in the interview that "It's terrible… I see Mai is very good at English. She works hard …family she stay with them…I think it's terrible to go

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there and after working with the online partners I feel comfortable and I like America more than before…” Obviously, this trust came from the good relationship in the online exchange.

 Confidence. Another clear example of changes in participants’ attitude can be found in the Vietnamese students’ confidence. Indeed, Lan expressed her feeling directly, “I feel more confident and I don’t mind expressing my thinking and my feelings with students from EMU.” She also compared this change now with her first communication with the EMU students:

 In comparison with the first meeting, I was a little bit shy and I think they didn’t want to talk to me because of my low level of English but for the second video conference I was more active and I could ask them some questions about some problems about my videos that we had seen on the forum. They also talked and shared with me a lot of things and they also helped me change my mind about some critical judgment I said before.

 Nam said, “At the first time I was very afraid and very shy but now I can communicate with them confidently.” He explained, “ I can talk directly to them…and I am more confident…I have chance to ask them if I have a question now” because “I have time to work with them and I feel familiar with foreign people.” This good relationship is a sign of ICC as discussed by Allport (1954, as cited in Deardorff, 2009) who noted the significance of having adequate interactions with people from other cultures and building good relationships to develop ICC instead of having intentional contacts with people from the target culture only. ICC is the term used in foreign language education and “All communication in a foreign language is intercultural” (Sercu, 2004, p. 74); thus having

these chances to interact with people from different cultures leads to confidence, openness, and curiosity which are important for ICC enhancement and prevents the one-sided or dominant views of the target culture. From the participants' sharing of experiences and opinions, it is undeniable that these changes in the participants' attitudes are the results of their participation in the activities of the IT-HELPS exchange.

Skills.

Skills of interpreting and relating. This skill of interpreting and relating is "the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own." (Byram, 1997, p. 61). Among the three objectives to obtain these skills mentioned in Byram (1997), some informants of the IT-HELPS exchange could "identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present and…mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena" (p. 61). A good example of this can be seen in Nam's case. Indeed, Nam told a very interesting story about the fact that the activity of Week 2 about Taboos, in which the participants discussed the habit of eating *baluts* in the Philippines, helped him identify misunderstandings of his online friends about the habit of eating *baluts* in Asia. Even though he does not like eating *baluts*, the strong reactions of the EMU friends against this eating habit in Asia and the conflict in the online discussion forum made him find relevant information to mediate meanings and convince the EMU students that *baluts* are not that disgusting in Vietnamese cuisine. He pointed out the differences of cultural practices and personal beliefs about the same food. While convincing his online friends to have the acceptance of differences in beliefs and values,

Nam also tried eating *baluts* after that and changed his view of this cultural practice. He explained in detail:

…about eating *baluts*…before that I don't like eating *baluts*…I have a little disgusting, but when I watch the video I think Americans maybe…. misunderstood…about…about that…I think it's not very disgusting like that and I find some information [He posted the pictures in the discussion forum] ….and after that I tried eating some *baluts* and it's very delicious…I like it..

Skills of discovery and interaction. There were only two videoconferencing sessions between the two classes during the exchange and not all participants could authentically interact outside the classroom; therefore, not much evidence of the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real time communication and interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 62) can be seen in the data. In fact, Lan affirmed, "if we keep in touch regularly, it may be enough for us. But we had just two online talks and we keep in touch via email and because of the time difference and connection, we can't talk much. I don't think that I understand much about my friends at EMU." She continued: "Although I learn lots of things, it is not enough to have a whole view and clear thoughts about American culture because it is changing over time. It is not enough for me to identify all aspects of American culture." In contrast, Anne interacted with her online interlocutors with consideration of "the degree of familiarity with the country, culture and language and the extent of difference between one's own and the other" (Byram, 1997, p. 62). She was familiar with the time difference and understood that the access to Internet as well as the habit of making instant email responses is culturally different:

...It was indeed interesting because there was a time lapse, so like you would send

out a question and then you have to conceive that there would be a day and a half

for you to get anything back which is totally understandable. But it was a different

mindset then if I have to email my friend in America today I would be like, why

don't you email me back after 4 hours later.

Cathy was also able to discover differences and accepted them but her skill of

interaction and discovery appears to be not as developed at a deep level. She said: "Oh

They do this because they are Vietnamese. They do that. That's strange. They're just

different" but later she explained: "They don't do certain things that people from other

countries do in America. They don't do something it is not because it is strange, or weird.

It is fun to know what they do in their culture." Additionally, Cathy could identify

contemporary and past relationships between her own and her online friends' culture and

society. She said: "I think people living in Vietnam are not really accepting Americans

because of the Vietnam War, " but then stated, "Not really war but it would be safe for me

as an American to go over there. I really want to go," and "I think it would be fun and

Vietnamese people like to speak English with you [herself] and they are OK to have you

[herself] come over. I thought it was really cool."

Language skills. Byram's (1997) ICC model does not discuss the development of

language skills in tandem with the other ICC skills. However, the findings from the

interviews of this study showed that the Vietnamese participants who were interviewed

improved their language skills, which facilitated their communication with their online

EMU friends better near the end of the program. Given this, Lan thought: "such a program

provides students with opportunities to improve their communication: Reading, Writing,

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Speaking and Listening. It is a good way to practice English and study culture and life of other country." Though Lan thought that her listening skill did not improve much "because of the slow internet connection," she was glad to see that her speaking skill "has improved a great deal thanks to the video conference" and her reading and writing skills "have been improved the most." Lan elaborated:

> Through the inflection writing assignments… I didn't like writing so much before but I found many interesting topics in this program, which gave me inspiration to write and I spend more time writing. It is with surprise that I had many writings on many topics.

> Similarly, Nam said that: "It [Skype activity] can help us improve listening skills."

because "We have friends after the program." This implies that he can communicate with the online friends out of the IT-HELPS website. In addition, Nam admitted that:

> Reading and writing skills are improved together. We have to read information on the Internet and then we think and write…all our work. We have to write and read the posts, make research about holidays and some other assignments and …it helps us improve…speaking too. In our class we speak with each other, ask and find the way to answer … so it helps very much.

> Nam continued: "at the beginning of the program I can just speak some short sentences. But at the end of the program I can speak more and more with them." In short, though the Vietnamese informants' perspectives of their language skill improvement were different, it is clear that language skill improvement influences ICC enhancement as it is an integral part of ICC skills.

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Improvement in Using English in International Contexts. Because the language used in the online exchange was English, there was no English language improvement in the EMU informants who are native speakers of English. Nevertheless, their development of international English, which is also known as global English, internationalized English, and worldwide English, existed. Anne nodded her head to confirm:

> yeah definitely… so I emailed the people in my Vietnamese group, we have like 3 or 4 email conversations. I think I definitely improved from the first one. I think I realize that I need to realize what I'm writing a lot more. Just because I have a tendency to write just the way I think. And so like one of the girl replied to me "I'm sorry, I'm so confused." I regretted what I had written and I was like uhhh. I can totally see where that confusion came from.

Later Anne pointed out that "…it's a good way for me to interact with language learners as a TESOL student because you need more practice with it," and confirmed her awareness of using English for an international audience with more detailed explanation as follows:

> Like I said before in my kinda being aware that I communicate using a lot of cultural specific things…And I think that I improved [international language] because I realized that if I'm speaking or writing or you know presenting to someone who are not from my culture background which is gonna happen in my life, I need to be precise and more aware of the way I speak.

> Cathy, however, did not state her growth of international English directly even though she was thankful for this opportunity to be aware of the importance of

understanding the conversations with non-native speakers of English or her future TESOL students. She agreed,

It was good because this way helps me realize that I can speak to people who are learning English, what they struggle with, how I can communicate with them better, ways in which I can help them…like…it was really cool to see they tried to practice as much as possible even some were shy at first and sent me just a few words. When they realized that I was okay to talk to, they felt comfortable and they sent me paragraphs (Laughing) and their grammar was really awesome. I got what they meant. So, I thought it was really cool. For me I tried to be an ESL teacher, just having a connection with students, it is so important. They just taught me that.

Critical Cultural Awareness.

According to Byram (1997), critical cultural awareness is another component of ICC in addition to knowledge, skills, and attitude. This is "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 62). Although the informants' level of critical cultural awareness is developed to a certain extent, their awareness of the otherness can be seen from their perspectives reflected in the interview. In fact, they are "able to negotiate agreement on places of conflict and acceptance of difference where this is not possible because of incompatibilities in belief and value systems" (Byram, 1997, p. 73). For example, Anne once attempted to convince the online friends to change their wrong perceptions of America shaped by the movie "Mai's America" in Week 4. She said: "after that video I was like… I gotta show them America is not like that." Anne was also aware

of the different belief and value systems when saying, "I think it [the activity] helps to increase my awareness of how different is our culture to others. Even with international students on campus… like when I interact with them I realize there are a lot of differences than I thought before. It made me a lot more aware."

Another example of the participants' ability to make critically evaluative analyses of their own culture and the other cultures, or the otherness, is the change in their view of cultural practices. In spite of holding a good view of his culture, Nam also showed his awareness of the negative side of his own culture, which he did not think of before the online exchange due to his ethnocentricity. In more detail, Nam said, " I think I have some negative attitude about the way Vietnamese people do with the trash" after watching the video clips made by another group of Vietnamese students for the activity of Week 7, which requires participants to discuss a social issue in their community. Similarly, Lan said, "After this program, I am proud of the culture but not as much as before. Vietnamese culture represents the traditional aspects but now there is something we need to improve and reconsider ourselves as compared to other cultures. Maybe I was over-confident about Vietnam." Along the same line, Anne, at the beginning of the online exchange "felt like it was a great opportunity to connect with students abroad and I wanted to give them a good outlook into the country which I am, you know, some way I'm really proud of." However, after watching the movie "Mai's America" in Week 4, she was "offended and ashamed of America" and explained this to the Vietnamese students directly when they had the final Skype session. She revealed to the researcher: "I know I need to present American culture, I need to be aware of American culture because that's what I have going for me but yeah I totally think it's better to learn about other cultures." At the same time, her perception of

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Vietnam became better during the online exchange because she no longer thought of Vietnam as a developing country with the wars and the postwar devastation. She admitted this change as well as her perception of the world outside America:

> I can see that my conception about Vietnam was very centered around the war. Because that's all you ever hear about in America history classes and American grade schools are like…about the Vietnam War… and the image of Vietnam is tied up with the war images, and like hippy protestors images, and uhm, weird things like that. And then I met the Vietnamese students that kind of give the modern face like...these kids are like 17,18 years old and they go to the university. They're so young like.... and so yeah… it gives me kind of the modern face of Vietnam. And it made me aware that my conception of the world is…not correct.

Moreover, the participants showed their critical comparisons of their own culture to the other to see the differences and similarities. This created better mutual understanding among the participants to foster a harmonious relationship in online communication. Anne's opinions accord with this very well:

> I think that I realize that America is really commercial. Like especially when I, my American group kinda finding the images for independence day, a lot of them are just like buy flags, buy shirts, buy underwear, buy American flag, you know, decoration for your car, buy, you know Independence Day plates, and so I think it made me, but you know I always felt like this, like we kinda…. Behind here, and it becomes you know really prepackaged, and you know I don't have any experiences in Vietnam but it seems a little more authentic in Vietnam. Especially because you know independence is a lot closer to that country.

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When being asked about the activity or the time that she changed her perception of Vietnam, Anne answered that was the first time they Skyped in class and watched the introductory videos from Vietnamese students. She found that "...they're [Vietnamese students] really dedicated to English you know, they all have these great hobbies, you know one of the girl she's a dancer, they seem really nice, and I think that's when I started to see the similarities more. Like it wasn't like my conception about Vietnam was negative. It was just… wasn't a conception after all." This complex thought about differences and similarities ran through her conversation with the interviewer. For example, with lots of critical questions, Anne showed the ability to "identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one's own and other cultures" (Byram, 1997, p. 63) for better critical evaluation of cultural differences. She shared her thinking of holidays and taboos in Vietnam and America:

 I was looking at the differences, something like New Year's for you. That's strange. Why did they think that? At the same time…is that really strange? Why don't we have that in America? I've tried to figure out why we did….Even the abortion, living together. Yeah. I questioned those a few times.

At a certain level of cultural awareness, Nam and Lan did not reach that high level of critical thinking as Anne did; however, Nam confessed, "When I watch and discuss the video about the taboos, I compare with my culture." Lan admitted:

I am not confident to say that I almost understand all the factors of the culture I am studying during that time but I learned a lot and I made some comparison between Vietnamese culture and other ones and I've learned about that so much.

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Even though there were students from Brazil and Japan in the SLA class, the Vietnamese students did not have the chance to communicate or discuss with them to learn about their cultures in details. Thus Lan said:

> I think I can just relate Vietnamese and American cultures because there are some other cultures that are not similar to the two that I have studied. Now I can just say that I can understand more about American culture. I can compare the way people think with ours.

However, due to the lack of active and intentional interactions among the participants of different cultures, Lan thought: "it is not enough to have a whole view and clear thoughts about American culture because it is changing over time. It is not enough for me to identify all aspects of American culture." She did not generalize her perceptions of people from certain cultures based on her judgment of those she communicated with online. She explained her opinions: "In fact, there is some part of American in there not reflecting all characteristics of American culture because they are the same as Vietnamese people. For the Japanese guy I told you about, he is Japanese but not all Japanese people look like him and behave like him." This finding contradicts what Belz (2002) reported that in limited direct communication with other people from the target culture, the participants may come to consider their online partners as the representative of all people in the target culture and "a reinforcement of stereotypes and a confirmation of negative attitudes" (p.138). Interestingly, this idea has also been described in Byram's (1997) disagreement of the one single concept of the native speaker. He argued that everybody takes on many different social roles during their lives and brings their own identity into a conversation. Even people from the same culture have different facets of personality that

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shape their different beliefs and values. Lan and Anne reached this point to some extent possibly because the interaction with online partners via videoconferencing allowed them to check their developing awareness of the target culture and also reminded them not to over generalize (O'Dowd, 2010).

In brief, because activities are the core element for the success of any class, it can be inferred that the IT-HELPS activities were quite relevant and effective in enhancing the students' intercultural communicative competence to some extent. It is also obvious that the activities helped improve language skills for TTU students and develop EMU students' awareness and improvement of their use of appropriate English for international interlocutors. Moreover, the participants had real experience and authentic conversations with people from other cultures and developed confidence, sympathy and trust.

The role of the free telecollaboration 2.0 tools in facilitating the IT-HELPS online exchange activities.

Ease and familiarity of the technological tools to the users. The researcher speculated that none of the IT-HELPS users had serious problems in using the web 2.0 tools except for the fact that some of them did not try to use the new tools. For instance, Lan said: "I think it [the web 2.0 tools] is easy because they are just small problems." Cathy also agreed, "They're very easy to use. It might be hard for someone who doesn't know technology but for someone who knows about technology it's really basic." Concerning this issue, Dr. Mai said: "In terms of technology, I don't think we used anything complicated."

The participants are very familiar with Skype, video making, and uploading videos on YouTube. Indeed, they used these tools more often although new tools such as Jing,

Meebo and PodOmatic were included on the site and some of them also tried these new tools. For instance, Anne said: "I think Jing was interesting and the Meebo was fun. Just having that website though is very nice." Later she confirmed: "I really like the Jing tool. I use that all the time now just like my normal… copying, cutting and pasting images. I use that for one of the power point presentation. And I really liked it" Cathy also tried this new tool: "I used the screen-cast… It was cool. It was cool. But it was the first technology that I have used."

In addition, asynchronous tools worked better for all participants but synchronous ones were preferred by non-native speakers of English. For example, Dr. Edwards said that the EMU participants liked uploading videos. She said: "They like to do the videos and they like uploading them and watching the videos from the Vietnamese." The answers of Anne, Nam and Cathy accorded with this because they showed their interests in the videos that the online partners posted on YouTube while Lan and Nam had the same idea as Dr. Mai, that Skype is the best tool. Indeed, Anne liked the videos because "you can showcase more, you can present more. And so I liked the videos more because I'm more like a talker" while Nam said that he liked "watching videos from another culture and then discuss about...the…that video." And "I like tool to make the videos because I can act, actor." Similarly, Cathy thought, "YouTube was actually really nice to see them more in person in the videos." She continued: "Skype is cool because we got the message chat and actually talk via the video," and "…It's an adorable issue to get together with people from two sides of the world with like…12-13 hours difference.…" However, Cathy liked the videos much more than personal conversations on Skype because "a little noise… because of the connection… Big screen cast… It was hard to actually hear what

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they are saying." On the other hand, Dr. Mai stated: "They like the video conference [Skype] better than just posting and then waiting for the responses for days." Correspondingly, Nam said that "All of them [the tools] are good but I like the video conference the most." This feeling was confirmed by Lan's response that the "Video conference is the best tool because Vietnamese students not only improve their English communicative skills but they can see each other on a face-to-face screen." This finding is in agreement with O'Dowd (2007) that "videoconferencing provided learners with authentic practice in developing the skills of discovery and interaction, i.e. being able to interact successfully with members of other cultures and elicit information about their world view *in real time* [sic], as well as critical cultural awareness" (p.102) and the use of video-conferencing for telecollaboration creates "the perceived similarity to a real setting" (Yamada & Akahori, 2009, p. 19). This also means the task of intercultural communication is much more challenging for students with disagreements or conflicts to mediate without ample time but "the videoconferences proved to be the most insightful and rich with respect to cultural learning" (O'Dowd, n.d., p.102).

   Usefulness and helpfulness. Expressing her opinion of the technological tools used for the IT-HELPS activities, Anne said: "I felt the technologies were really good. It's good to have a face, so I liked the videos [on YouTube] when they were able to introduce themselves, talk about themselves outside of school. Cuz I thought that was really cool." Cathy also stated her interests in these web 2.0 tools: "The technologies available did help me a lot …like Skype, the website and Facebook. It would have been a lot more difficult to get in contact and actually we had a very fast interaction."

   Likewise, Lan disclosed her opinion of the use of the technological tools explicitly:

I think technologies are very useful in this program since we can see each other clearly through Skype, YM [Yahoo Messenger] and we can contact with each other. I think technologies should be used more since they are really helpful. For me, I now can make a video and prepare a presentation and I can improve my technical skills working with technological tools.

More generally, Nam affirmed: "All the things are helpful for me" and supported his statement with examples: "when we study the course it's really interesting. It helps us relax after some difficult course…and I like it. You can see that some other friends from other classes asked you to access to this course because they find it very interesting. They can practice English with native speakers."

Regarding Nam's statement, it is true that some informants communicated with their online friends outside the classroom on the Meebo bar of the IT-HELPS activities, on Skype as well as emails and built good relationships through information exchange about their personal lives and cultures. Cathy told the researcher: " I contacted via Skype or Facebook a lot …I got through video chat a few times… They also messaged me a lot… outside…we emailed stuff." Though not all participants were involved in this process, it is interesting to see the effectiveness of telecollaboration 2.0 tools in facilitating the participants' communications outside the classroom. This is an integral part of the development of ICC in telecollaboration.

Convenience and appropriateness. The technological tools were selected and used appropriately for each of the IT-HELPS activities. This can be seen from Anne's opinions: "Overall I think it was awesome. …And I want you to know that this was really good ... you [suggested] appropriate technologies, you exposed to me the new things.

Yeah, I had a great time." Anne clearly explained that the appropriate use of the IT-HELPS website with privacy settings created easy access and confidentiality among the users: "I just like the website because it is really private and I knew who I am talking to. We can talk easily like we can discuss the hard topics." Comparably, Cathy said, "it was a lot better than just using emails or letters. It was faster...We were able to keep up with conversations and communicated offline too." If only emails were used for this online exchange, the informants would not have had that fast communication.

It was convenient for the participants to use the suggested web 2.0 tools because working collaboratively for the group activities helped those who could not do it by themselves. In this way, they learned new things from each other in a collaborative and harmonious environment. In fact, Anne revealed, "I haven't really uploaded anything by myself before. And …so… I think it's a combination. I think when I was working, when it was just my American classmates and like oh we'll just get it done together." And her group did make and upload many interesting videos on YouTube and the IT-HELPS website. Nam found it convenient to learn the new tools from his friend's software: "I felt I have to make video, so I ask my friend to get the software and I learn by myself how to use it… I think it's very good for me." And then he helped his group successfully. Lan added that some group members who knew how to create high quality videos helped the others. This is similar to Dr. Mai's statement about her Vietnamese students: "The one who knows already has the chance to practice….and good at them and show others who do not know." This evidence demonstrates that telecollaborative 2.0 tools are relevant because they are important ways to foster the development of learning-to-learn competence. These online exchange tools are "open," "collaborative," and "relational"

(Helm & Guth, 2010, p. 22) in their approach, thereby leading to the belief that they correspond to "the Web 2.0 mindset" (p. 22) though, as other tools, their effectiveness depends on many other factors for ICC improvement.

Problems in the Online Exchange

Although the participants' ICC was enhanced thanks to the use of the telecollaborative 2.0 tools and the IT-HELPS activities in the online exchange between students from Tan Tao University and Eastern Michigan University, this exchange itself did not really make the best of the essence of the originally and purposefully designed IT-HELPS activities. Contrary to expectations, this exchange experienced some drawbacks that can be attributed to the following problematic issues:

Time difference. It was found that difference in time zones was the foremost and prominent problem existing in the exchange. Concerning this, Dr. Edwards affirmed: "Time is different." And this is supported by Dr. Mai who said: "Due to time difference and also other aspects… So I don't think students had good and equal participation from both sides." Likewise, Nam expressed his ideas: "I think the program is a very short time and the time between Vietnam and America is different and it is very hard to set up the video conference." Explaining the reasons for having only two videoconferencing sessions, Anne said: "The collaboration with the Vietnamese students …I do wish I'd have more time on that, part of that is just because of the time difference." and blamed that "yeah… I think it maybe [time] (laugh) yeah… it may be because of the time difference also it was poor planning on my American group part." Lan agreed with this idea: "We can't fix it because of difference of time or internet connection…" By the same token, Cathy confided that "We wanted to do it (Skype) every night to help her [an online

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Vietnamese partner] with her English and I learn more with her culture but because of the time difference I just couldn't make it." But she confirmed,

I contacted via Skype or Facebook a lot. I believe a girl "T." She and I got through video chat a few times, so it was fun but also time-consuming because it is twelve hours difference being with the Skype, and then I would be exhausted. So it was a little difficult.

Participants' lack of motivation. As other kinds of tasks designed by educators in institutional contexts, telecollaborative tasks are very pedagogic for educational purposes. Thus the interactions can only become authentic when there is motivation to interact outside or beyond the classroom with online partners to purposefully build good and authentic relationship through information exchange and to do collaborative work from the learners themselves (Helm & Guth, 2010). However, the participants in the IT-HELPS exchange seemed to lack motivation in their communication. Lan said that "The problem may rest on EMU students since they were not active to keep regular contacts or arrange appointments." In detail, they gave different reasons for this lack of motivation in EMU students:

First of all, it was the way the class was set up that the exchange was not the priority and not an entire EMU class with required and graded tasks. Anne expressed her disappointment:

Because the way the project was explained was at first, it was a way for us to meet Vietnamese students to help us with our project. And then some students already had foreign language learners to interview so they chose to opt out at the beginning…..She [the professor] had this kind of conflict and so uhm, I wish she

could have said something like oh this is for extra credit or oh because like, then later …when you listen to it, but then, oh it's a way for you to meet Vietnamese students for your project. And then the next step was oh some people are opting out so this won't be part of your class grade. And then oh now you guys need extra credit so if you want to participate this will be (your) extra credit. So there was a period where it looked like there was no reason for American students to participate besides… like… goodness of their hearts.

Cathy also stated the same reason: "I was very excited about it at first and then …oh no credit" In addition, Anne disclosed: "I think… a lot of it was because spring break happened, and then after spring break we didn't discuss it in our class that much." Thus, the passive participation of the students happened because of the lack of motivation as a result of the way the class was managed, not the IT-HELPS activities themselves. Moreover, the EMU students did not have targeted goals in the exchange. Dr. Edwards said, "My students were kind of it was hard getting them to consider the projects as meaningful but I think they just didn't fit it in their plans." Dr. Mai also had the same explanation:

In my opinion, of course the activities designed in the course were very good and students' participation was an important factor. If they had a purpose like if they want to learn about Vietnamese culture, or if they are interested in coming to Vietnam. I think the interest and motivation was different. In my side, students want to learn English and want to go to America one day, so they are highly motivated.

However, the EMU students' participation seemed just for fun and they just did it voluntarily. This supports what Belz (2002) reported that there may be tensions due to the social and cultural differences in expectations, motivations, time constraints, attitudes, and beliefs that may lead to misunderstandings or missed chances for interaction. Indeed, TTU participants are motivated to join the exchange to improve language skills and cultural knowledge while the EMU participants expected the activities to be parts of the graded tasks in their SLA class. Anne said: "… I mean I know that Dr. Edwards already had her syllabus planned out but if she could have you know, put in some incentive into the syllabus so that the Americans would do better work." This lack of instrumental motivation in EMU participants made these online activities "extra" to EMU participants. Explaining why this problem existed and the activities could not be embedded into the curriculum of the Second Language Acquisition class, Dr. Edwards revealed:

> If I had really controlled it, I would have to take out some of the other requirements that I had in class otherwise they wouldn't have achieved credits in our class. So I couldn't do both. So I think that in order for it to be effective for my students more than at the personal level that there would need to be class discussions about what is going on with partners and what you think the difficulty is, are you communicating? Why or why not? Are you collaborating? What is the problem?

> Actually, all of the IT-HELPS activities were task-based; however, there was no assessment tool in the class because Dr. Edwards said that "I couldn't do that because not everybody was participating" due to voluntary participation. She added: "because the consent form says they can withdraw anytime then I can't require everybody." Dr. Edwards also talked about the difference in cultures that shaped the teaching principles:

"the group of students [in Vietnam] is pretty active, I thought. That might be the Asian culture. The professor wants to do something special and you do something special. You just do it. You try because professor asks you. Here it is not the same obligation." This is true in Vietnam because Dr. Mai agreed that: "We asked them [students] to do and they performed well. They did what they were asked." Therefore, Dr. Mai also blamed this for her role as the teacher in the exchange: "No comments or feedback from their own teammates [Vietnamese and Vietnamese]. I think there was a lack of active participants among my own teams as well. It might be teacher's fault I didn't know how to encourage them and initiate the discussions." From this opinion, it is obvious that the lack of teacher's control over the students' progress and activities in the online exchange led to their lack of motivation. This finding accords with Lund and Smordal (2006, cited in Dooly, 2007) that even when technologies are integrated into the class activities of the online exchange, the teacher maintains the important role in educational environment to control the teaching resources and the ways to use them effectively in the curriculum. Indeed, without the teacher's control, the students will lose their interests and motivation easily. In this study, one of the teachers had little control over or input into the content of the IT-HELPS online activities; these culture-based activities were different from the required tasks of the Second Language Acquisition class.

Participants' lack of time for active involvement in the exchange. As mentioned above, participants in the exchange were volunteers and the informed consent form allowed their withdrawal from the online exchange at anytime. Hence they did it just for fun and stopped the communication when they did not have enough time. The climax was during the midterm exam. This is what Cathy told the researcher in the interview:

We and the rest of my group ended up with something busy. It was kind of need

contacts with them and they were trying to get the contact to us because my group

on this side of the world was just… we don't have time.

 Then Cathy explained with details:

At first, it was hard for me to end it up and near the middle of assignments after

week three (Winter break) because I had so much else going on. If I had tried it

hard a little more, it would have been a lot more meaningful to me. But because I

had so many things going on…

Similarly, Dr. Edwards agreed that her students "have different stuff going on in

their lives," and "I think they just got so overwhelmed during the mid-term and the break."

In addition, the tight schedule in their student life was also the reason why some

students did not try the new technologies to really get involved in the online activities. Lan

confessed:

 We had too many subjects to learn and do not have time to focus on what we wish

 to learn. I am sure that all of students in my class like this program but sometimes

 they feel tired of doing assignments making videos because they do not have time

 for their own homework. It is not your fault, this rests on my university's schedule

 arrangement.

Along the same lines, Dr. Mai thought: "Maybe they didn't have time to practice

it. They tend to fall back to what they've learned and known before, so they can save time

and they don't want to waste time learning new ones." Talking about this lack of time, she

also said, "If it is the class itself, then it is easy for students to do. But they have to do this

in addition to others, then it is going to be hard." And this truth was confirmed by Dr.

Edwards, who said: "Maybe because the technology was new and they didn't want to or didn't spend the time learning how to do something." In contrast, Dr. Mai thought of another way to deal with this lack of time in participants:

> I think it would be better if you tied with specific activities, walking them through it. That would work, for example you want to do the screen-cast project and you spent time doing the video conference they tell you the idea of what they want to do and we can do this and that. We should incorporate both sides, not only my side. If we had the activities for them to base on, we would walk them through and support them and they would be happy to use it.

> This lack of time was also found in Ware (2005)'s exchange between German and American students. She claimed that German students voiced frustrations with the limited amount of time the American students allocated for their participation in the project. Thus the lack of time from the participants can be considered as tension in online exchange because reading responses and composing well-considered replies are time-consuming.

Participants' lack of active interaction for the collaborative projects. There were some collaborative projects in Weeks 3, 5, and 7 in which participants from the two institutions had to work together. However, the fact that the EMU students were inactive sometimes because of the aforementioned problems delayed the interactions in the collaborative projects. Lan complained that "I emailed some friends [EMU students] and asked them for the Yahoo account to chat with them online but they did not receive it." Nam also expressed his disappointment: "Ah, because we could not connect them, some of my Vietnamese friends sent emails to EMU students but they did not reply." He gave

more details: "I lost contact with them after their Winter break, so I don't know…I cannot ask them about this." Similarly, this problem was revealed in Dr. Mai's opinion:

It is the reluctance and hesitation from my students. I urged my students to contact people and email them and my students said they did not get any replies from the other side. I asked my students to keep trying and sending another emails. I can say that my students expressed some frustration.

This problem occurred perhaps because of the different expectations and interactional purposes of the participants as mentioned earlier. Ware (2005) found similar problems in the exchange between 12 advanced-level students of English in northeastern Germany and 9 advanced-level students of German in the southwestern United States. In this study, American virtual encounters simply did not have the same "thrill" that Ware (2005) supposed it did for the German partners. He reported that several of the American students in his project not only viewed the partnership as an additional activity, they saw it as "relatively mundane." While American students tend to have more opportunities to participate in electronic discourse communities and therefore were supposed to "view the telecollaborative partnership as an expansion of their already prolific electronically-mediated activities" (Belz, 2001, p. 227), the non-native speakers of English wanted to improve their target language. Thus active interactions cannot happen if there are no common goals in terms of learning and instruction.

Technological problems. There were some barriers in the application of technologies for the online activities:

Slow Internet connection. First of all, it was the slow Internet connection that caused problems in uploading the assigned work. For example, Nam stated: "There are

some problems when I make the screen cast with big file I cannot upload it because the Internet is slow and weak." Nam also gave another example about the slow connection to the IT-HELPS website: "And about the IT-HELPS website, it takes a long time to access the web." And then he added: "maybe in Vietnam the Internet is slow. Sometimes I cannot post my entry, my response to the website because there are some problems…the post for me to type the words did not work." In addition, it was surprising to know that even EMU participants in the United States also experienced a slow Internet connection. Anne said, "I know one of my American friend skyped with them [Vietnamese participants] for her class and she said she had a great experience except for the Internet connection went in and out." Lan also blamed the Internet connection: "Maybe not because we can't fix the time. The Internet connection at EMU might be out of order at the time the communication between the two sides was happening." Moreover, a slow Internet connection might have been the reason why EMU students did not interview TTU students for their projects in the SLA class. Talking about her online communication with the Vietnamese students from Tan Tao University for this kind of project, Cathy said:

> It was hard for us to do the recording and transcribe the recording of the interviews. We wanted to see how they said different words but Skype was lagging. Our project was about fossilization in terms of syntax and phonology. It would be very hard to do that without being able to hear them. It was really nice but the Internet was slow.

However, this seemed not to be the main problem because Anne explained: "But most of my communications with the Vietnamese students were a group-oriented thing. So it's easier to get group stuff …. Especially, when we're not together all the time."

Different operating systems. All TTU students were awarded their own laptop set up by IT technicians at TTU, using the Linux operating system, which is quite common in developing countries because it is free; thus, they all had the same problems with the installation of Jing and Skype. Lan revealed: "I just set up a Skype software in my computer. We're required to use Linux operating system that does not work on Skype. So I had to change it into Windows to make it happen." About this problem, Nam disclosed: "You know that in our school, some friends use Ubuntu and they cannot set up the Jing." When being asked why there were still problems with the new links provided by the researcher to set up Jing on Linux, Nam said, "Some of students don't know how to use the new technologies." However, Dr. Mai did not think this is the main problem. It seemed to her that the lack of cooperation between the students of the two institutions was more serious. She said:

> The only project we need to work on and didn't work on screen casting, students used different operating systems here when they download the software, it didn't work and then anyway, we passed the assignments, of course there was no co-operation from EMU students, that's why it didn't work either, not just the technology but other kind of thing as well.

Suggestions for Future Exchanges

Besides sharing their opinions of the problems occurred in the IT-HELPS exchange, the respondents also suggested some solutions for future improvement.

Longer time for the online exchange. Both Nam and Anne gave the same suggestion for improving the future exchange. Nam shared his opinion: "I think the time

of the program should be longer…" Anne also thought that having 15 weeks to integrate the IT-HELPS activities into the curriculum "would be great." She said:

> That would be really cool especially if what we were learning about that week in like my TESOL class at the university here if it would reflect that with the online discussion a little more, yeah I think that'd be a lot better. Not that this is bad. This is good. I want you to feel positive about this.

From the perspectives of the instructors, Dr. Edwards suggested:

> If we could have done it in an entire semester instead of eight weeks, we would have more time to do things. If my syllabus hadn't already been ready and we could work my objectives into your programs. And then if it was required and the time we spent that would have been meaningful they could see where they're going.

> Talking about the requirement of the tasks, Dr. Edwards continued suggesting providing participants more time: "I think it is required if we can work it into so they have a goal longer so that they can have time to spend on something and I think it can be really successful."

Ways to motivate active participation.

1. Make the exchange a formal course for credit. Having experienced the problems with motivation, all EMU respondents recommended that the IT-HELPS activities should be embedded to be used formally in the curriculum of higher education institutions in general and the SLA class in particular. For instance, Anne revealed:

> I would, maybe have this as a class, instead of just having part of a class, like I know it has to go through the university but… in an ideal world, this would be

really cool to be like a one credit class in the college of world languages. Then you

would have motivations because that's gonna be something that you're getting

credits for. Also it will give you a chance to really focus on, this is part of my

schedule, like part of my schedule to interact with these students (yeah not

overwhelmed), yeah. Not just like in addition to…yeah like a lot of my American

classmates were like oh this is extra work (and you get nothing, you have more

work). Even though it wasn't that much work, but… whatever, yeah. Like it would

be really cool in an ideal world, a hypothetical world that this is a 1 credit class

and there would be an exchange at the end.

Likewise, Cathy stated the same opinion: "It would be even good if it were a part

of a class that I was taking, like kind of an assignment and not having other assignments

for that Second Language class." At another time Cathy restated this idea: "I think that

would be really cool. I wish it was an entire class that would be really cool like…a

cultural awareness class…" and "So you can also do it at higher level classes as an extra

component that you get credits for because students' life is harsh. You can't do something

for fun. I know it's a lot of extrinsic motivation, a lot of goals." Cathy was really

interested in this idea; hence she repeated her suggestion:

> I should have more time…It should have been a class with credit where we have
>
> an exchange program we could delegate…It would be like...in class …kind of part
>
> of an assignment that we have to do, people could have invested more time to it.

2. Emphasize teachers' roles. Showing her frustration about the learning outcome

which was not controlled, examined, or tested properly, Cathy emphasized the important

role of the instructor in reminding and guiding the students of the tasks and the deadlines:

"Umm…to remind, a lot of time I think the teacher would have done a better job if the teacher says, "Hey just let you know this assignment is coming up on the website" and then goes through it very fast." Additionally, Dr. Edwards added some ways that the instructors can be helpful in managing class activities that students did not do voluntarily "I sit there and I'll reserve the room for you and… I will speak in case they have questions and they would probably be happy do it on their own." Cathy also believed that the teacher should guide the students thoroughly with specific goals:

> Sometimes I didn't know exactly what the goal was so it would be better to reword the goals. I'm kind of organized and I like things organized. So as a teacher, if you make it like "hey, this is one goal, you have to do this!" and then underline several essential parts to be done.

> In addition, Dr. Edwards shared her opinions for managing the in-class activities: "There would need to be class discussion about what is going on with partners and what you think the difficulty is…" She also thought of using the group discussions to facilitate both the classroom activities and the online exchange activities:

> I think that maybe if I had asked them to hand in the work they studied in my class and I required everybody to do it. I would require discussion posts for my class so they can talk among themselves about the kinds of things they are doing.

> Dr. Edwards continued: "I would devote some class time to group discussions about what they are learning from other groups. I wouldn't have them talk together; I'd have them pair up to talk with other groups so they found out other perspectives. I'd make it longer."

Moreover, weekly report submission of the collaborative process was suggested to be required assignments so that the instructor can know whether the students are working collaboratively for the projects. Dr. Edwards talked about her requirements for another potential exchange class: "There will be a reflection paper and this is why we are doing it. We're trying to do this to meet this objective…" while Cathy wished: "...I wish we had done a report ….everyone would have put more efforts into it."

3. Organize study tours after the exchange. In order to motivate the participants in the IT-HELPS exchange, informants thought of setting the goals or providing benefits from both sides. The EMU students were not really motivated; thus Cathy and Anne both agreed with the idea of having a study tour for face-to-face meetings in Vietnam. Cathy exclaimed when being asked about this: "Oh yeah definitely!" Even more excited, Anne said:

> … oh yeah that would be awesome. But not just because I want to travel really bad. But yeah that would be really cool because there would be more motivations to have this trip. Because I'm gonna keep this email list around, and I hopefully to continue to interact with the Vietnamese students that way.

IT training sessions or workshops before the exchange. Even though the tutorial videos and the online technical support received high appreciation, informants still preferred the training sessions or workshops before the exchange or each activity. The role of the teacher in this case is very important to guide the students through the completion of the required tasks. Dr. Edwards thought "In the future I need to show them how to do it in class so that they are not doing it on their own." Lan also agreed with this when saying that "we need an instructor to help us use them (technologies)." She repeated her opinion

in another answer: "Yeah. We are actually keen on trying new technologies but we don't have much time to go further with them. Instead, we should wait for teacher's instructions on how to use them." Replying to the question about the need for attending some technical training sessions before the exchange, Nam nodded his head and showed his excitement: "Yes. That would be helpful!" Likewise, Anne showed her need for the technical support from the teacher. She said:

I think it would be good to arrange more Skype dates like the professors help to do that cuz I don't have the technology to Skype on my own. So I would have needed a professor to help facilitate that. But as far, I know that you posted the tutorial videos are really helpful. I think the only aspect of technical support that would help really much is you showing us the website.

More synchronous time. Time arrangement for each small group to talk on Skype was recommended. Dr. Edwards stated explicitly: "I recommend more synchronous opportunities." Similarly, Anne said: "skype dates with smaller groups" when being asked about her suggestion for the exchange. On the same track but emphasizing more on the benefits and the need of having more online talks, Lan suggested:

I suppose we need to change the way we get in touch via emails into Skype. I would like to email them to make an appointment asking them for an online talk. Through emails we have had some problems. So we need to a have a meeting online so that we can talk and share through which we can improve our listening and speaking skills. This is also the way to make EMU students closer to us.

In short, four main themes found in the raw data of the interviews with six informants showed different aspects of the online exchange. These findings included both

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positive and negative sides of the use of the IT-HELPS activities and the selected

telecollaboration 2.0 tools, the other affective factors in online exchange and some

suggestions from the respondents for the future. Though the IT-HELPS exchange was not

fully explored as expected due to the obstacles mentioned above, its activities and

technological tools received high evaluations from the informants thanks to its

effectiveness and relevance in enhancing their ICC to some extent.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this study, the question of how relevant and effective the free telecollaboration 2.0 tools and the IT-HELPS activities are in enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence in online intercultural exchanges has been answered with the data from the interviews with participants from Tan Tao University and Eastern Michigan University. In fact, from the perspective of Byram's (1997) ICC definition and five ICC principles, the researcher discussed the extent of the informants' ICC enhancement as a result of the use of the free tools and activities in the online exchange. The findings from the informants' perspectives and experiences during the online exchange showed that the culture-embedded telecollaborative activities and the free telecollaboration 2.0 tools used in this online exchange facilitated their ICC enhancement well despite some problems in using these activities and tools for specific contexts. These findings set a foundation for future research in this field and can provide practitioners with knowledge about effective ways to facilitate online exchanges designed to achieve ICC. Results indicate that the enhancement of these ICC components is consistent with theoretical expectations to some extent. Though such kind of online exchange with native speakers of the target language and culture does not guarantee ICC enhancement, these free telecollaboration 2.0 tools and the IT-HELPS activities are worth being considered for use in the broader population in future online exchanges that aim to increase participants' intercultural communicative competence for better language learning.

Specifically, the following important results can be drawn from the interviews with the informants of the IT-HELPS online exchange:

First of all, it can be concluded that the virtual IT-HELPS activities which used free telecollaboration 2.0 tools can facilitate the enhancement of the participants' ICC quite well in reference to Byram's (1997) ICC definition and his descriptions of four ICC components. Despite some problems causing the failed communication in some of their online partners which was found to lead to participants' negative attitudes in previous studies (O'Dowd, 2003; Belz, 2002), the informants of the online exchange between Eastern Michigan University and Tan Tao University thought that they changed their attitude toward their online partners positively and increased their knowledge of the other cultures and their own quite a bit. The informants also developed their ICC skills, language skills and their critical cultural awareness but not as significantly as perhaps predicted because of the failed communication between some online partners. Without active interactions and assessment of the assigned tasks, some informants did not strongly develop their skills of discovery and interaction, interpretation and relating but found the positive and new changes of their cultural knowledge and awareness of differences in cultural practices and products. Some of them could see their selfhood and the otherness; others failed to be exposed to another culture due to their lack of communication. It is quite hard to assess the extent to which the informants had increased their ICC; however, they reported many remarkably positive changes in their attitude and cultural knowledge.

Second, the free telecollaboration 2.0 tools selected for the online exchange were highly rated by the informants as effective, useful, appropriate, easy, and familiar. Both synchronous and asynchronous tools facilitated the interactions well but the former was preferred by non-native speakers of English because they created authentic conversations for language learning. The videos shared in the discussion forum were one of the most

effective tools for online interactions while the new tools such as Jing or PodOmatic attracted the participants but were not used as frequently as the ones they were already familiar with. Language learning was facilitated via the discussion forum in Webs which used authentic discourse in a real world setting to develop writing and reading skills and via Skype which afforded extra synchronous practices in oral and listening comprehension. Various tools were suggested for each IT-HELPS activity, but the ones used for daily social contact seemed more convenient for and accepted by the participants. Hence it can be inferred that if web 2.0 tools which are engaging many people in informal social practices can be applied to language learning in formal academic settings, these social web practices can generate better cultural learning for enhancing individuals' ICC in tandem with enabling wider access to cost-free and authentic language learning. This cost-efficient method makes the spread of culture learning possible to all kinds of language learners across boundaries and social backgrounds to develop openness, trust, respect, active participation and cultural diversity. This also demonstrates the potential of Web 2.0 technologies as a means to transform education (Walton, Weller & Conole, 2008, cited in Guth & Helm, 2010).

Third, as the study results revealed, the IT-HELPS activities, which were designed to develop the five targeted ICC principles by Byram (1997), received high appreciation and positive feedback from the informants as relevant and effective activities in enhancing ICC for those who were actively involved in the online exchange. However, the informants' ICC was not satisfactorily enhanced to the expected extent because of some problems in implementing these IT-HELPS activities. Some other minor problems such as technical challenges and time difference were anticipated before the online exchange with

well-prepared solutions; however, the participants' lack of motivation is surprisingly an unexpected problem because it is totally different from Savignon and Rothmeier's (2004) claim of an increase in their participants' motivation when joining an online exchange. The lack of motivation perhaps prevented interactions and led to the lack of communication in some online collaborative group-work. Indeed, due to this lack of motivation, some of the respondents reported that they did not fully participate in the exchange as they should have. Students may think that online means an easy option and they underestimate the amount of time and effort they need to put into the online exchange to maintain their active participation. As has already been pointed out, this lack of motivation was caused by many factors; nevertheless, the main reason for this lack of motivation was the failure of integrating the IT-HELPS activities into the existing curriculum of the content-based Second Language Acquisition class at EMU. The tasks were not graded because the teacher said that the content of the SLA class, which was not the first choice for this online exchange, was different from that of the IT-HELPS activities. The online exchange in academic contexts required participants to spend a substantial amount of time meeting, working collaboratively, reading and replying to correspondence, but these clashed with the amount of time students prioritized for other formal academic activities. Without instrumental motivation for doing the collaborative tasks or interactions for real academic purposes, some EMU students did not communicate for some tasks and their participation as volunteers limited their active interactions. In addition, though the informants said that it was the tight schedule at school that prevented them from actively participating in the online exchange to some extent, it is possible that besides their lack of motivation, the IT-HELPS activities required too much work from the

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participants. Thus it is suggested that the IT-HELPS activities should be carefully

embedded into the curriculum as an integral part, not just an extra part in which students

can choose to participate at their convenience. Moreover, even though the informants of

the IT-HELPS exchange showed fun, mutual understanding in a good relationship, respect

and trust, they experienced the limited communication due to the individual differences in

motivation which are also a decisive cause in the low functioning of an exchange (Ware,

2005). O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) noted:

> Although surprisingly little research has looked at the relationship between failed
>
> exchanges and the methodological aspects of the activity, elements such as task
>
> design, the relationship between the teachers in both classes, and the ways in
>
> which students are prepared for the exchange have been acknowledged as having a
>
> significant influence on the outcome of telecollaboration. (pp. 626-627)

Therefore, it is suggested here that goals for each IT-HELPS activity should also

be clearly modified to effectively motivate the individual participants of certain learning

contexts before the exchange. It has been noticed that "teachers play a crucial role in

affording students opportunities to participate in intercultural projects" (Lomicka, 2006,

p. 219); thus collaborating teachers should carefully discuss the best ways to use these

activities for specific types of students and classes before any exchange. The choice of

class to implement and the ways to integrate and control these online collaborative

activities in academic settings are among the most important factors for a successful

online intercultural exchange.

The present study also supports the finding in previous intercultural projects

(Furstenberg et al., 2001; Helm & Guth, 2010) that culture can be explicitly taught in

online communication of foreign language classrooms to increase the participants' ICC level. This cultural learning process, in turn, also improved participants' language skills effectively. These culture-embedded activities, being used in both English speaking and non-English speaking countries, were designed to reach the targeted culture learning goals and facilitate the learning process of the target language. Therefore, future intercultural exchanges should modify the current IT-HELPS activities in a way that both the participants' native and target languages can be used in communication. Due to the limited amount of time in the exchange program, the Vietnamese language was used in just one activity of week 5 and the native speakers of English from EMU did not learn Vietnamese formally; thus this may cause the lack of motivation in their communication with the Vietnamese students.

An online teaching environment is not being advocated over more traditional teaching environments. However, since the free tools are very helpful in facilitating the exchange with low pressure and authentic conversations among learners across personal and national boundaries, it is preferable to have blended learning to add more exciting activities into a physical classroom to enhance ICC more effectively. It would be better if future projects could have IT training sessions to employ activities for online interactions with native speakers of the target language, activities in a physical classroom and chances to visit the other in face-to-face meetings all together in one class. The informants showed great interest in the ideas of having a study tour to visit their online partners' country; thus, the combination of asynchronous and synchronous tools for online interactions, the controlled but interesting classroom practices plus a chance to meet each other in person at

the end of the online exchange will surely motivate the future participants for their active participation which will consequently lead to their ICC enhancement at deeper levels.

Due to the limited amount of time for the online exchange and the researcher's use of only the interviews, the third ranked ICC assessment tool suggested by Deardoff (2006) as the main instruments for data collection, there were no pre-tests and post-tests to compare the ICC results as some other previous studies did. According to the informants, these IT-HELPS activities were effective and relevant in facilitating the online exchange, which aimed to enhance participants' ICC; nevertheless, future application or duplication of this project should be conducted with the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to fully explore the levels of ICC enhancement and to have thick descriptions as well as statistical evidence of the results. Quantitative assessment instruments are needed to exactly measure the extent to which participants increased their ICC in the online exchange. This research, like other studies on telecollaboration in foreign language education, is often limited in generalizing the results because of the small size of samples, the socially and institutionally situated nature of data collection, the scheduling difficulties, and time differences in conducting international collaboration. For these reasons, more studies should be conducted to examine the effectiveness and relevance of the IT-HELPS activities in enhancing ICC at different levels and in various contexts as well as to provide more convincing evidence for substantiating or challenging the previous findings in the field of telecollaboration 2.0. Additionally, as multimedia technologies become more available and diverse, the replication of this IT-HELPS project should select or consider using more effective and appropriate tools for specific online exchanges as well as the in-class tasks and discussion depending on the specific learning context and culture.

Ultimately, collaborating teachers need to find out more ways to motivate and promote sustained engagement in these online activities so that participants can benefit from the kinds of intercultural encounters that telecollaboration 2.0 tools can potentially provide.

In conclusion, from these findings, it is obvious that there is a possibility of enhancing intercultural communicative competence effectively through online exchange programs for free, especially in developing countries like Vietnam. Literature shows that not many previous studies about online exchanges have successfully used completely free telecollaboration 2.0 tools, which are mainly used for daily contacts in social life, to facilitate language learning and ICC development in academic settings. It is hoped that the aforementioned suggestions will be beneficial for future intercultural projects with the effective application of telecollaboration 2.0 tools and activities. Regardless of the means of communication to be used, intercultural exchange will remain a vital element in the language learning process (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999); therefore, it is expected that these IT-HELPS activities which used free telecollaboration 2.0 tools for working collaboratively online will be effectively implemented for a wider population of language learners in Vietnam or in other developing countries.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Timeline of the IT-HELPS Exchange

Week	Topic	Technologies in Use	Assignment(s)	Activities	Deadline
1 Feb. 6-12	Identity	Podomatic / YouTube	- A video clip for self-introduction: Yourself, cultural box, family	- Group matching "Who are you? What are 5 cultural artifacts that can represent you?" (Group work)	Feb 4
		Video conferencing	Response to the introduction video clip and be connected online to your group match	- What do you find most interesting about your group match?	
2 Feb.13-19	Taboos and Stereo-types	Webs (videos/articles posted on flipchart, discussion board)	- Individual online discussion	Write and response to at least one posting/ thread	
3 Feb. 20-26	Holidays	Webs and PodOmatic Thinkfree/ Dropbox/ Google docs	Creating a podcast on PodOmatic (Share a weblink on Webs)	Discuss in class on how to design a website about your group match's traditional holiday and how to use Thinkfree/Dropbox (Groupwork) - After class: Assign work for each member + Contact the group match for the content	Week 8

4 Feb.27-Mar. 4	Education and Entertain-ment	Webs, YouTube	Movies discussion on class website's forum	Discuss the content of the movie in terms of education and entertainment values	
5 Mar. 5-11	Language	Skype (individuals), PodOmatic	Language box (posted on wikispaces)	Learn from your group match how to speak at least 4 phrases or sentences in another language (not English) (why/ when to use them?)→upload online	
6 Mar.12-18	People and Places	Webs (article or discussion questions), Thinkfree/		- Online discussion about an article	
7 Mar. 19-25	Social Issues	YouTube/ PostCast or podomatic/Jing Webs	Presentation of a study tour/local community issue + discussion	Community Service learning or a video/research about a social issue	
8 Mar.26-March 31	Sum-up video conference	Skype, PowerPoint/ Prezi	Presentation (in class) Cultural Festival (?) Journal 2	What have you learned?	

Appendix B: University Human Subject Review Committee Approval Letter

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

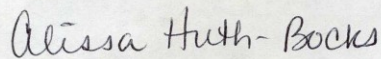*Education First*

March 5, 2012

Nguyen Bui
World Languages

Dear Nguyen:

The College of Arts and Sciences Human Subjects Review Committee (CAS HSRC) of Eastern Michigan University has granted approval to your modified proposal (#1098), "Free Telecollaboration 2.0 Tools and Activities for Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence." After careful review of your completed application, the HSRC determined that the rights and welfare of the individual subjects involved in this research are still carefully guarded. Additionally, the methods used to obtain informed consent are appropriate, and the individuals participating in your study are not at risk.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the HSRC of any change in the protocol that might alter your research in any manner that differs from that upon which this approval is based. If your data collection continues beyond the one-year period from your original approval date (see below), you must apply for a renewal.

On behalf of the Human Subjects Committee, I wish you success in conducting your research.

Sincerely,

Alissa Huth-Bocks

Alissa C. Huth-Bocks, Ph.D.
CAS Human Subjects Review Committee Chair

Note: If project continues beyond the length of **one** year, please submit a continuation request form by **2/16/2013**.

cc: Elisabeth Morgan, Ph.D.

University Human Subjects Review Committee · Eastern Michigan University · 200 Boone Hall
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
Phone: 734.487.0042   Fax: 734.487.0050
E-mail: human.subjects@emich.edu
www.ord.emich.edu

Appendix C: Thesis Proposal Approval Form

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Graduate School
Thesis Proposal Approval Form

Name of Student _Nguyen Bui_ Student # _E01004582_

Advisor _Elisabeth Morgan_

Major _TESOL_ Cognate _Linguistics_

Thesis Proposal Title

Free Telecollaboration 2.0 Tools and Activities for Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence.

Committee Report on Thesis Proposal

After review of the thesis proposal, the Thesis Committee certifies that:

[✓] The proposal is satisfactory. The student may proceed with the study.

[ ] The proposal is unsatisfactory. The following deficiencies must be corrected:

_____

_____

Thesis Proposal Approval: student may proceed with the thesis research as outlined in the proposal.

Committee Signatures:

Committee Chair _Elisabeth Morgan_ Date _1/24/2012_

Committee Member _____ Date _1/24/2012_

Committee Member _James Perren_ Date _1/24/2012_

Committee Member _____ Date _____

Committee Member _____ Date _____

Signed form is kept in the academic department/school student file.
Figure 1. Thesis proposal approval form.

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Appendix D: Background Information Questionnaire

Please tick (v) the appropriate space to provide some information about yourself:

1. Name:………………………………, email: ……………………….
2. Age: ☐ 17-19   ☐20-22   ☐ older than 22
3. Gender: ☐ Male
                    ☐ Female

4. Foreign language(s) that I can speak:
                    ☐ Spanish

                    ☐ French

                    ☐ Chinese

                    ☐ Japanese

                    ☐ Cambodian

                    ☐ Others…………………..(Please specify)

5. I am studying….
                    ☐ Full - time

                    ☐ Part - time

6. I have been living / studying abroad ….
                    ☐ Yes. Where and how long? ………..

                    ☐ No

7. To have knowledge of another culture is….
                    ☐ Very important

                    ☐ Important

                    ☐ Not important

8. I use a computer:
   ☐ Daily   ☐ more than 3 times but not daily

   ☐ 2-3 times/ week   ☐ fewer than 2-3 times

9. Which technologies can you use? Check all that apply to you.

☐ Skype   ☐ Blogs

☐ YouTube   ☐ Jing

☐ Email   ☐ PodOmatic

☐ Microsoft PowerPoint   ☐ Google Docs

10. What types of support do you need to make you familiar with the new technologies?

☐ Teacher help in class   ☐ Online support when in need

☐ Tutorial videos   ☐ I can manage them by myself

☐ Contact information of whom to get support

11. What activities are you familiar with?

☐ Blogging   ☐ Online forum discussion

☐ Chatting   ☐ Presentations

☐ Online conferencing   ☐ Making video clips and sharing

☐ Podcasting   ☐ Group Projects

12. Please write down 3 activities that you enjoy doing in online exchanges

13. Do you have previous experience with learning partnerships or online exchange? Please provide details.

14. What expectations, if any, do you have for your virtual partners?

Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Students

1/ Could you please describe your experience with the online exchange?

2/ Tell me about any changes, if any, in your communication with your online partners. How confident/ comfortable are you now in communicating with people from another culture (Vietnamese/ American)? Could you please give me some examples?

3/ What changes, if any, have you noticed in your attitude/awareness of your online partners' culture? What changes, if any, have you noticed in your knowledge about your own culture and other cultures? Why do you think so?

4/ I'd like you to think back to your skills and knowledge in communicating with your online partners at the beginning of the online exchange and tell me how they are similar or different from your present skills and knowledge. What effects, if any, did the activities and the technologies have on your changes?

5/ Can you describe any problems and successes in communicating online with your partners (in terms of time, availability of technological tools, technological support, and easiness of use)?

6/ People have different opinions and experiences of the technological tools in the online exchange. How about you? What have been your experiences with the technologies in this online exchange project? In what ways do you think so? Which kind of technological tool do you like/ dislike the most? Why?

7/ How did the technologies in this exchange project impact you communicating with your online partners?

8/ How relevant, if at all, were the activities to support your communication with people from another culture? In what ways did the activities impact your knowledge about your own culture and your views of other cultures? Can you please clarify this with more details/ examples?

9/ Do you have anything you want to add that we have not talked about?

Appendix F: Semi-structured Interview Questions for Teachers

1/ Could you please describe your experience with the online exchange?

2/ Can you please describe how you used the activities and technological tools in your class? What do you think about fitting the IT-HELPS activities into your existing curriculum?

3/ Can you describe any problems and successes in managing the asynchronous and synchronous activities (in terms of time, availability of technological tools, technological support, and easiness of use) in your class? Can you please suggest anything for improvements?

4/ People have different opinions and experiences of the technological tools in the online exchange. How about you? What have been your experiences with the technologies in this online exchange project? In what ways do you think so? Which kind of technological tool do you like/ dislike the most? Why?

5/ How did the technologies in this exchange project impact your students? Please give me some examples.

6/ How relevant, if at all, were the activities to your course? Can you please clarify this with more details/ examples?

7/ Do you have anything you want to add that we have not talked about?

Appendix G: Informed Consent Agreement

Project Title: Free Telecollaboration 2.0 Tools and Activities for Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence

Investigator: Nguyen Bui, MA TESOL student, Eastern Michigan University
           Contact: Email: nbui@emich.edu, mobile: 7342394177
Thesis advisor: Dr. Elisabeth Morgan, Department of World Languages, Eastern Michigan University
           Contact: Email: emorgan@emich.edu, Phone: 734-487-3389

Purpose of the Study: The main purpose of this research study is to examine the effectiveness and relevance of the selected free technological tools and collaborative activities in facilitating the online intercultural exchange that aims to enhance the intercultural communicative competence of students at Eastern Michigan University and Tan Tao University in Vietnam.

Procedure: If you agree to be part of this project, the investigator will explain the study to you and answer any questions you may have. Then you will be asked to participate in the online exchanges between students of the Second Language Acquisition class at Eastern Michigan University and an ESL class at Tan Tao University in Vietnam from Feb 6 to March 31, 2012. Near the end of this exchange project, you may also be interviewed and recorded for about one hour about your experiences and perspectives of the technologies and activities used in this online exchange project. A duplicate copy of this informed consent with follow-up contact information will be given to you.

Confidentiality: All your personal information and related materials will be kept strictly confidential. The website for the online exchanges can be viewed by registered members only. Only a code number will identify your questionnaire and interview responses. At no time will your name or any identifying information be associated with your responses to the questionnaire and the interviews. A digital recording of the interview will be kept on a password protected computer in the possession of the investigator. Once the digital recordings have been transcribed and the study has been completed, the digital recordings will be permanently destroyed. The informed consent forms will be kept separate from any other recordings and will be kept locked up.

Expected Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to you by participating in this project because the research results and personal information will be kept completely confidential.

E*xpected Benefits*: You may enhance your intercultural communicative competence, language and computer skills in this project. Also, your participation will greatly contribute to developing a better multimedia-based curriculum for intercultural communication. Therefore, the investigator strongly values your input and information.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you do decide to participate, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study without negative consequences.

Use of Research results: No names or individually identifying information will be revealed. Results may be presented at research meetings and conferences, in publications and as part of a master thesis being conducted by the investigator. The participants can ask for a duplicate copy of the research results if needed.

Future Questions: This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use from February 2012 to April 2012. If you have any questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Deb de Laski-Smith (734.487.0042, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-chair of UHSRC, mailto: human.subjects@emich.edu). Concerning your participation in this project, you may contact the investigator or the thesis advisor, Dr.Morgan, using the contact information indicated above. If you agree to participate in this study, please sign this consent form.

Consent to Participate: I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project and the above information, including the research procedures, possible risks, confidentiality, and the likelihood of any benefit to me. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered. Also, I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information traceable to me at any time up to March 2012 without giving a reason. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to follow the study requirements and take part in the study.

_____   _____   _____
Print name   Signature   Date
_____   _____   _____
Researcher   Signature   Date