Internet-based videoconferencing in a cross-cultural telecollaboration project

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With the growing availability of distant technologies, a growing number of Internet-mediated cross-cultural projects are established with the aim to increase contact between learners and speakers of the target language and foster learners’ intercultural learning (Belz, 2002). While such telecollaboration projects have demonstrated learner development in linguistic and intercultural competence (e.g., O’Dowd, 2003; Liaw, 2006; Basharina, 2009), much of this research has been conducted in asynchronous written communication domains such as emails, instant messaging (IM), blogs, and e-forums with little exploration in exchanges in synchronous contexts (e.g., Skype, FlashMeeting, iChat, Lyceum).

Informed by the sociocultural perspective of language learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), this study examines synchronous interaction among 40 EIL speakers in an online multimodal teleconferencing platform. Twenty Taiwanese students and 20 American students participated in an eight-week cross-cultural telecollaboration project and completed one task-based one-to-one videoconferencing session using Google Hangouts and Skype as part of the course activities for promoting students’ language and cultural learning. Our study investigates (1) Whether, and if so how, EIL learners develop intercultural understanding over time through the cross-cultural teleconferencing experience; and (2) What affordances of Internet-based video teleconferencing tools can mediate learners’ language learning and promote their intercultural learning?

Through quantitative and qualitative examinations of the synchronous Internet-based videoconferencing exchanges among the 40 EIL learners and other data sources including questionnaires, reflective journals, and follow-up interviews, the findings indicate that the EIL learners’ intercultural understanding and cross-cultural awareness exhibited meaningful changes throughout the online intercultural exchanges. The technological, social, and cultural affordances of Internet-based video conferencing tools are shown to mediate students’ languacultural practices and intercultural learning. The study provides valuable insights into culture-based telecollaborative L2 pedagogy. Promises as well as challenges of integrating videoconferencing as a teaching and learning tool in second/foreign language classrooms will be discussed.

Keywords: intercultural communication, telecollaboration, videoconferencing.