A study of learners' perceptions of online intercultural exchange through Web 2.0 technologies

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Abstract

This paper reports a Spanish-American telecollaborative project through which students used *Twitter*, blogs and podcasts for intercultural exchange over the course of one semester. The paper outlines the methodology for the project including pedagogical objectives, task design, selection of web tools and implementation. Using qualitative and quantitative data collection, the study explored how the application of Web 2.0 facilitated cross-cultural communication. How the use of digital technology affected the way in which the students viewed intercultural learning and peer feedback was examined. The findings showed that students viewed the online exchange as a superb venue for intercultural communication with native speakers. Through social engagements, students not only gained cultural knowledge but also became more aware of their own beliefs and attitudes toward their own culture. In addition, discussions on topics of tangible and intangible cultures afforded the opportunity to raise students' awareness of cultural norms and practices. Peer feedback helped learners increase lexical knowledge, prevent language fossilization, and acquire native-sounding discourse. The study suggests that allocating sufficient time to complete each task and making personal commitment to online contributions are essential to successful intercultural exchanges.

Keywords: Intercultural learning, telecollaboration, Web 2.0, task design, peer feedback

1 Introduction

In the fast-growing, globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people across cultures is vital. Ensuring that our students attain the effective intercultural communication skills needed today is of paramount importance. Byram (1997) stresses that intercultural communicative competence (ICC) encompasses a constantly evolving process of developing cultural knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction with

others, open attitudes and critical awareness. It is commonly acknowledged that formal foreign language (L2) instruction is not sufficient to develop learners' ICC. Learners may be linguistically competent but unable to cope successfully with real-life situations where they negotiate meaning with others according to various cultural contexts (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Byram, 2000). As many students do not have opportunities to engage in conversations and exchange cultural perspectives with native speakers (NSs) outside of class, finding an effective means of providing them with acquisition-rich interaction through intercultural communication is crucial.

Among approaches to intercultural learning, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has opened up a wide range of opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. Efforts have been made to use telecollaboration to foster intercultural dialogue within institutional settings (e.g., Lee, 2009; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Over the last two decades, L2 research across different CMC conditions has been conducted and distinct learning outcomes have been reported in edited collections (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Guth & Helm, 2010; Levy & Stockwell, 2006; O'Dowd, 2007). Affordances of intercultural exchange include linguistic gains (Belz, 2007; Dussias, 2006; Lee, 2011a; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008), pragmatic awareness (Chun, 2011; Kinginger & Belz, 2005; Stockwell & Stockwell, 2003), intercultural competence (Hauck, 2007; Lee, 2012; Schenker, 2012), and increased motivation and autonomy (Lee, 2011b; O'Rourke, 2005; Ware, 2005). In spite of these beneficial effects, pitfalls have been reported, such as intercultural misunderstandings (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Ware & Kramsch, 2005), institutional constraints, misalignment of academic calendars, and scheduling conflicts (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003; Lee, 2009). Teachers also face challenges of raising learners' awareness of intercultural learning and training them to interact effectively with distant partners (Basharina, Guardado & Morgan, 2008; O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004). Finally, effective tasks are essential to promote learners' active engagement and further develop their cross-cultural competence (Lee, 2012; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009).

Although existing research enhances our understanding of online exchange for intercultural learning, most findings are drawn from Web 1.0 tools (email, text chat, discussion board). With widespread popularity, Web 2.0 tools including blogs and podcasts have continued to evolve in L2 instruction. Yet there is a lack of research on the application of Web 2.0 for intercultural exchange (Guth & Helm, 2010; Lomicka & Lord, 2009). Due to significant differences between Web 1.0[1] and Web 2.0[2], it is worthwhile investigating how Web 2.0 fosters cross-cultural dialogue through which learners gain different cultural perspectives. Thus, this study explored affordable and challenging aspects of intercultural learning in a Spanish-American telecollaborative exchange. In particular, the effects of peer feedback on the content and language from students' perspectives were examined.

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[1] The content of Web 1.0 sites is created by using various web-authoring tools with HTML and posted by the administrator. Web pages are static, non-interactive, and passively read by the users to retrieve information.

[2] Web 2.0 allows users to build dynamic social networks by creating the content in various media including wikis, blogs, photos (e.g., *Flickr*), audios (podcasting, *Skype*) and videos (vodcasting, *YouTube*), as well as interact with others through embedded communication tools, such as e-mail or instant messaging systems (*Facebook, LinkedIn*).

2 Review of the literature

2.1 Telecollaborative exchange and intercultural competence

The primary goal of networked intercultural learning is to develop learners' ICC. ICC consists of a conceptual framework of four interrelated components *knowledge*, *skills, attitudes* and *awareness* (see Byram, 1997: 50–63 for details). Within this framework, intercultural interaction aims to promote in-depth cultural learning that goes beyond the superficial "facts only" approach. According to Bennett (1993), to become competent intercultural speakers, learners need to be open-minded to people of other cultures in order to understand cross-cultural perspectives with non-judgmental attitude and respect. Moreover, they should critically reflect upon the cultural similarities and differences and further develop cross-cultural awareness through personal discovery and social engagements (Byram, 2000). To this end, a number of telecollaborative projects have been conducted and the results have proven to be effective in the development of L2 learners' language skills and ICC (e.g., Belz, 2002; Chun, 2011; Lee, 2009; Schenker, 2012). For example, O'Dowd (2003) undertook a longitudinal study of a Spain-US university student e-mail exchange involving various types of tasks to exchange cultural information and perspectives, with results highlighting willingness to express cultural identity and sensitivity to others' needs as essential to successful intercultural partnerships. Another study conducted by Jin and Erben (2007) shows that students of Chinese developed greater intercultural sensitivity and showed respect for cultural differences through an online exchange via instant messenger. The process of analyzing and reflecting on native informants' perspectives enables students as outsiders to learn about the cultural framework governing the what, how and why of insiders' expressions in everyday interactions. Using Byram's (1997) model of ICC, Schenker (2012) reported on a six-week American-German student email exchange, with pre- and post-survey findings indicating development of intercultural competence, while conclusions highlighted the importance of teacher intervention to monitor progress and increase student motivation.

Application of CMC in intercultural learning has shifted from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, with wikis and blogs increasingly used for online exchange. For example, the *IntercultureWiki* project was created in 2006 to provide intercultural exchanges between students from the University of Padova, Italy and students from various universities in the US. The recent Padova-Dickinson telecollaboration involved the development of bilingual wiki pages. Students used various Web 2.0 tools, such as *Skype* and *Facebook* to discuss cultural topics, before collaboratively creating wiki pages concerning intercultural issues (Guth & Marini-Maio, 2010). One blog example of intercultural exchange is a one-year study from Ducate and Lomicka (2008) who found that students gained cultural understanding from a variety of different perspectives by reading native-speaker blogs. Another recent study by Lee (2012) shows how using blogs not only enabled students to exchange cultural knowledge with NSs but also raised awareness of cross-cultural issues over the course of a one-semester study-abroad program. Besides wikis and blogs, social networking tools such as *Facebook* and *Ning*[3] were used for online exchange. For example, using cross-cultural

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[3] *Ning* is an online platform that enables users and organizers to create their own social websites. For more information, visit http://www.ning.com.

assignments, students carried out virtual interviews with their distant partners via *Facebook*, interacting socially and exchanging cultural views (Genet, 2010).

2.2 Web 2.0: blogs, podcasts and twitter for language learning

The emergence of Web 2.0 has been progressively put to inpractice for pedagogical purposes. Unlike Web 1.0 applications, Web 2.0 enables learners to create and share content through social networking in a dynamic and instantaneous manner. Through social engagement, students interact, collaborate and network with others beyond the traditional classroom setting. Among other tools, blogs and podcasts have received substantial attention from language practitioners (e.g., Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Lee, 2010; Pinkman, 2005). Unlike traditional web creation, blogs are easy to make without in-depth HTML knowledge. Multimedia features including external links such as digital photos, audio and video clips are used to enhance content and appearance. Personal blogs are collections of online journals that foster self-expression and self-reflection, whereas collective blogs involve an entire class or small groups of students who collaboratively construct L2 knowledge (Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Lee, 2010). Given that blogs are asynchronous CMC, authors write at their own pace without time pressure, so enabling critical reflection on content. Network-based publishing also fosters learner autonomy, as students take charge of decision-making on what, how much and when to publish their work. Moreover, the perception of engaging with a broad audience, not a sole instructor, increases writing motivation (Lee, 2009).

Another increasingly popular Web 2.0 tool is podcasting. Podcasting is online audio content delivered through an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed that allows listeners to subscribe to their favorite podcasts. Podcasts can be downloaded automatically to the computer using media player applications, such as *iTunes*. Students often have limited opportunity for exposure to authentic input (listening) and produce output (speaking) in regular classroom settings. Podcasting supports language acquisition because it allows learners to listen to authentic recordings on a PC, then record and publish their own talks. Listening to native-speaker broadcasts enhances the real-world use of interpretive aural skills, whereas producing podcasts boosts learners' pronunciation and speaking abilities (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007). For listening practice, teachers can identify appropriate language podcasts and make them accessible to students, or assign specific podcasts to students based on students' language proficiency. As for creating podcasts, students can exchange their own recordings with another class or students from other cultures (Lee, 2009).

Like other asynchronous CMC tools, *Twitter,* a microblogging tool, enables users to exchange tweets: brief messages of up to 140 characters. One effective way to use *Twitter* is for instructors to post homework and brief questions for students to respond to. To build continuity, students are asked to follow their peers to comment on their tweets. The recent study by Lomicka and Lord (2012) shows that students were motivated to tweet with their peers to share and exchange information about their lives, and found tweets relevant to how L2 is used in the target countries. Other potential benefits include building learners' social presence and sense of community, increasing L2 learning outside of class, and enhancing their knowledge of L2 culture (Antenos-Conforti, 2009). The 140 characters limit, however, presents challenges to students when trying to communicate complex thoughts; while

confusing interface for non tech-savvy users, unwanted followers and video upload limits exhibit challenges to using *Twitter* effectively.

Based on the above discussion on Web 2.0 technologies for L2 learning, this paper describes a Spanish-American intercultural exchange project through which students used blogs, podcasts and *Twitter* in conjunction with task-based activities to develop their language and cross-cultural competence. The following section provides a detailed description of the current project in three parts. First, the institutional context where the project was set up and the participating students will be presented. Second, the objectives and structure of the project combined with Web 2.0 tools and tasks will be described. Third, the outcomes of the project focusing on both general and specific students' observations will be reported and discussed along with pedagogical implications.

3 Methodology

3.1 Context of the study

The intercultural exchange project was undertaken during one semester in Spring 2012. One advanced English class from a university in northern Spain and one advanced Spanish class from a large public university in the northeastern United States participated in the project. The project aimed to exchange cultural perspectives, raise intercultural understanding, and promote linguistic awareness. Generally, students don't have opportunities to use the target language to interact with NSs outside of class, as they live in small towns and cities with only native-language daily communication. Thus, the Spanish-American intercultural exchange was built into the course to afford students with increased opportunity to engage in meaningful and authentic intercultural interaction. The project set three main objectives: (1) to build students' intercultural competence through telecollaborative exchange using Web 2.0 tools; (2) to create a collaborative learning community where the students co-construct meaning and form using task-based activities; and (3) to foster linguistic awareness through peer feedback as part of online exchange.

3.2 Participants

The project involved 28 students from two cross-cultural institutions. The American students (n = 10) enrolled in the Graduate Seminar were first-year master's students (n = 4), teaching assistants (n = 4) and high school teachers (n = 2). All of them had spent a minimum of one semester studying in a Spanish-speaking country except one native Spanish speaker from Mexico. The Spanish undergraduate students (n = 18) were advanced speakers of English. They were pursuing degrees in English or Linguistics, and many were planning to become ESL teachers, including two students from Italy and France who had native fluency in Spanish. Prior to the project, both groups of students had attained advanced language proficiency, and were able to use L2 with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate in most formal and informal exchanges. They had limited experience with the target culture, resulting from brief study or travel abroad. As for Web 2.0, the majority of the students were familiar and comfortable with Internet technology. However, none had used *Twitter*, blogs and podcasts for intercultural exchange prior to the project.

3.3 Web 2.0 tools

Several Web 2.0 tools were implemented in the project. *Twitter* as a social media tool was employed to allow participants to make initial connection, establish good rapport and build group dynamics by exchanging brief text messages. Like other freely available blog publishing services, *Blogger* was employed for creating personal and group blogs. To make podcasts, *Audioboo*, a web-based application that allows users to create, upload and share short podcasts, was adapted for the project. Additionally, video-editing software applications including *iMovie* (Mac) and *Movie Maker* (PC) were recommended for video recordings. The greatest advantage of using *iMovie* or *Movie Maker* is its capacity for recording both audio and video clips with images that display during play. Recordings can be easily saved as MP4 files to upload to *Blogger*. Most students were digital natives and were comfortable with digital media/social networking (e.g., *Facebook*, *Twitter, Tuenti*). Thus, no training on how to use Web 2.0 was required. Students were encouraged to use tutorial videos and online help sites for assistance.

3.4 Procedure

Prior to the project, two partner teachers worked closely to design the project and tasks through e-mail exchanges. Their roles were primarily as facilitators of monitoring the project including reminding students of task deadlines and ensuring students' active involvement with the exchange. Both groups were given the same general instructions for the exchange. They were informed about the project via *Blackboard* (US group), *Moodle* (Spanish group) and e-mails (both groups). As part of the course requirements, students completed three major tasks (see Table 1). Each task took approximately three weeks to complete.

The intercultural exchange consisted of three stages:

Stage 1: Getting to know each other via Twitter. At the beginning of the exchange, students were asked to set up a *Twitter* account and follow other students. They sent tweets to introduce themselves to their distant partners. To facilitate conversations around the topic, hashtags (# symbols) were used to allow anyone interested in the same topic to follow. Both groups spent two weeks tweeting each other to share and exchange personal interests, academic work and cultural perspectives. They also used *Twitter* to discuss course assignments, brainstorm ideas and make decisions on the topics of their blogs and podcasts.

Stage 2: Exchanging cultural perspectives via blogging. The US students created individual blogs, whereas the students from Spain were divided into groups of two or three to produce collaborative blogs. Each blog consisted of a minimum of five entries concerning typical young people's lives and local/regional cultures. Although the instructors did not participate in any blogs, they were available to answer questions and offer assistance. Upon the completion of blog assignments, all URLs were posted and made available in *Moodle* (Spain group) and the class wiki (US group) for viewing. Students were instructed to read and critique their partners' blogs. One of the major benefits of using CMC is the opportunity to focus on form through expert feedback (Lee, 2008). Thus, students were asked to provide corrective feedback to foster linguistic awareness. No specific instructions were given to the students. They made their own choices regarding how feedback should be provided to their native speaker partners.

Table 1 *Topics and tasks for intercultural exchange project*

Topics	Tasks
Blogs: a taste of local culture and people	You are required to produce a blog concerning university student lives, your hometown and the Spanish/American culture. Your blog should contain a minimum of five entries. You should use external links, photos, audio and videos to support the content of each entry. Upon the completion of the assignment, blogs will be posted in *Moodle*/class wiki to invite your distant partners to make comments on the content, as well as provide linguistic feedback.
Podcasts: controversial issues	For this task, you will work with your classmate to produce podcasts concerning controversial topics. Each pair should choose a different topic. You will explain the current situation in the United States/Spain. You will debate the issue, discuss different arguments and conclude the discussion by asking your distant partners for their reactions. Your recording should last a minimum of 5 minutes and should be embedded into your blog.
Peer feedback: content and language	You are required to make comments on your cross-cultural partners' blogs and podcasts. In addition, you should provide linguistic feedback by addressing vocabulary and grammar errors. You may use L1 or L2 to write comments in their blogs.

Stage 3: Discussing controversial issues via podcasting. After blog task completion, students worked in pairs or small groups to create podcasts on controversial topics. Each recording was made within a dialogue format in which students discussed and debated the chosen topic. Students first wrote, rehearsed, and finally recorded the script using their own computers. Each recording lasted approximately 5–6 minutes. The recordings were embedded into blogs for viewing. Both groups were required to listen to their partners' recordings and provide feedback to each other. The instructor did not assign any particular podcasts to specific individuals. Students were free to listen to any recordings that interested them.

4 Data collection and analysis

Data collection included both qualitative and quantitative data. Online surveys were created using a popular free survey website, *SurveyMonkey*. The post survey, consisting of a set of statements, used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* to gauge different viewpoints. Students indicated their level of satisfaction by ranking the statements from 1–5 (5 is the highest score). A few open-ended questions were used to elicit additional information about intercultural learning, Web 2.0, topics, and peer feedback. Both groups voluntarily completed the survey through which they reflected on their experiences with the project. Blog postings and responses to online open-ended questions allow researchers "to offer rich descriptions of observed phenomena, and to address issues related to participants' individual perspectives as well as to their personal lived experiences." (Wang & Vásquez, 2012: 422). Qualitative analysis was undertaken by

means of content analysis. Coding categories were derived directly from students' online responses and blog comments. The researchers first read and then identified common phrases, themes and key patterns concerning the effectiveness of Web 2.0 tools, task type and peer feedback. Most frequently used key points provided additional evidence to illustrate and support the findings on students' views of online intercultural exchange.

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Affordances and challenges of intercultural exchange and Web 2.0 tools

Table 2 displays the results of the students' reactions to the exchange and the use of Web 2.0.

Overall, the high rating (4.5 out of 5) indicates that students were extremely satisfied with the outcomes of the project (statement 10). Students often used words such as "fun", "rewarding" and "beneficial" to describe their optimistic experience with the exchange. One noted: "I would highly recommend the intercultural exchange because I think it is useful and it is another type of work different from the things we normally do in class, as grammar and vocabulary. I think this involves all these but in a more interesting way." For many students, the exchange allowed them to exchange different views of cross-cultural perspectives in a meaningful way. One student, for example, shared his observation:

> "I learned a lot about Spanish culture that I didn't know, particularly some of the less main-stream music and some festivals that I wasn't aware of. It was great to get some of that information because it's not necessarily something you get in a classroom."

Linguistically, the exchange afforded students the opportunity to explore lexical, phonetic and social variation between Peninsular and Latin American Spanish. The following quotation exemplifies beneficial effects of intercultural communication on the development of L2 learners' sociolinguistic awareness:

> "It was very beneficial for me to practice with more conversational, less formal Spanish. There were at times challenges when it came to the different varieties of

Table 2 *Students' views of intercultural exchange and Web 2.0 tools*

Statements of the survey	Mean	SD
1. I enjoyed using Twitter to communicate with my partners.	3.89	0.72
2. Writing blog entries was beneficial to me.	4.40	0.50
3. I liked how we incorporated other media (YouTube videos, images, photos, links) to the blog project.	4.70	0.57
4. I enjoyed making podcasts for my peers.	3.65	0.57
5. Topics were interesting and informative.	4.35	0.73
6. I liked having my peers make comments on my blog entries.	4.45	0.52
7. It was important for me to receive linguistic feedback from my peers.	4.55	0.50
8. I felt comfortable posting comments.	3.95	0.78
9. I liked making comments on my peers' blogs.	4.05	0.72
10. Overall, it was a positive experience for me.	4.50	0.52

Spanish since the students we were communicating with were more familiar with peninsular varieties as opposed to Latin American ones, but that also provided us some interesting topics for conversation."

With respect to the effectiveness of Web 2.0, students reported favorably on the application of digital tools, as shown in the following excerpts from online survey responses[4]:

- All the tools are very intuitive and easy to use and produce a nice, original product. They also now have mobile apps so that you could use them on the go.
- I enjoyed using blogger, twitter and podcasting for the exchange. It allowed you to communicate in different ways and the podcasts allowed you to hear the voices of your exchange partners even though they were in another country.

Nearly 78% of the students found *Twitter* useful for instant communication (statement 1). Most used *Twitter* as a broadcast tool for sharing all types of information including videos, pictures and links with their partners. For example, one American student posted a tweet to inform her Spanish partners about the progress of her blog:

"@Lara0602 @almuska he escrito algunos ejemplos en el último blog pero este fin de semana pienso en añadir mucho mas:) #997."

(I have written some examples in the last blog but this weekend I intend to add much more:) #997.)

In addition, *Twitter* allowed students to build a sense of belonging to support each other. For example, in response to her partner's tweet about prepositional errors, the Spanish student wrote:

"@Oanaxox It's totally understandable. I do have several problems with prepositions & collocations in English but we're still learning:-)! #997."

As shown in the above quotations, students incorporated emotions as visual cues (e.g., smiley-face symbol) to provide affective support to written communication and comfort each other by knowing that the 'other side' makes similar errors. The ability to establish a personal rapport can be seen to have greatly enhanced the working of these intercultural exchanges.

While *Twitter* enables students to focus on community and interpersonal relationship building, it is not without its limitations. For example, one student remarked: "I felt the Twitter was too limiting in how much I could express. It's difficult to have a meaningful conversation." Another admitted: "I didn't enjoy twitter because it is a mess to put some order within the messages." Similar findings were reported in the study by Lomicka and Lord (2012). Interestingly, one student was reluctant to use social media for academic work and made the following statement:

"I would do it because I was asked to do so. I do not think it is inevitable using Twitter academically, in fact I hope it is not, because I find technology to be overwhelming as it is. I already stare at a screen for too many hours per day."

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[4] All examples presented in this paper were taken from the current study and without any correction. While accents, tildes and umlauts are supported in *Twitter* and *Blogger*, students do not always use them.

To make the intercultural exchange more compelling, teachers should make students aware of the potentially significant impact that social networking has on intercultural dialogue across geographical boundaries, not just the use of social media itself.

More than 80% of the students enjoyed blogging (statement 2). They found the capability of embedding images, photos and *YouTube* videos to their blogs attractive and useful to support the content (statement 3). Many students agreed that they benefitted from sharing cultural information and personal experiences with their partners. The survey shows that 60% of the students had never used Web 2.0 tools prior to the exchange and so found the experience gratifying and rewarding. The following excerpts from post surveys and blog postings further demonstrate how blogging facilitated the process of intercultural communication:

- I enjoyed the Blogger because it provided enough space to expand on thoughts and use the target language. I was using Spanish in a real-life situation to connect with other students and to discover their cultures.
- It's really interesting. I would like to know more about "real life" in the USA because we often have a certain image from movies or publicities, stereotypes…but I think it's quite different in some ways.

The experience with social media transformed the way that students viewed intercultural learning. These findings suggest that learning the target culture from native speakers' experiences and perspectives is more meaningful than the surface learning of a set of simple facts about the target culture, as shown in the previous research (Lee, 2009; O'Dowd, 2007).

As for podcast recordings, students' feedback was very encouraging (statement 4). Over 70% of the students enjoyed making podcasts for their peers. Although *Audioboo* was recommended, most students chose alternatives including *iMovie* and *QuickTime* to create short videos along with photos, images and music interludes. Students found listening to their own recordings very helpful, as they learned how to make improvements in their speaking. In particular, interacting with their distant partners through human voice not only connected students in a way that the written text cannot, but also built their confidence in using L2 for real-world communication. Due to academic calendar differences (e.g., Spanish holidays, American spring break) between the two institutions, students encountered difficulties in completing the assignment in a timely manner. Consequently, not all podcasts were made available in blogs by the due dates, which affected the quality of online exchange and students' motivation toward the project. A few students made the following observations:

- Because we didn't exchange using podcasting until the end of the semester, I felt we didn't have adequate time to analyze and discuss our recordings.
- I found the podcasts to be rushed towards the end of the semester and would have liked to maybe do skype sessions where we could have talked live with the students rather than making a short recording and then waiting for a response.

It is likely that students did not realize that creating an interactive podcast is a time-consuming task because it involves writing the script, rehearsing and recording it. Given the diversity of Web 2.0 tools employed, the need to allow students to adequately familiarize themselves with these tools, and the apparent benefits of a gradual transition from one form to another without excessive pressure on time, the benefits of expanding the project beyond one semester are worth exploring.

5.2 Effects of task type and topic choice

When asked to give their opinion about tasks and topics, more than 85% of the students agreed that topics were stimulating and informative (statement 5). The *Twitter* tasks served as "getting-to-know you" icebreakers to help students become acquainted. As a result, students were successful in tweeting about their personal biographies, hobbies and schoolwork and further developed personal relationships with their cross-cultural partners. Students were given the freedom to choose their own topics, which appeared motivational to them. Free topics not only involved students in making their own decisions on the content of their work but also built on the area of interest. Both groups took initiative and control of their own learning as a key element in the development of autonomous learning, as suggested by other studies (Lee, 2011b; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009). Table 3 shows that both groups wrote about various topics from specific themes of the target culture (e.g., bullfighting, proms) to current controversial issues (e.g., immigration, abortion). It appears that American students chose topics concerning aspects of daily life (e.g., doing yoga, coffee break) along with their personal stories to express their own observations on local cultures, whereas Spanish students focused on specific aspects of Spanish culture including national and local customs and traditions.

Cross-cultural discussions on topics of tangible (e.g., food, holidays) and intangible (behavioral patterns and lifestyles of everyday people) cultures afforded the opportunity to raise students' awareness of cultural norms and practices. Through social engagement, students gained different cultural perspectives, and further showed appreciation of cultural similarities and differences. The following blog exchange illustrates how students reacted to and shared their thoughts on Spanglish:

> Student A: "I like this post, in Spain, I think that it doesn't happen very often, we just take some words from there but just as borrowings, but it is so curious for me listening that there are people who really speaks Spanglish"

> Student B: "I've found it very very interesting as well. I cannot believe that people really speak Spanglish. Personally, I agree with you. I don't believe that it's a good idea to mix two languages …"

Table 3 *Selection of topics for blogs*

Topics chosen by American students	Topics chosen by Spanish students
Blog #1: college student lifestyle; summer in New Hampshire; my first experience in Spain; mistakes in Spanish	Blog #1: languages of Spain; bullfighting; typical clichés of Spain; Spanish cinema
Blog #2: travel experience; immigration and Arizona; music "indie"; best coffee in New Hampshire	Blog #2: Salamanca; my memories of Salamanca; life in Granada; Granada University
Blog #3: snow in New Hampshire; prom; Winter carnival; educational system in the US	Blog #3: Barrio Húmedo -León; ERASMUS program; wild parties in Spain
Blog #4: Mexican food; Spanglish; my favorite artists; life experience in New Hampshire	Blog #4: Flamenco; festivals in León; music and sports in León; Spanish carnival

Table 4 *Selection of topics for podcasting*

Topics chosen by American students	Topics chosen by Spanish students
Gay marriage	Abortion
Advanced technologies	Spanish cinema
"Bostonisms" – Words, phrases, accents from Boston and New England areas	"Leonesisms" –Lexical items from León
Colloquial English	Different languages/dialects in Spain
Popular music in the United States	Sightseeing in León, Spain
Importance of learning a second language	Bullfighting in Spain

> Student C: Yeah, this tends to happen in regions of the US where there are a lot of Hispanic communities raising children who are attending American schools. These kids learn Spanish at home and English at school… they make friends at school who are in the same situation and that is how code switching begins in the life of a student … I believe it happened in Spain as well when the "Moros" invaded the southern portion of Spain …"

In addition, debatable topics like 'bullfighting' aroused students' curiosity, as they raised further questions, such as "Are there any movements that prohibit bullfighting in Spain?" or "How common is it to find individuals in Spain that are against them?" The above findings reveal that students exhibited attitudes of openness and curiosity; one of the objectives of intercultural communicative competence defined by Byram (1997).

Although students liked the idea of using free topics, some students found recurring topics unappealing. For example, one disappointed student explained:

> "I enjoyed the material content of their blogs but found it repetitive after already studying abroad in Spain and being aware of the holidays, foods and culture. I would have enjoyed a more varied content. I felt like many students wrote about similar topics … and that it would have been nice to have them share more about their lives and topics that we couldn't have just looked up online if we had wanted."

Clearly, this student didn't find topics of tangible culture informative after having had cultural immersion experience in Spain[5]. To avoid topic repetitions, students should submit topics in advance to get the instructor's approval before carrying out the blog assignment.

Originally, students were instructed to use controversial topics for podcasting assignments. However, as shown in Table 4, only a few podcasts focused on controversial issues. Some students chose their topics as an extension of the discussion on certain aspects, such as Spanish cinema and American popular music. The results show that students made more comments on controversial and linguistic issues than on cultural topics.

Both groups appeared interested in discussing linguistic aspects of the target language, such as lexical variation and colloquial expressions. Regionalism encompasses lexical

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[5]   It should be noted that the majority of US students chose to study abroad in Spain, as the language department managed a semester program at the University of Granada in conjunction with the *Centro de Lenguas Modernas* – Center of Modern Languages.

items, expressions and pronunciation favored by speakers in a specific geographic area with distinct cultural identities. Students took pride in making linguistic podcasts through which they discussed lexical variations in particular regions. For example, one Spanish group discussed lexical items (e.g., 'aguantar' for 'tardar', 'luego' for 'ahora') used in León, Spain, whereas the American students talked about words (e.g., 'wicked' for 'very', 'bubbler' for 'water fountain'), phrases and accents peculiar to Boston and New England areas. Consequently, students benefitted from creating podcasts and learned about the spoken language in a particular region. Evidently, listening to podcasting exposed students to native speakers' accents, linguistic and cultural sources in a natural and authentic manner.

5.3 *Role of peer feedback and strategies for error correction*

As shown in Table 2, overwhelmingly, over 90% of the students valued peer feedback (statement 6) because they viewed linguistic feedback as necessary for the development of L2 accuracy (statement 7). Nearly 80% of the students were comfortable addressing their partners' linguistic problems (statement 8) and were in favor of commenting on linguistic errors made by their partners (statement 9). The following excerpts drawn from online surveys illustrate that the students found peer feedback beneficial:

- I enjoyed most receiving the linguistic feedback from our peers in Leon. They were able to provide feedback on subtle errors that I have fossilized and commit frequently.
- It was very useful the fact that American students commented on our blogs to help us change some expressions they wouldn't use.

These comments corroborated the findings found in the study conducted by Ware and O'Dowd (2008), who reported that students preferred an inclusion of peer feedback on form as part of the online exchange.

Both groups provided various types of feedback including lexical and morphosyntactic comments to address linguistic problems. They used affective comments, such as praise, empathy or encouragement to diminish face threatening before they made error correction. The following excerpt exemplifies how the Spanish student was impressed with the high quality of her American peer's writing:

"By the way, you speak Spanish better than me, that's great. Normally, when we talk about the author of a novel, we say "de" (un libro de J. Safran) instead "por" (un libro escrito por J. Safran) … But they are insignificant mistakes, congrats for your Spanish and for this entry:)"

Similarly, the American students employed compliments as open remarks to comment on their partners' writing. Words of appraisal like 'awesome', 'excellent', and 'impressive' appeared repeatedly, as shown in the following quotation:

"First of all, awesome English! You write better than some of the students over here. I know we were told to offer linguistic advice or suggestions but to be honest I'm having a hard time finding major mistakes in your writing."

Pragmatically competent speakers know how to express themselves appropriately in a social context. The above excerpts clearly demonstrate that the advanced speakers were

aware of using compliments to diminish intimidation. The result coincides with the findings in the study conducted by Lee (2011b), who found that students used effective pragmatic strategies during CMC.

Due to the high level of linguistic skills and metalinguistic knowledge, both groups provided accurate grammar and lexical explanations to bring their partners' attention to focus-on-form. Stylistic comments with concrete suggestions were the preferred way to provide linguistic feedback by the American students, whereas reformulations to provide target-like forms were used by the Spanish students. The American students tended to focus on wording issues to provide more natural and native-sound-like discourse, as shown in the following blog comment:

> "I would rewrite this part "…are the terms which they think represent the whole country" to say "are what people think represent the whole country". It's less wordy and more concise …"

In addition, both groups appeared aware of and interested in discussions on lexical items. One intriguing observation made by an American student was the difference between the formal "going to" and the informal "gonna" form shown in the following comment:

> "I noticed you used the word "gonna" a few times throughout your blog. This word is formed from the two words "going" and "to." However, we use "gonna" in spoken English and "going to" in written English. Be careful when using it in writing, because it can come across as very informal."

Although no explanation was forthcoming from the Spanish student, the frequent use of colloquialisms such as "gonna" can be attributed in part to students' familiarity with American cinema and, to a lesser extent, television.

Another notable commentary made by the students was lexical variation, such as 'guajolote' (*turkey*) in Mexico vs. 'pavo' (*turkey*) in Spain. For example, one student raised the American student's awareness of different words used in Spain to express the meaning of 'to drive':

> "Aquí en España, no solemos hablar de "manejar" la moto, sino de conducir
> o coger la moto o también montar en moto."

> *("Here in Spain, we don't usually say "manejar" the motorcycle, but conducir or coger the motorcycle or also montar en motorcycle.")*

The above posting suggests that learners need to go beyond a rule-governed approach in order to address idiosyncratic errors (Lee, 2011b). Essentially, peer feedback as part of intercultural exchange helped learners increase lexical knowledge, prevent language fossilization and acquire native-sounding discourse.

6 Pedagogical implications and conclusion

Despite some challenges reported, the project demonstrated how students learned to use social networking tools for intercultural exchanges in ways that are pedagogically effective. The findings are noteworthy and point to pedagogical implications. Firstly, the

combined method of task-based instruction and Web 2.0 tools proved to be effective in empowering L2 learners' intercultural communication. Secondly, online interaction with NSs exposes students to first-hand cultural observations and cross-cultural pragmatics within social contexts. Thus, native informants should be incorporated into intercultural exchange to increase meaningful and authentic communication. Thirdly, in addition to student-chosen topics, teacher-assigned themes making use of authentic materials such as films, newspapers and TV shows should be explored, given their potential to increase discussion and debate on cross-cultural issues. Fourthly, synchronous CMC tools, such *Skype* and *Google Talk* are good options for establishing good rapport and increasing interaction during online exchange. Finally, linguistic feedback constitutes the development of L2. Instructors should create appropriate awareness-raising activities through which focus-on-form is guaranteed while meaning-oriented interaction is shared during the CMC.

To conclude, the development of learners' intercultural competence should be the core of L2 instruction in the age of globalization (Thorne, 2003). The current study contributes to the field of using Web 2.0 for intercultural learning in telecollaboration. The results showed that the majority of the students had a rewarding experience with the exchange. Most of the students acknowledged that they would not have gained in-depth cultural understanding through participating in the exchange outside of class had they had only in-class meetings. According to Byram (2000), a competent intercultural speaker is able to consciously and critically understand the relationships between his/her own culture and the culture of others. The study showed that online exchange provided learners with a superb venue for intercultural communication with native informants. Through social engagement, students not only gained cultural knowledge but also became more aware of their own beliefs and attitudes toward their own culture. Significantly, the project helped students to become autonomous learners who described, understood, analyzed, appreciated and enjoyed intercultural experiences and differences. While it is difficult to ascertain with precision how much both groups improved their language skills over a short period of exchange, linguistic feedback received from NSs enables students to look at the suggestions which allow them to notice the gap between L1 and L2, discuss language choices, and further reflect on language use.

Notwithstanding the above positive outcomes, a more in-depth picture, and hence more nuanced conclusion could be achieved by undertaking further studies with, for example, less advanced learners. Similarly, while feedback from students and critical assessment from the researchers indicated the overwhelming success of the project, the need to achieve familiarity with the diversity of Web 2.0 tools employed, coupled with the problems arising from academic calendar differences, would seem to indicate the worth of examining the extension of such projects beyond a single semester. The study recognizes the small sample size. Future research would need to increase the size, as well as to include learners of other levels of language proficiency to determine whether their language proficiency influences how they socially and cognitively exchange linguistic knowledge in the process of providing feedback. The study concludes that allocating sufficient time to complete each assigned task and making personal commitment to online contributions are necessary for maximum communication and collaboration. Well-designed tasks and effective strategies for online collaboration between teachers and among students are essential to achieve a fruitful intercultural exchange experience.

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