A survey of Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education in China

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Abstract

In all educational contexts, technological developments and changes in pedagogical theory mean that any picture of current practice and attitudes must be dynamic. In many countries, the learning outcomes of foreign language courses now include intercultural communicative competence (ICC), although the precise model for teaching ICC varies even across the English-speaking world. Internet-mediated approaches are widely used to support intercultural learning. In China, the geographical scale of the country and the speed and extent of contemporary socio-economic evolution, allied to long-established and distinctive cultures of learning, make the interface of new technologies and intercultural learning objectives particularly interesting and significant. A small-scale study of college teachers' and learners' perceptions of intercultural classroom instruction, with a special focus on Internet mediation, was conducted in mid-2007, using questionnaires and semi-structured questions, to explore the professional, personal and technical issues associated with Internet-mediated learning of languages and cultures. The results show that textbooks remain the predominant authority, while Internet tools are used as a source of information rather than a means of communication. Findings suggest recognition by teachers and students of the potential of the medium, and of the validity of intercultural goals for foreign language classes, although there are some divergences between the views of teachers and students. However, it is suggested that national policy, local incentives and resources and above all educational traditions do not yet allow optimal use of Internet-mediated approaches.

Keywords: Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education, Chinese tertiary education, Intercultural communicative competence, Internet, Classroom instruction, Blended instruction

1 The intercultural approach and the Internet in foreign language education

In China as elsewhere, globalisation has led to greater demand for foreign language skills, and a greater awareness of the need for intercultural competence. The Internet offers a uniquely flexible tool for developing linguistic and intercultural skills, in four modes:

- computer as tutor in standalone training programs;
- computer as input, providing unprecedented access to motivating, authentic, topical material;

- computer as output, offering through websites and online publication a real audience and communicative purpose for target-language production;
- computer as social environment: the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) draws on the importance of interaction in both cognitive and socio-cultural approaches to language learning, offering a wealth of possibilities for communication, self-expression and collaboration (Debski, 2006) which facilitate synchronous or asynchronous channels in either written or spoken form, for one-to-one (tandem), one-to-many or many-to-many purposes that involve learners and/or teachers, or native and non-native speakers.

In Europe, North America and Australasia, thanks to a growing body of research and good practice, it is now commonplace to exploit the Internet for intercultural exploration and exchange (see Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillet, 2001; Müller-Hartmann, 2000, 2006; O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004; Belz & Thorne, 2006; O'Dowd, 2006; Levy, 2007). In the past, culture has been treated as 'background studies', a fixed set of behavioural practices belonging to a single target culture, to be transmitted from teacher to learner (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat, 2004; O'Dowd, 2006). Such notions of national cultures embodying unchanging meanings, values and behaviours can lead to stereotyping (Jordan, 2002). More recent approaches recognize the multiplicity of cultures in any linguistic area, the infrequency with which individuals display 'national' collective characteristics (Macfadyen, 2005; Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005), and the relativity of all cultures which emerges from comparisons and contrasts across cultures, including the learners' own (Piller, 2007).

Scollon and Scollon (2000, 2001; also Piller, 2007) set aside what they call 'cross-cultural communication' and 'intercultural communication' since, while the latter is interactional, both embody an essentialist assumption of culture A in contact with culture B. 'Interdiscourse communication' supposes that linguistic and social practices inform and formulate culture and identity (Burr, 2003 in Piller, 2007), in a continuing process of assertion, negation, construction and reflection (Piller, 2007).

Within Second Language Acquisition, an essentialist language-plus-culture (L2 + C2) perspective has often accompanied more cognitive approaches, while communicative language teaching, with its objective of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980; Byram, 1997), extends also to discourse, strategic and sociolinguistic competences. However, the emphasis on the native speaker as model and target, common in communicative approaches, is now recognized as largely unattainable and mostly inappropriate, partly because it ignores the learner's own cultural identity (Byram, 1997), and partly because international languages, especially English, are predominantly used as second languages by non-native speakers and not attached to any particular set of cultural norms. The native-speaker goal thus becomes 'utopian, unrealistic and constraining' (Alptekin, 2002: 57). The language learner's goal today is more typically to be a mediator than an imitator, to develop an 'intercultural speaker' perspective (Thorne, 2006; Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998) possessing 'the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures … different from our own' (Guilherme, 2000: 297). Byram adds to the components of communicative competence those of intercultural competence, comprising the five '*savoirs*': knowledge, attitudes, two sets of skills and critical

cultural awareness. Byram further distinguishes intercultural competence from 'intercultural communicative competence' (ICC): the former refers to the ability to communicate with members of other cultures in one's own language, the latter in a foreign language (Byram, 1997; O'Dowd, 2006). While Byram's model perhaps lacks detail on how to operationalize the objectives in classroom, immersion and independent learning contexts, the complementary process model of Intercultural Learning and Teaching (Liddicoat, 2004), although following the same trajectory by providing learner-centred awareness-raising, skills development, production and feedback, maybe lacks the specificity of Byram's outcomes. Both models focus primarily on classroom or immersion settings, without technological mediation.

Only a decade ago, intensive intercultural exposure and interaction was available only through experience abroad (Lafford & Lafford, 1997), but the role of Internet technologies as input, output and social environment for intercultural learning and exchange is now widely recognized (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Lee, 1999; Liaw, 2006). The rapidly changing nature of authentic web pages allows teachers and learners to perceive the dynamic nature of cultures as they constantly form and reform, whilst CMC enables active participation in interaction and reflection with access to an authentic audience, and the potential for the collaborative construction of knowledge in online interaction (Warschauer, 1997). More importantly, as O'Dowd and Eberbach (2004) stress, CMC-based activities contribute particularly to the development of learners' ICC in that communicating with members of the target culture may encourage learners to move from a fact-figure notion of culture towards an ethnographic understanding of culture. Technically, CMC provides a number of affordances by producing a digital record of language transcripts that can be 'intensively studied after the fact' (Belz & Thorne, 2006: xix). Internet-mediated activities, like those in other language learning contexts, may be divided into 'non-interactive' (working with materials such as online newspapers) and 'interactive' (working with other people, e.g. completing tasks using email or videoconferencing). The integration of new technologies tends to encourage students to use the target language for intercultural learning. Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education (Belz & Thorne, 2006) embraces four major types: telecollaboration, tandem learning, local expert-learner partnership and engagement in an Internet community. Differing in pedagogical design, they all require frequent involvement of participants outside the classroom via Internet technologies (Thorne, 2006).

2 Foreign language education in China

The use of Internet technologies in the language class may offer a solution to developing language and intercultural skills in countries like China where monolingual cultures dominate and face-to-face experiential learning is difficult. However, socio-cultural differences will shape the pedagogical development differently. In China, the long-standing transmission mode of teaching (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998) oriented towards passing exams rather than developing communicatively competent language learners has produced generations of 'deaf-and-dumb' graduates (Zhang, 2006). Taking previous low achievement into account, the latest national syllabuses for both English majors and non-English majors have made efforts to steer professionals towards cultivating not

only sound language proficiency, but also intercultural competence, creativity and the ability to solve problems (MoE, 2000, 2004). However, in both pedagogical and research practices, although ICC as a concept has been recognized since the 1980s (Hu, 1999; Wang, 2005), there is little evidence that an intercultural approach has been implemented in practice.

In conventional settings, like other subjects, language classes are 'teacher-led, classroom-dependent and textbook-based' (Gu, 2002). The teacher and the textbook are still the main authoritative sources of language and culture input, and knowledge of languages and cultural generalizations the principal content (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Gu, Y., 2006; Shi, 2006). More recently, setting up online courses has become an increasing fashion. However, it is observed that many online programs still abide by the transmission mode and, thus, are no better than a simple delivery of conventional materials via online platforms (Zhong & Shen, 2002; Liu, Lin & Wang, 2003; Gu, Y., 2006). In other words, networked computers serve as an alternative to textbooks, but with added multimedia effects.

As regards research, much discussion has stressed the importance of integrating intercultural communication into foreign language syllabuses (Wang & Zhou, 2006; Hu, 1999) and of enhancing learners' ICC (Hu, 2003; Wang, 2005), yet few empirical studies have been reported in terms of course development and activity design (Shi, 2006) that focus on an intercultural pedagogy, especially with Internet technology mediation. Rather, the intercultural dimension is often considered subordinate to other pedagogical goals such as project-based learning (Gu, P., 2006; Xu & Warschauer, 2004) or collaborative learning to develop language skills such as essay writing (Zhang, 2005), where intercultural communication between learners of different cultures did occur. Elsewhere, in her recent quasi-experimental study, Shi (2006) reported that a web-based intercultural training program was valuable in helping learners enhance their ICC, although the potential use of communication tools was not examined. Overall, there is a need to investigate further applications of Internet technologies for developing learners' ICC.

3 The study

3.1 Research design

This paper reports a research survey into teachers' and learners' practices and the perceptions of intercultural foreign language teaching and learning, especially using Internet technologies, at China's higher education institutions. Table 1 summarizes the research questions and links them to the item numbers in the Teacher Questionnaire (TQ) and Student Questionnaire (SQ).

Via personal networking, a convenience sample (Dörnyei, 2003) was recruited, comprising teachers from across China who had participated in conferences on intercultural studies and online language teaching. They were also asked to engage their colleagues and students as participants on a voluntary basis. To take advantage of easy access to participants and to reduce time and cost in travel, an Internet-based survey containing two questionnaires was developed for teachers and students respectively, the latter being provided with a Chinese translation in order to minimize misreading and errors of interpretation. The questionnaires were similar in

Table 1 *Research questions and questionnaire items*

Research Questions	Questionnaire items
How is ICC positioned in language teaching at tertiary institutions?	TQ1, 2; SQ1
What are teachers' and learners' aims in foreign language classes?	TQ3, 7; SQ2, 6
What materials or resources are used in designing intercultural activities?	TQ4, 5, 6; SQ3, 4, 5
What tools, especially Internet tools (if any), do teachers use to engage learners in language class settings? Do learners use these differently outside the class?	TQ4, 9; SQ3, 8
What are the current activities/tasks for intercultural language learning in the classroom, especially when using Internet tools?	TQ8, 10; SQ7, 9, 10
How are such learning processes and outcomes conceived and assessed?	TQ11, 12, 13; SQ11, 12, 13

content and structure so as to elicit comparable data, though the study itself was not primarily intended to compare the views of teachers and learners. The questions were set with four-category Likert scales (never/sometimes/often/always) to encourage definite answers (Dörnyei, 2003) whilst some factual questions were used to seek background information. In case of a low response rate, semi-structured questions were prepared for teachers as a supplement, and sent via email to those who replied, in order to compensate for any shortfall in the quantity of data.

3.2 Results

The survey was administered between May and June 2007. Forty-seven valid teacher responses and 72 valid student responses were received in total. 39 TQ and 59 SQ responses included informants' personal information, identifying responses from 21 geographically separated institutions from the southeast, northeast, southwest and central regions of mainland China.

Nearly two-thirds of the teachers had over six years of service. One-third of the teachers had more than 40 students in their classes and the rest between 20 and 40, which is lower than average for tertiary institutions. 82.1% of the teachers held a master's degree and 86.4% of the students were doing a bachelor's degree. Nearly 70% of the students were majoring in English language-related disciplines while the other subjects studied varied from accounting to engineering.

Nearly 70% of the teachers had over six years' experience of Internet use, whereas about 85% of the students reported less than six years. In general, about three-fifths of the teachers used the Internet frequently, connecting for between one and three hours a day, though a remarkable one-third spent over three hours at the keyboard. By contrast, students recorded much less time surfing the Net. Only about 10% exceeded three hours online per day. This is probably due to their heavy workload. 79.5% of teachers accessed the Internet primarily from home, but also via public

access such as campus or Internet café networks. However, only 54.2% of the students had 'home/dormitory' access. This may partially explain why students typically spent less time online than teachers.

With regard to the position of ICC-oriented teaching strategies, most of the teachers agreed that intercultural learning was an important aspect of their classes (83%) and that it was also a specific outcome at their institutions (76.6%). On the students' part, they had a slightly lower perception (79.1%) of the importance of ICC in language classes. This result seems to indicate that while the goal of developing ICC has been recognized, the implementation still remains problematic.

When examining the specific aims of language classes (Table 2), both teachers and students ranked reading, speaking and listening highest, reflecting a tendency to value linguistic components more than intercultural elements in general. In their aim of developing ICC, both ranked knowing the target culture and understanding its perspectives highest, while de-emphasizing the importance of knowing their own culture and the skills of intercultural communication.

Table 3 confirms that both the teachers and the students viewed the textbook as the most important tool. While almost half of them agreed that they used online materials relatively frequently, they differed significantly in their assessment of the frequency of using online communication tools.

Table 2 *Teachers' and students' aims in language classes*

Aims (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ3 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ2 (N = 72)	S rank
reading skills	95.7	1	91.7	1
speaking skills	91.5	2	86.1	3=
listening skills	87.4	3	88.9	2
vocabulary and grammar	87.2	4	75.0	7=
openness, tolerance and respect towards different cultures	85.1	5	73.6	9
writing skills	83.0	6	86.1	3=
knowledge of other cultures	80.9	7=	80.6	6
understanding of different cultural perspectives	80.9	7=	82.0	5
intercultural communication skills	78.7	9	75.0	7=
knowledge of home culture	70.2	10	62.5	10

Table 3 *Tools used by teachers and students*

Tools used (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ4 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ3 (N = 72)	S rank
textbook	93.7	1	91.6	1
courseware supplement	70.2	2	57.0	2
online materials	55.3	3	50.0	3
online communication tools	38.3	4	9.7	4

In terms of cultural input, Table 4 shows that the textbook and the teacher are the two dominant sources. While in the teachers' eyes the textbook plays a more important role than that of their personal life experiences, the students tended to rank the two sources as of equal importance. However, neither the teachers nor the students depended on their online partners as sources of cultural information.

Though their evaluation of the materials they use (Table 5) was generally positive, students had an overall lower opinion of these than did the teachers. Roughly, one third of the students were not satisfied with the materials. However, the teachers and students had two similar scores: they agreed (1) that their home culture was rarely addressed and (2) that the target culture was subjected to over-generalisation.

Responses to a question on priorities (Table 6) reveal that while the teachers focused on teaching language and culture in an integrated way, the students tended to emphasize learning cultural knowledge from the textbook and the teacher. Concerning technology, they both opted for using information tools.

In examining teaching styles in foreign language classes, Table 7 clearly demonstrates that a traditional teacher presentation style proved most influential, followed by both individual and collective activities. However, where learning in online environments was practised, it was less common.

When asked about their online foreign language teaching and learning experience, about three-fifths of the teachers and the students categorized themselves as having some experience, though not necessarily a lengthy one. It can be seen from Table 8 that Internet tools were used much more frequently for information input than as a channel for output and communication, with the exception of emailing by the teachers. This ranking seems to suggest that online teaching and learning only

Table 4 *Topic sources*

Topic sources (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ5 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ4 (N = 72)	S rank
textbook	95.7	1	84.7	1
teacher's life experience	76.6	2	83.3	2
learners' suggestions	46.9	3	33.3	3
negotiation with online partners	12.8	4	9.7	4

Table 5 *Profile of materials*

Materials (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ6 (N = 47, Mis = 1)	T rank	SQ5 (N = 72)	S rank
informative	89.1	1	69.4	1=
up to date	82.6	2=	68.1	3
unbiased towards either culture	82.6	2=	65.3	5
based on real life situations	78.3	4	69.4	1=
over-generalize the target culture	71.8	5	68.0	4
cover one's home culture	63.0	6	62.5	6

Table 6 *Priorities in foreign language classes*

Priorities (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ7 (N = 47, Mis = 2)	T rank	SQ6 (N = 72, Mis = 1)	S rank
deal with language as a linguistic system	88.9	3	69.0	5
teach the relationship between language and culture	93.4	1=	73.3	3
integrate the target culture into instruction	93.4	1=	–	–
learn cultural knowledge from textbook	–	–	78.8	1
learn cultural knowledge from teachers	–	–	77.4	2
use multimedia resources	73.3	5	67.7	6
use Internet information tools	82.3	4	70.4	4
use Internet communication tools	51.1	6	54.9	7

Table 7 *Teaching styles in foreign language classes*

Styles (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ8 (N = 47, Mis = 2)	T rank	SQ7 (N = 72, Mis = 1)	S rank
teacher presentation	91.1	1	95.8	1
collective learner activities	88.9	2	54.9	3
individual learner activities	84.4	3	69.0	2
online learning system without partners	17.8	4	12.6	6
online activities with distance classes	15.6	5	15.5	4=
online activities within class	13.3	6	15.5	4=

Table 8 *Use of Internet tools*

Internet tools (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ9 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ8 (N = 72)	S rank
browsers and search engines	71.4	1	71.8	1
email	60.7	2	35.5	4
online reference tools	54.3	3	57.8	3
text-based web pages	53.6	4	63.4	2
chat-room	39.3	5	30.4	6
blog	34.6	6	26.0	7
instant messenger	30.8	7	20.0	8
e-forum	28.6	8	31.1	5
videoconferencing	25.0	9	10.8	9

occurred at an initial level, where engagement in online collaboration and interaction was not seen.

Further investigation into the activities undertaken using Internet tools (Table 9) produced findings which generally echo the previous data. Among common activities,

Table 9 *Activities using Internet tools in/after class*

Activities (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ10 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ9 (N = 72)	S rank	SQ10 (N = 72)	S rank
browsing and searching information on specific topics	67.8	1	57.8	2	69.1	1
access online audio materials	60.8	2	64.5	1	57.1	2=
writing emails to partners	48.1	3	24.4	7	28.5	6
online reference tools for vocabulary and grammar learning	42.9	4	46.7	3	57.1	2=
chat with partners	35.7	5	28.8	4	33.4	5
web page or blog for sharing ideas	32.1	6	26.6	5	34.2	4
forum discussion within class	25.9	7	25.0	6	21.5	7
videoconference with partners	25.0	8	11.1	9	12.2	8
forum discussion with partners	17.8	9	20.0	8	11.9	9

Table 10 *Main barriers*

Barriers (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ11 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ11 (N = 72)	S rank
technical support	84.6	1	68.9	2
funding	76.9	2=	–	–
time outside class for preparation	76.9	2=	46.6	6
time in class	73.1	4	60.0	3
access to network	65.4	5	55.6	5
pedagogical experience/teacher instruction	46.2	6	57.7	4
participation by the students	22.3	7	73.3	1

the teachers and the students clearly made frequent use of information tools for searching and accessing online textual-graphical and audio materials (over 50 percent) which were mostly used for reading and listening activities. In class (TQ10, SQ9), teachers seemed to require their students to contact their partners via email but students reported a much lower frequency of doing so. In their self-study time (SQ10), students did not work differently from in classes. On the whole, it is safe to conclude that activities using the Internet tools for information searching were largely implemented whereas activities employing tools for communication and output were little explored. This suggests that intercultural learning which emphasizes learning via intercultural encounters and exchanges did not occur to a very large extent in many Chinese language classes.

Table 10 explores the possible barriers when designing activities using Internet tools for intercultural learning. Interestingly, teachers and students ranked what they saw as the main obstacles differently. While the teachers were most concerned about technical support and least worried about student participation, the students complained that both were seriously insufficient. Timing seemed to be a problem for

Table 11 *Teachers' and students' views of using Internet tools for language classes*

Views (T = teacher, S = student) Percentage of 'often + always'	TQ12 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ12 (N = 72)	S rank
foster skills in intercultural communication	95.3	1	85.8	4
enrich cultural knowledge	95.2	2=	90.0	1
enhance intercultural understanding	95.2	2=	87.1	3
encourage active learning	92.8	4	82.9	5
enable real language use	90.5	5	78.5	7=
allow great flexibility in teaching/learning	90.4	6	88.6	2
as important as classroom teaching	80.9	7=	77.2	9
enhance language proficiency	80.9	7=	81.4	6
more interesting than classroom teaching	78.5	9	78.5	7=

both teachers and students. The former were more worried about lacking time outside class for preparation and the latter more about the time in class for carrying out activities based on the Internet. This indicates that teachers should be more aware of utilizing time after class for students to develop their own intercultural learning within a given pedagogical framework. However, although slightly over half of the teachers seemed confident about their pedagogical experience, their students were less positive about the instruction received from their teacher. Gaining access to the Internet appeared not to be a serious problem.

With a generally positive attitude towards Internet tools for intercultural language classes, both teachers and students seemed to acknowledge its contribution to enhancing intercultural competence rather than language proficiency (Table 11). The difference is that teachers attached more importance to the skills domain of ICC whereas students focused on cognitive development. Comparing technology-mediated instruction with a traditional approach, over three quarters of the teachers and the students held the view that the former was as important as the latter, and more interesting. In addition, over four-fifths of the teachers and the students supported the claim that instruction with technology mediation allowed great flexibility in teaching/learning and encouraged active learning.

In reviewing the ways of assessing intercultural learning outcomes (Table 12), the teachers and the students disagreed significantly in ranking oral presentation. While teachers ranked it as the most important outcome, students regarded it as a minor application. However, they agreed in positioning written forms of assessment, including a written test, written assignments/reports and a learning diary, the former two of which were widely adopted whilst the latter least of all. 70.2% and 68.1% of teachers also supported the use of student portfolio and observation in assessment whereas the percentages from the students were only 54.2% and 47.2%. Interviews, on the other hand, were not popular. Overall, it appears that assessment methods are more product-oriented than process-oriented.

In addition to answering questionnaires, four teachers also described their regular designs for intercultural activities with respect to course context, activity design, exemplar plan, purpose, benefits and problems, and expectations for future plans.

Table 12 *Assessment of intercultural foreign language teaching and learning*

Assessment (T = teacher, S = student)	TQ13 (N = 47)	T rank	SQ13 (N = 72)	S rank
oral presentation	83.0	1	23.6	6
written test	76.6	2	75.0	1
student portfolio	70.2	3	54.2	3
observation of language use	68.1	4	47.2	4
research reports/written assignments	59.6	5	61.1	2
interviews with learners	38.3	6	26.4	5
learning diary	17.0	7	19.4	7

Among them, Informants X, D, and Y were all teaching general English to students of various disciplines while Informant S taught professional courses (writing and linguistics) to English undergraduates and postgraduates. The former three reported that they either used search tools for reading materials or audio-video resources for cultural information input. However, in Informant X's account, it is not clear whether she engaged her students in searching activities. Informant D mentioned briefly his way of using online audio-video and graphic materials to motivate his students in role-play or brainstorming activities. Informant Y exemplified his instructional design as follows to show how he actively involved the students in information searching activity with various theme-focused topics:

> When dealing with the theme 'Women, Half the Sky', I assigned my students to surf the Net for the following information: 'half the sky' Versus feminism, the right to vote both for the Chinese women and for their western counterparts, equal pay for equal work and sex discrimination in China and the west. The above-mentioned information is to be discussed in class. The second activity is to watch on line 'Desperate Housewives'. And the latter is optional.
>
> [Informant Y]

Although such an instructional plan is clear and not complex in operation, the students were instructed to use search engines for themed searching. The pedagogical purpose was to gain cross-cultural understandings of ''Mao's 'half the sky' and feminism'' and to reflect critically on the issue in Chinese culture. By contrast, Informant S reported asking his students to discuss with distant counterparts via e-forum and listserv cross-linguistic and cross-cultural issues without definite goals.

Regardless of the varied practices in the four cases, the four teachers agreed that technology-mediated instruction is beneficial as it is motivating, resource-rich and communicative. However, they commented that major time-consuming demands on pedagogical guidance and technical support were the main challenges. Little evidence can be drawn from the limited qualitative data to demonstrate active use of the Internet as a channel for communication and output. It seems that the Internet used as an input source in teaching culture is more a way to reinforce teachers' instruction than of engaging learners' active participation. However, the real motives in both these cases remain to be explored.

4 Discussion and conclusion

4.1 Discussion of the results

The results of the survey can be summarized as follows: Firstly, ICC development has been established as an important strategy by most of the institutions investigated. This finding lays the cornerstone for promoting an intercultural approach (Byram, 1997; Corbett, 2003) to language education in China, requiring a shift from the conventional, communicative-competence-oriented, native-speaker goal of language learning to an intercultural-speaker goal (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998). Secondly, although the view is widely held that it is necessary to balance the teaching and learning of language and culture in language classes, the traditional teaching of linguistic and cultural knowledge is still widely valued and influential. This may cause problems, resulting in an essentialist view of cultures, cultural stereotyping and misunderstanding (Piller, 2007). Thirdly, while textbooks remain the predominant source of cultural knowledge, Internet information tools are being widely used as a complementary means of obtaining cultural input. However, the value of using communication technologies as investigatory tools is under-explored. Fourthly, in terms of designing tasks for intercultural learning by using Internet technologies, most of the activities are limited to information searching, using online audio-video and graphic resources, online reading and so forth. Tasks relating to communication tools do exist, but are not well developed. This phenomenon may increase the chances of getting access to the collective/national level of the target culture but reduce opportunities for communicating with people from the target culture at the individual level, let alone achieving a constructivist view of intercultural communication (Piller, 2007). Fifthly, the implementation of ICC-oriented pedagogy has largely been impeded by technical, pedagogical and practical constraints. Adopting an intercultural approach with technology mediation may prove difficult to implement in the classroom. Rather it is an institutional or even national commitment that demands interdisciplinary collaboration and support (Belz & Thorne, 2006). Last but not least, teachers and learners are broadly enthusiastic and supportive of developing ICC by incorporating Internet technologies into traditional classroom instruction.

While there is substantial agreement between teachers and students, the former evince rather greater enthusiasm overall. Students find classes more teacher-centred than teachers think they are, and have a rather lower view of teaching materials, the potential of new technologies, and their teachers' ICT pedagogy, yet they rely heavily on the teacher's authority – a conventional stance also reflected in the low value attached to oral presentation. Students are less conversant with what the Internet offers for language learning and use purposes, perhaps because teachers have easier access and greater dominance. Concerns are differentiated as far as obstacles are concerned.

While few generalizations can be drawn from the present snapshot of Internet-mediated intercultural teaching and learning in China in mid-2007, the findings can still suggest some theoretical and practical implications that are worth discussing. Theoretically, this study contributes to better understanding the contexts of China's tertiary institutions, as opposed to the West, where technical pedagogies have developed faster, and language and culture programmes based on Vygotskyan social

constructivist principles and intercultural communication theories have proved to be an effective means for intercultural learning (Belz & Thorne, 2006; O'Dowd, 2006; Corbett, 2003; Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001; Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillet, 2001), particularly for helping students to improve their linguistic and intercultural competence by comparison and interaction with speakers of the target language. However, approaches must be adapted to local cultures and contexts, and localization will require many more empirical studies.

On a practical level, this study has helped to raise Chinese teachers' and students' awareness and to inform them of the possibilities of developing ICC via Internet technologies; it has also brought out some policy issues, leading to the following preliminary suggestions. At the national level, syllabi should not only – as a matter of principle – urge teachers to shift their pedagogy from the culture-transmission mode to an intercultural approach, but also need to support teachers with practical frameworks and guidelines in terms of institutional policy, hardware and software preparation, and more importantly, pedagogical training. Only when teachers are confident with new technologies and innovative pedagogies, will they serve the students as best they can. Otherwise, it is a huge risk to push teachers and students into a world of uncertainty. Therefore, it is of vital importance to identify appropriate pedagogical frameworks. Basically, two approaches seem viable to implement Internet-mediated intercultural teaching and learning, i.e. a task-based approach (Corbett, 2003; Müller-Hartmann, 2000, 2006) and project-based learning (Gu, 2005; Debski, 2006). While the former is appropriate for short-term commitment, the latter suits long-term projects. Debski (2006: 10) points out that a project can be broken up into tasks, so a combined approach is feasible. Therefore, it would be safe to suggest using a task-based approach from the beginning of a course, in order to make activities 'shorter, more prescriptive, and simulated' (Debski, 2006: 10). To sum up, only when Internet technologies are inherently integrated into the syllabus will blended instruction with technology-mediation enable both teachers and students to obtain an intercultural perspective towards teaching and learning in language classes.

At the institutional level, systematic support should be made available, including resources, administration, and staffing. The administration must be aware that 'it is not enough simply to have the technological resources available for use; teachers must also know how to harness the educational capabilities of the technology' (Moore, Morales & Carel, 1998: 111). Considering the tradition of teacher dominance in classes and some disparities between teachers' and learners' answers in this survey, it would be sensible to suggest that teachers are in a better position than learners to promote Internet-mediated approaches to intercultural teaching and learning. This teacher-led top-down approach might be more appropriate to the context than a more learner-oriented western approach (Conole, 2008). Although in the survey the teachers did not indicate that they lacked the pedagogical experience for using technology, it is still worth emphasizing the issue of technical support so that teachers can learn in a 'hands on' way to appreciate the benefits of networking and real time communication for enhancing intercultural competence. Moreover, the administration must develop a set of policies that help teachers implement an intercultural approach to teaching and assessment, with practical incentives, considering the substantial additional workload

for teachers. In a review of a five-year study of a technology-enhanced foreign language education reform initiative (project-based courses and traditional courses with technology involvement) at a Chinese university, Xu and Warschauer (2004) observed that despite the sharp increase in the number of staff using technology in classes, few were willing to teach project-based courses due to the huge demand in time and effort, which did not accrue any privileges and incentives.

The present 2007 survey provides grounds for believing that, given appropriate incentives, resources and policies, and a balance between respect for local cultural contexts and the need to redefine linguistic and (inter-)cultural learning objectives in a globalizing society, future studies will find increasing adoption by teachers and students of Internet tools in developing foreign language skills and intercultural communicative competence.

4.2 Limitations and further research

Like all surveys, the present study relies on self-report (perception rather than reality) and on respondents' understanding the questions and relating them to their own experience; it sometimes also lacks detail (Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Dörnyei, 2003). The use of convenience samples recruited via conference participants in China might have introduced bias, especially since many participating teachers, unlike the majority of those teaching in tertiary institutions, held tenured posts. A snowball technique was therefore used in the hope of extending the sample to include less senior staff. Nonetheless, the sample was too small for any inferential analysis, and the results are limited to descriptive analysis, with correspondingly lowered validity and reliability. A future study might involve a longitudinal research design, a larger sample, qualitative elements including interviews and observations, and an empirical evaluation of the impact of using the Internet to enhance intercultural communicative competence.

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