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# Using Social Media to Promote Intercultural Communication Between Chinese and American University Students

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## *Abstract*

This paper reports a five-year computer-mediated intercultural exchange project between Chinese and American university students that explores the use of various social media tools with WeChat application as the main medium in collaborative intercultural assignments. The study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches by using questionnaires and action research, to investigate how Chinese EFL and American CFL learners increase their intercultural communication competence by assessing their knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and skills of discovery and awareness. The findings reveal their changes and progress in the following variables: knowledge about the variety and subtlety of both the home and target cultures, a different worldview, and cultural study methods; awareness of the importance of differences and similarities between the home and target cultures, their negative reactions to these differences (e.g., fear, ridicule, disgust, feeling of superiority, etc.) and therefore, critical evaluation of the target and home cultures; attitudes from excitement or blind admiration of the target culture to confusion, anxiety or frustration about the cultural differences, later to toleration and appreciation of cultural differences, adaptation to the target culture, and eventually to openness and readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own; skills to contrast the target culture with their own, to demonstrate a capacity to interact appropriately in a variety of different social situations in the target culture and resolve cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings. This research will serve as a valuable reference for computer-mediated intercultural communication teaching and open up new possibilities to extend classroom teaching by bridging the gap between second-hand knowledge and hands-on experience.

***Keywords:* social media, intercultural communication competence model, intercultural exchange project, WeChat application**

## 1. Introduction

If we compare the design of a learning ecosystem to a landscape design, we might call it a “learnscape,” whereby a learnscape’s goal, like a landscape designer’s goal of “conceptualizing a harmonious, unified, pleasing garden that makes the most of the site at hand” (Rennie & Morrison, 2013, p. 8), is to “create a learning environment that increases the organization’s longevity and health, and the individual learner’s happiness and well-being.” Gardeners and managers have influence but not absolute authority. “A learnscape is a learning ecology—it’s learning without borders” (Rennie & Morrison, 2013, p. 8). The design of a healthy and sustainable learning ecosystem between different cultures is a difficult task. How can we best create an environment where each member can increase his or her intercultural communication competence while maintaining high motivation and autonomy? To solve this problem, it is necessary to have a close study of the aim of the learning ecosystem, intercultural communication competence, and the tools to build the intercultural learning networks such as technology, theory, pedagogical design, and hands-on experience.

### 1.1 Intercultural communication competence (ICC)

Foreign language learners’ intercultural competence or intercultural communication competence has been defined and analyzed by scholars from different perspectives and in a detailed way. Byram’s intercultural communication competence (ICC) model (1997) foregrounded intercultural criticality among a cluster of factors for developing intercultural competence within communicative, learner-centered foreign language education. He developed a definition of “intercultural competence” containing five dimensions, namely, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, attitude, and critical cultural awareness/political education. Spitzberg (2000) defined ICC in terms of motivation, knowledge, and skill. Chen proposed that ICC consists of four dimensions: “Personal Attributes, Communication Skills, Psychological Adaptation, and Cultural Awareness” (Senyshyn, 2019, p154). Two research projects, conducted by Federation EIL in 2016, explored the multiple components of ICC as the basis for constructing an instrument to measure the impact on participants involved in intercultural experiences abroad, that is, the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) (Fantini, 2018). This survey was made to learn about various outcomes of intercultural educational experiences on participants, that is, the level of intercultural competence developed, effects on their lifestyle choices, and their impact, in turn, on communities and other individuals after returning home. In this survey, intercultural communication competence was tested through 54 questions in four categories: knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness. Interviewees were required to use the scale from 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely high), and to mark each question twice: first, to mark with a (B) to indicate their ability at the beginning of their stay in the host culture, and then mark the same question with an (E) to indicate their ability at the end of their stay. This provided a basis for comparison before and after the stay.

In this study, we used AIC as the framework to analyze how Chinese and American students increased their intercultural communication competence via online intercultural learning.

## 1.2 Review of online intercultural learning

Over the past two decades, a number of systematic reviews have been conducted to review the history and research of online intercultural exchanges, from the use of email and other early tools in the 1990s, to recent projects using Web 2.0 tools. They have examined the learning outcomes and challenges of online intercultural exchanges that emerge in the research (Hockly, 2015). They have also investigated the issues associated with the use of CMC in education, including what has been overlooked in previous studies, the methodology used to address these neglected issues and suggestions for further research (Ivannikova, 2016). This research suggested intercultural communication aided by social media offers some useful dimensions to intercultural teaching and proves effective in increasing language learners' intercultural communication competence. First, learners have the opportunity to talk to other learners in different regions, even students in faraway countries, and this can give students a fresh and interesting experience. Second, many online conversations take place through text, and this is conducive to language learning. Third, students know that their linguistic practice through online intercultural communication is worthwhile because they are probably heading for a lifelong experience of using language through this medium (Chapelle & Jamieson, 2008). Fourth, synchronous online discussions on specific cultural topics help students eliminate their stereotypes and increase their intercultural communication competence.

When utilizing new media in an educational context, it is suggested that educators take into consideration right resources, right mode delivery, right context, right learners, and a right level of support (Joint Information Systems Committee [JISC], 2004). Actually, the essence of online collaborative course design is the use of activities appropriate to the subject and level of the learner (Rennie & Morrison, 2013). Table 1 illustrates some ways by which generic learning needs can be matched to student-learning activities and how these activities might be facilitated using different levels of engagement with the media of distributed learning (Rennie & Morrison, 2013, p. 49).

Despite the “overall satisfaction with digital tools and intercultural experience over the Internet or technology, increased knowledge of both own and other cultures, and varied levels of ICC development,” weaknesses such as “superficial findings without in-depth analysis and detailed reports on ICC development, and superficial and fact-based exchanges” are also brought to light (Çiftçi, 2016). Innovative and in-depth qualitative analysis is especially advocated to offer rich and thick descriptions of the intercultural experiences. As to the detailed reports on ICC development, the content areas of synchronous online learning (SOL) in English/foreign language acquisition mainly concern developing vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing skills, and oral and listening skills (Liu, Moore, Graham, & Lee, 2002). According to Martin, Ahlgrim-Delzell, and Budhrani

(2017), the most common variable studied in synchronous online learning research was perception or attitude followed by interaction. Motivation was the least studied variable. It is suggested that future research focus more specifically on independent variables such as attitudes, awareness, interaction, or motivation in depth. As to the representation of countries, Martin et al. (2017) found that the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada were among the top countries where SOL research was conducted. Comparatively, fewer publications on synchronous online learning came from lower e-readiness ranking countries such as China (56th), India (58th), and Thailand (49th) (Martin et al., 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to focus on SOL research in these countries to make the representation of countries more comprehensive.

**Table 1.** Examples of the application of distributed media to learning activities

Student learning need	Example of student activity	Fundamental	Extended	Emerging
Information handling skills	Web searching Using electric libraries	print	Webpages	E-books Digital repositories
Developing understanding	Linking information from different sources	Connected document (with hot links)	E-portfolios	Mashups
Linking theory to practice	Learning by doing	Online quizzes	Instant messaging tutorials	Screen casting
Practicing discussion and argument	Presentation	CD/DVD	Photos/images Online debate using threaded discussion (flickr)	Vlog
Practicing articulation of ideas	Reflective journal	Computer conferencing	Blogs/ Video conferencing	Podcasts
Rehearsing skills and procedures	Audio-visual essay	Audio clips (Power point)	Video clips	Webcasts/ You tube
Practicing teamwork	Group projects	Online games	Social book-marking	Wikis
Learning professional practice	Problem solving exercises	Role playing	Animations or audio graphics	Simulations
Feedback	Interactive tutorial	Telephone support/ email	Telephone conferencing	Skype

Given what has been overlooked in previous online intercultural communication studies, this research aims to seek in-depth interpretations and intercultural representations gained through a variety of social media, especially WeChat app, which is popular with young people. Independent variables such as attitudes, awareness, interaction, or motivation will be studied in depth in the intercultural communication project between Chinese and American university students.

## 2. Research

### 2.1 Research questions

Overall, this research aims to investigate to what extent Chinese EFL and American CFL learners might increase their intercultural communication competence in terms of knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness with appropriate social media. To achieve this, the research looks for answers to the following questions:

- 1) What is the problem that EFL and CFL learners have in intercultural teaching?
- 2) What kinds of methods and social media can be used to address this problem?
- 3) Will the use of WeChat app increase EFL and CFL learners' intercultural communication competence with regard to knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness? If it will, how will they make progress in such variables as attitudes, awareness, interaction or motivation?

### 2.2 Participants

At the beginning of each new semester, about 30 Chinese and 30 American college students participated in this 3-semester project, which has continued for the past five years. The students were from different majors other than English or Chinese. Most of them had never engaged in intercultural communication. Therefore, it would be easier to detect and evaluate the progress they might make in such variables of intercultural communication competence as attitudes, awareness, interaction, or motivation. Despite the different languages acquired by the two groups, CFL and EFL learners both needed to overcome intercultural communication apprehension and increase their intercultural communication competence in terms of knowledge, affection, and behavior, in which the two groups were comparable. According to the levels of their language proficiency and their academic grade, these two groups were divided into beginners, intermediate and advanced learners, according to which online activities were designed.

### 2.3 Methods

This study used action research to examine a problematic aspect of their own teaching, introduced changes, and evaluated the results of these changes (Burns, 1999). When introducing changes to intercultural teaching and evaluating the results brought by these changes, the study used thick description, namely, interpreting the “said” of the flow of discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms (Geertz, 1973); that is, the authors described in detail the cultural shocks experienced by Chinese and American students and interpreted them from perspectives of value orientations. When evaluating the progress Chinese and American students made in terms of knowledge, affect, and skills, the questionnaire of intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) designed by Neuliep was first used to analyze the potential problems faced by American and Chinese students. At the end of intercultural exchange, the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) developed

by EIL was used to measure whether they had made progress in the variables of intercultural communication competence. As to the uncovered questions such as the reasons leading to the ICA of Chinese and American students, the solutions to that problem, and the variables of ICC in which students made great and little progress, interviews were used to explore them in detail. Data for this study were collected in an intercultural exchange program between students from a Chinese university and an American university from February 2012 to June 2017.

## **2.4 Procedures**

In the first phase, we examined their language and cultural teaching processes and identified a problem that needs to be solved. In the second phase, we introduced different social media tools to refine their traditional intercultural teaching in the classroom. In the third phase, we singled out the WeChat app to design and perform all the online exchanging activities. Finally, our observation, interviews, surveys, and students' journals highlighted certain findings of the students' intercultural communication competence in terms of knowledge, awareness, attitude, and skills.

### **2.4.1 Reviewing current practice--Identifying the problem in intercultural teaching**

This phase of the research concentrated on identifying a focus for the study. Research observations focused on how intercultural communication teaching increased students' intercultural communication competence in terms of knowledge, motivation, and behavior. Teaching activities mainly centered on classroom procedures: observation, exploration, expansion, and evaluation (Zhang, 2007).

In the observation phase, the instructors presented a cultural topic, for example, how the dominant values in China and the U.S. are reflected in movies, and then let students identify the cultural differences. In the exploration phase, the instructors guided the students to analyze these cultural differences in terms of value orientations such as social relationships, activity, sense of time, and so on, to gather further information and form their own judgment about the cultural phenomenon. In the expansion phase, the instructors input more cultural material to students and helped them repair their previous observation through case study and group discussions. In the evaluation phase, the instructors guided students to synthesize the relevant cultural information, to prove or give up their previous judgment, and finally to reflect on their cultural study in the form of cooperative projects and writing assignments.

At the end of the semester, we surveyed Chinese and American students about their intercultural communication competence. Most of them agreed this kind of teaching helped them increase their target language and cultural awareness in terms of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, especially of culturally-loaded words, contextual features, communicative style, non-verbal communication, social customs, history, geography, and social values. But as for motivation and behavior, the other two aspects of intercultural communication competence, they felt they made very little progress. Due to the large input of cultural information related to each topic, some students even felt their intercultural motivation and interests suffered or were even diminished.

### 2.4.2 Introducing social media to intercultural communication class: How to address the problem in intercultural teaching

Subsequently, we thought it was necessary to introduce authentic and real-life intercultural communication activities by linking technology, theory, pedagogical design, and hands-on experience, all of which “assist in fostering intercultural communication and critical thinking and in building intercultural learning networks” (Lomicka, 2006) between both Chinese and English-speaking classes.

Based on the examples of the application of social media to learning activities in Table 1, the instructors on both sides designed the online intercultural communication activities (as shown in Table 2) and divided the levels according to students' language proficiency.

**Table 2.** Online intercultural communication activities

Level	Tool	Function	Suggested Activities
Beginners	Blogs, podcasts, italki, and online written or oral communication	Improve students' reading, listening speaking and writing proficiency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students read blogs about the target culture in English and Chinese and they are required to post their comments.</li> <li>2. Students create and publish their own oral podcasts in Chinese or English on a cultural subject of their choice.</li> <li>3. Students are assigned some simple online chatting topics in Chinese or English, such as inquiring about one typical day on the campus of their partner with the use of appropriate tenses or make a telephone call in the target language.</li> <li>4. Students are encouraged to compare the two universities, popular songs in both countries and their college life.</li> </ol>
Intermediate students	Blogs, or voice thread (a special software to combine one's voice and slides)	Improve students' writing proficiency	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students consult blogs to practice writing descriptions, noting their observations in their own blogs.</li> <li>2. Have two foreign language classes exchange blog addresses, read, and comment on one another's blogs.</li> </ol>
Advanced students	Wiki, voice thread and online written chatting	Promotes students' critical thinking and communication skills in a web-based collaborative environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students in both universities collaborate to plan travel in the target culture.</li> <li>2. Students in both universities create a book club suitable for each other for reading and discussion.</li> <li>3. Students in both universities survey college students' views on employment or friend-making patterns by interviewing their pen pals via online chatting.</li> <li>4. Students in both universities complete and share their film projects (4-5 minutes), which introduce these two universities in English or Chinese via wiki.</li> </ol> <p>(Exchanges between pen pals are written half in English and half in Chinese)</p>

After one round of intercultural communication, the instructors found some prominent issues that needed to be addressed. First, there was the need to provide training for a small minority who were not skilled in the use of a range of software applications. Therefore, it was necessary to adjust the methods to accommodate novice users, while at the same time providing stimulating and challenging activities for the very experienced users. Second, the project verified the observation that students were inclined to want only a moderate amount of new learning tools to be used on formal courses (Kvavik & Caruso, 2005) and that most

students were very strategic in their use of these tools, as Kear (2004) pointed out,

Students will participate in a discussion forum if they see sufficient benefits for the time invested... and there are different kinds of benefits for different students. Some students will only take part if the course assessment gives them marks for doing so. Some will take part because they gain information and help from others, which supports their learning. Others value interaction for its own sake and gain support and motivation from other students in the forum. (p. 162)

Third, some tools were inaccessible or too confusing to both Chinese and American students. For example, Facebook is not available in China. QQ, the Chinese equivalent to “Facebook,” has many complicated functions that American students felt frustrated with. Italki is a kind of software just developed for academic study. Its impersonal features diminished students’ interest.

Therefore, in the next round of intercultural communication course design, a more refined approach must address two aspects of the student perspective:

- 1) The need to keep the student workload very much in mind. Evidence suggests that overloaded coursework leads to surface-level learning and that activities and online interaction are much more time-consuming than is usually acknowledged.
- 2) The need to choose one kind of social media tool and design online activities with that tool in mind.

The WeChat app can meet the requirements of all the online activities listed in previous sections. First released in 2011, WeChat was created by the Chinese company Tencent. The app includes multiple features ranging from free voice calls to a walkie-talkie and is also web compatible. WeChat has made its debut in China and is gradually gaining popularity throughout the world, topping 697 million registered users now.

### **2.4.3 How WeChat was used in the three-semester intercultural communication**

#### *Step 1. Establishing personal connection through WeChat*

Personal connection is the foundation of this project because it aids in breaking the ice between American and Chinese students during their preliminary period of intercultural communication. Guided by their instructors at both the Chinese and American universities, the Chinese and American students (about 60 individuals from different majors such as English, Chinese, International Business, Biology, Civil Engineering, Management and Mining Technology) set up their respective blogs on the WeChat social media tool, on which students may choose to have their pictures appear along with their self-portraits (profile pictures).

Exchanges between pen-pals during this phase were typically personal in nature and mainly dealt with their hobbies, interests and studies. They were summarized half in English and half in Chinese in the form of group discussion in the same chatroom.

Activity 1: Getting to know your e-pal and talking about personal life, family, hobbies, and universities.



Level: Beginners

Culture shock: To American students' surprise, in the Chinese male and female dorms, there were six people to a room that was roughly the same size as a room for two or three at their American university. Each student had an upper bunk bed with a small closet, a desk, and a stool underneath. The rooms were very efficiently organized but seem a little cramped. There was no extra space or freedom to move the furniture around. Their different understanding of individual and group privacy led to a greater understanding of their different lifestyles.

Activity 2: Students write a short essay to compare and summarize their and their e-pals' thoughts on the concept of "ideal appearance" by making statements and descriptions, and also by giving examples.

Level: Beginners

Culture shock: Unlike American girls, most Chinese girls did not wear make-up or feel pressure to be beautiful. Chinese women are educated to be more confident, not more beautiful and that true beauty is in the heart. In addition, education is important for both men and women, and that leaves little time for anything else. When pressed though, American students' pen pals also admitted that being thin is more beautiful than being big and that pale skin is the ideal. This was very different from American students' preference for a sexy and sun-tanned appearance. Many Chinese girls and boys preferred South Korean male stars with sweet looks and fair complexion, who seem not to be macho to American boys. What struck the American students was the Chinese pen-pal's opinion that in the United States the esthetic focus is placed on the body, but in China, the focus is on the mind, which is why beauty is not such a big issue.

*Step 2. In-depth understanding about target cultures on WeChat*

Built on mutual trust, a common course schedule (same themes and similar linguistic notions) was shared, allowing students to develop their linguistic, cultural, and analytic learning with their partners. In this phase, exchanges between pen pals were mainly academic in nature. Instructors from both universities helped students determine topics that reflected the interests and concerns of the learners, such as typical campus conversations, activities, travel, sports, movies, pop music, education, advertisement, and employment (Chastain, 1976). Once a topic was selected, a variety of activities were designed to develop linguistic skill and cultural awareness.

Activities: One day in a city (e.g., Beijing, China; Chicago, U.S.A). Students practice writing, speaking, and listening. Talk about transportation, location, and plans with people.

Level: Intermediate

After they had written the essays and made the PowerPoint presentations, American and Chinese students sent assessment questions through WeChat. Sometimes a question was sent as a text message, and then students responded with a text message. It may also be sent as a voice message, and thus, students listened and comprehended the question and responded accordingly with a voice message.

Culture shock: American and Chinese students had different expectations about their respective trip itineraries. American students would like to make the trip as detailed as possible, such as learning the names of different buildings and the exact leaving and starting time of a one-day trip, while Chinese students did not give much attention or emphasis to these details since any plan might change in reality.

Activities: Talk about cultural differences in love: What qualities do you value when finding a boy or girlfriend? Are there any gender or cultural differences in this aspect? What do you think of the social phenomenon of “3S lady” (single, seventies, stuck) or “leftover women” in both China and the U.S.A.?

Level: Intermediate to advanced

Culture shock: Chinese young people might be very much more romantic about their youthful love lives because they mostly agreed love should last forever, and they would not change dating partners frequently, while their American counterparts tended to be very practical and not very romantic about their dating relationships. When it comes to marriage, however, the Chinese become more practical and materialistic than most Americans because they would take housing, salary and family background into consideration. In addition, Chinese parents have to approve of the boy or girl before they can get married. In the United States, most couples want their parents to approve of their marriage, but it is not required, and many couples would get married anyway.

### *Step 3. Real-time conversations and visiting the other*

Engaging students in real-time conversations is an exciting and motivating task that brings the language and culture to life, gives it purpose, and creates a reason to develop intercultural sensitivity and understanding (Lomicka, 2006). That is also the ultimate goal of intercultural communication. In this study, students conversed in real time approximately twice a month with their peers across the ocean by using video chatting or voice calling on WeChat. Students came to class having prepared questions based on readings and class discussions relating to a cultural theme. They chatted for approximately 25 minutes in Chinese and 25 minutes in English. This structure helped them apply the grammar and vocabulary studied during the week, and it was integrated with the cultural theme.

The academic year closed with an opportunity for students to visit the other country and observe what had been discussed during the year. Instructors at the American university started a course that provided an opportunity for American students to explore the global world with a specific focus on China. The course was designed to guide the students to get an authentic and in-depth impression of China – present, history, culture, business, people, and life – through an eight-week trip to three cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Harbin) in China. American students took history, cultural, business, and social lectures by professors at the Chinese university, toured historical sites and museums, visited high-technology centers, appreciated traditional Chinese performances and cuisine, and had a homestay with a Chinese host family for two nights. Students were exposed to a genuine China from all perspectives, and this could not possibly be done in the United States. Meanwhile, Chinese students took the role of host and had the chance to meet up with their pen pals. A variety of doing-culture exchange activities were carried out. Every week there was a workshop held on the Chinese campus around different themes, such as Chinese campus sports (table tennis, basketball, soccer, etc.), art and music (especially performance by Chinese students), traditional Chinese culture (calligraphy, tai chi, folk dance, Chinese chess, mahjong, etc.), and Chinese students’ associations (robot club, model UN, English corner, debating club, dancing club, etc.). Chinese students took American partners to visit their associations and involved them in their activities. To expose American students to authentic life

in Beijing, Chinese students and teachers organized a bicycle tour to downtown Beijing, which included some famous historical sites such as the Confucius Temple, an Ancient Academy, Nan Lou Gu Lane, and Hou Hai bar street. American and Chinese teachers and Chinese students introduced the features of Chinese folk architecture like the old quadrangle courtyard, the moral and ethical system Confucianism, *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (a set of ritual and musical systems) and the modern popular culture like bar-culture and pop music in both China and America.

Pair or group activities such as paired drill practice, shopping, a visit to a bar or tea house, online group chatting, karaoke and organized campus activities were organized to underscore the idea that communicating across cultures is a process of making meaning, of people understanding one another so they can get to know one another, build relationships, and solve problems together. The exchange closed with a party attended by American and Chinese students who showcased their talents.

### 3. Results

After the three phases of intercultural communication exchange above and several rounds of refined intercultural communication teaching, our observation, interviews, surveys, and students' journals highlighted certain findings of the students' intercultural communication competence. First, both EFL and CFL learners need to cultivate their ICC in independent variables such as attitudes, awareness, interaction, or motivation in depth other than superficial aspects such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing skills, and oral and listening skills. Second, to solve that problem, it is necessary to provide students with rich and thick descriptions of the intercultural experiences aided by social media tools. Considering the accessibility to these tools and the most popular functions with students, WeChat app was singled out for intercultural communication between Chinese and American students. Third, based on the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC), we focused on some prominent questions on intercultural competence where both Chinese and American students showed relatively great or little progress, used them to design closed interviews and came up with the following description.

#### 3.1 Knowledge: Cultural differences

The students gained knowledge of differences in important aspects of the target culture and home culture, such as language, basic routines, value orientations, social interactions, historical and socio-political factors (Fantini, 2018).

With the online exchange between Chinese and American students, our EFL and CFL students became more accustomed, adaptive, and tolerant of cultural differences, realized the variety and subtlety of culture, and gained more insights into values underlying the process of individual interaction.

In terms of language, Chinese students became more fluent in oral and written English and learned many colloquial expressions and internet slang language commonly used by

American students such as “You are the bomb,” “knees-to-chest,” “you got it,” “reach out to sb.” Chinese students liked using the coined word “high” to express they have a lot of fun in a Chinese context, which may cause a cultural shock because, in American students’ eyes, this word refers to the feeling after taking drugs. Chinese students realized it was unnecessary to use big and formal expressions and long sentences during their first meeting: It’s my honor to...I’d like to help you with your Chinese.

In terms of value orientation and social interactions, both Chinese and American students longed for multi-culture, freedom, and individuality. Meanwhile, they realized the weaknesses and benefits of both cultures. As genuine Chinese, EFL students felt they knew so little about traditional cultures, such as Kong Fu, Peking opera, and calligraphy and could teach very little to American students. Chinese students believed some Chinese overreacted towards foreigners by trying to show Chinese politeness and being hospitable hosts. EFL students, therefore, held that an equal relationship should be built. They also felt they had a more impartial attitude towards American life and felt less envious. The long-held misunderstanding about American students loving parties was eliminated. Their parties are like Chinese students’ dormitory discussions. Young people in both countries need different activities to build a sense of connection and belonging. Sometimes American students live a harder life than Chinese students due to little connection with their families. There exists a kind of paradox of cultural values in both cultures. For example, in individualistic American culture, American students also love to engage in many collectivistic campus activities, such as music festivals and super bowls. Comparatively, in Chinese collectivistic culture, some Chinese students rejected campus group activity due to the lack of individuality. Chinese students found a combination rather than a separation of Eastern and Western values in both American and Chinese students. They felt more tolerant rather than shocked by cultural differences. When comparing rigid Chinese school regulations, American students also felt they should not take an incredible amount of freedom and privilege at such a young age for granted because they could transfer schools and change their majors multiple times.

In terms of cultural study method, Chinese students had learned how to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches by doing surveys, conducting interviews, and doing ethnography during their intercultural communication research. The instructors guided them on how to design questionnaires and make pre-tests. Then these questionnaires were sent to American students and collected for further analysis online from perspectives of value orientations.

### **3.2 Attitude: Curiosity and openness**

The students increased their curiosity, openness, and willingness to learn about their target language and culture and increased their readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one’s own (Fantini, 2018).

Our observation and surveys, based on the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (Neuliep, 2008, p. 30-31), suggested that Chinese students felt more apprehensive than their American partners during the preliminary phase of intercultural communication as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** The comparison of ICA between Chinese and American university students

Subjects	The score of ICA		The percentage of the forms of ICC		The score of the forms of ICC leading to higher ICA			The percentage of the reasons leading to ICA			The impact of the ICA on your future intercultural communication		
	Chinese students	American students	Interacting with people of different ages	Interacting with people from different countries	Interacting with people from different ethnic groups	Interacting with people of different ages	Foreign language competence	The degree of your understanding about the foreign culture, such as religions, values, customs, thinking and communication patterns and so on.	I will be more willing to engage in intracultural interactions.	I will be more willing to engage in intercultural interactions to reduce the apprehension.	I will be more willing to engage in intercultural interactions between members of the same culture)	I will be more willing to engage in intercultural interactions to reduce the apprehension.	I will avoid communicating with people from different cultures.
Chinese students	41.75	82.07%	77.17%	3.47	3.22	90.22%	67.93%	39.13%	55.98%	14.13%			
American students	35.56	85.19%	92.59%	4.19	2.93	85.19%	48.15%	55.56%	48.15%	3.7%			

Due to the lack of multi-cultural immersion, Chinese students had a certain illusion about American culture. They thought American students were very smart, open, and superior to them in terms of language proficiency, self-confidence, and socializing. These ideas were mainly from movies and the mass media. For example, Chinese students always mentioned some popular American singers and household movies in China, such as Lady Gaga, *Gossip Girls*, or *Friends*. But their American partners may have their individualistic tastes or think these popular movies in China failed to reflect the genuine American culture. Facing this embarrassing situation, Chinese students felt the gap between their second-hand cultural experience and their intercultural communication in an authentic environment. With their further communication, both Chinese and American students found some cultural differences were hard to fathom and even frustrating (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Cultural shocks in attitude

Intercultural exchanges	Cultural shocks
Daily life and communication	When both parties communicate in English, Chinese students (CSs) had nothing or very little to say and felt depressed and insulted by the “silent” moments.
Paying the bill	Due to “face culture,” CSs felt embarrassed when dining outside because they could not afford to treat ASs but ASs did not mind waiting for them while CSs were eating and drinking.
Hobbies	CSs often share similar hobbies and do something together while ASs really vary from person to person and are very unique in the choice of their hobbies and activities.
Recreation: bar-going	ASs considered this a very natural way of communication while CSs thought this was bad and improper, an outlook influenced by their Confucian heritage.
Education	exam meritocracy vs. creativity meritocracy
Esthetics	body focus (ASs) vs. inner beauty focus (CSs)
Attitude towards employment	Equal (ASs) vs. hierarchical (CSs) attitude towards jobs; individual choice and open-minded (ASs) vs. collectivistic expectation and utilitarian attitude (CSs)
Students’ character	independent and individualistic (ASs) vs. modest, cute, sweet and collectivistic (CSs)
Friendship	future orientation (ASs) vs. past orientation (CSs)
Family values	distant and weak (ASs) vs. intimate and strong (CSs)
Privacy	individual privacy (ASs) vs. group privacy (CSs)

However, these cultural shocks did not pose cultural barriers in communication between Chinese and American students. EFL students gradually realized that these are due to different cultural values. For them, it was necessary to acknowledge and respect these differences. With further interactions, they became acquainted with the needs and habits of each other and even began to enjoy the different “zests” of life.

When it comes to readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one’s own, Chinese and American students experienced a variety of misunderstandings when exploring subtle and concrete cultural differences through WeChat discussions in *Step 3, Real-Time Conversations and Visiting the Other*. In intercultural classes, Chinese students learned about the stereotypes that, unlike Chinese counterparts who always engaged in little

eye contact and had very little body language, American students were always very active and highly motivated in class. To confirm the cultural differences, they have taken for granted for a long time, Chinese students filmed a short video clip showing the differences in kinesics between Chinese and American classes demonstrated by Chinese students and shared it in the WeChat group. To their surprise, American pen-pals' observation showed the same stereotype they held for Chinese students. They all thought their Chinese counterparts had been hard-working all the time and were never absent-minded in class. But the truth was that they were all "cheated" by the false assumption they got from textbooks. They realized it is very necessary to suspend judgment and appreciate the complexities of communicating and interacting interculturally.

### **3.3 Behavior or skills**

The students improved their ability to interpret and relate cultural differences and the capacity to interact appropriately in a variety of different social situations in the target culture, to use appropriate strategies for adapting to the target culture and reducing stress and to resolve cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstanding when they arise (Fantini, 2018).

Although Chinese students learned how to analyze cultural differences in terms of value orientations like social relationships, activity, sense of time, gender traits, and so on, they seldom had opportunities to apply these concepts to real-time intercultural communication. Computer-mediated communication on different cultural topics provides them with a lot of data for interpretation or thick description. Take the activities in 2.4.3 for example, when exploring the cultural differences in esthetic standards applied to men and women, Chinese students found both Chinese men and women tend to focus on the tender feminine aspects: slender figure, pale skin, fair complexion, and sweet looks, which had been a prevalent esthetic standard since ancient China, while American students give priority to tough masculine features attached to men and women: power, muscle, and healthy, sun-tanned skin. When making the itinerary for different countries, American students tend to be future-oriented; that is, they would like to "set goals, target dates for meeting them, and outline specific steps for getting to the goal" (Davis, 2001, p. 201). Chinese students, however, tend to be past- or present-oriented; that is, they may "pay attention to daily, seasonal and historical cycles and look to factors in the present situation" (Davis, 2001, p. 201). Compared to their American counterparts, they are more flexible. When discussing love and marriage, Chinese young people tend to be more romantic and would like to marry their first love under the influence of past orientation, which balks at change. But when it comes to marriage, which involves two families rather than just two individuals, they will take the material factors and family background into consideration, and this is entailed in their parents' or collectivistic expectations.

With regard to intercultural behavior and skills, Chinese students felt more at ease and confident about engaging in flexible and effective intercultural communication. When interviewing Chinese students, some even said they did not consider American friends as

foreigners and could communicate with them freely, especially on the telephone. Chinese students wanted to try something exotic and new in distant countries and cultures because they knew very well they would socialize with Americans flexibly and properly in the future. Meanwhile, they would relapse back very naturally and adopt Chinese habits when communicating with Chinese. For example, even if Chinese students had learned to make the third-party introduction; that is, the introduction of their Chinese friends to American friends during their first meeting, most of them were not used to revealing their names to strangers due to Chinese' anonymous privacy. Therefore, they will not adopt this kind of introduction when socializing with Chinese.

### **3.4 Awareness**

They improved their 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).

Both Chinese and American students could evaluate their home culture and life more critically. Chinese students tended to make comparisons when observing some cultural phenomena: what would American students think of it? They liked to engage in critical thinking by challenging and doubting what they have learned in books and even got into the habit of inferring conclusions by logic due to their debate with American students about some social issues. They have become used to approaching a problem from different perspectives. For example, Chinese students took it for granted that Chinese student associations should be organized hierarchically. They valued form, official titles and politeness very much. But when American students joked about this by saying, "There are so many ministers everywhere on campus" and "What we value is team spirit, equality and results," Chinese students began to rethink about the differences between American's "Doing" orientation—what you achieve does matter and their "Being" orientation—who you are does matter. Likewise, American students gradually realized their "culture superiority complex" for not knowing any Chinese and asked themselves, "Why is it that Americans do not know any foreign languages and yet expect everyone else to know English?"

When resolving an intercultural communication misunderstanding, a Chinese female student realized that American students' reactions to Chinese students reflected their cultural values. This Chinese student developed a very close friendship with an American male student during their online intercultural communication. When the American student arrived in China, she assumed it was her responsibility to take good care of him, for example, reminding him to go to classes or put on more clothes when it got cold. These little favors were very common among Chinese students. But the American student joked that he did not want to have a "new mum in China." When reflecting on her inappropriate "care," she understood she should act in accordance with the Western value of individual freedom, rather than the Chinese value of collectivistic dependence. Built on mutual respect and understanding, the intercultural relationship benefited both of them.



## 4. Conclusion

This research brought together the use of these technologies to increase students' intercultural communication competence in an authentic environment. As is illustrated above, Chinese students experienced intercultural communication from inadequacy to acculturation, to some extent, in a relatively short period of time. As far as knowledge is concerned, Chinese EFL and American CFL learners became more proficient in the target language, realized the variety and subtlety of both the home and target cultures, acquired a different worldview and cultural study methods. With regards to attitude, Chinese EFL and American CFL learners experienced a U curve—from excitement or blind admiration of the target culture to confusion or frustration about the differences between the target and home cultures, and eventually to toleration and appreciation of the cultural differences, adaptation to the target culture and openness and readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own. As for the behavior, Chinese EFL and American CFL learners were able to contrast the target culture with their own, demonstrated a capacity to interact appropriately in a variety of different social situations in the target culture, and helped to resolve cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings when they arose. They all felt more at ease and confident about engaging in flexible and effective intercultural communication. Regarding awareness, Chinese EFL and American CFL learners could realize the importance of differences and similarities across the home and target cultures, their negative reactions to these differences (e.g., fear, ridicule, disgust, superiority, etc.) and therefore, evaluate critically the target and home cultures.

### 4.1 Implications

This project has the potential to create a student-centered learning atmosphere that allows students to set the pace and learn according to their own rhythm, style, and needs. Instructors scaffold both language and cultural knowledge to help students fully adopt their skills. These socio-culturally-based activities also taught students how to be responsible learners, collaborators, and problem-solvers (MacDonald, 2003). This research will serve as a valuable reference for intercultural communication teaching and open up new possibilities to extend classroom teaching by bridging the gap between second-hand knowledge and hands-on experience. More importantly, computer-mediated communication added some useful dimensions to face-to-face intercultural communication.

### 4.2 Limitations and future work

There is still much room for improvement. It would have been more effective if more Chinese and American students were involved, and the quantitative approach covered more samples. Some statements in the four categories of intercultural communication competence were left unexplored by the ethnographic approach, such as the techniques to aid students' learning of the target language and culture, reflection on the impact and consequences of

students' decisions and choices on their hosts, responses by target culture members to home culture members' social identity (i.e., race, class, age, ability, etc.) and diversity in the target culture (such as differences in race, class, gender, age, ability, etc.). These aspects should be incorporated into the future online course design in an exchange project. In addition, instructors need to be equipped with certain online pedagogical skills. They need to learn how to welcome, encourage, support, and monitor students in an online environment.

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