

Editor's Introduction

Although many online intercultural exchanges (OIE) have been conducted based on the groundbreaking *Cultura* model as described by Furstenberg, Levet, English, and Mailet (2001), most to date have been between and among European languages.¹ This volume presents a collection of chapters with a focus on exchanges involving Asian and Pacific languages, the culmination of what began as a Summer Workshop sponsored by the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in 2008.² Most of the projects that were begun at the workshop were carried out and reported on at two conferences at the University of Hawai'i in 2009: *Cultura: Web-Based Intercultural Exchanges*³ and *Language Learning in Computer Mediated Communities*.⁴ Many of the benefits and challenges of such exchanges are similar to those reported for European languages (Belz, 2003; Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd, 2003, 2007b; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; and Thorne, 2003, to name but a very few).⁵ However, some of the difficulties reported in the Chinese and Japanese exchanges (Chapters 5 and 7) might be due to the significant linguistic differences between English and these two East Asian languages, suggesting that adaptations of the original model might be necessary. This volume adds to the body of emerging studies of Asian and Pacific languages (e.g., Jin & Erben, 2007; Wang, Berger, & Szilas, 2012; Wang-Szilas, Berger, & Zhang, 2013).

¹ <http://cultura.mit.edu/archives>

² <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/onlinecafes/>

³ <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/lcmmc/cultura.html>

⁴ <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/lcmmc/index.html>

⁵ See also related publications at <http://cultura.mit.edu/home/articles/> and sample projects listed at http://www.uni-collaboration.eu/sample_projects_all

Situating *Cultura* in the broader study of telecollaboration

Telecollaboration is an online educational activity, often used synonymously with the term online intercultural exchange (OIE). O'Dowd (2011) provides explanations of these terms:

Traditionally, online intercultural exchange projects in foreign language education have involved the use of (text-based) online communication tools to bring together classes of language learners in different countries to learn the others' language and culture. Also referred to as telecollaboration (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006) [and] Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education (Belz & Thorne, 2006)..., online intercultural exchange has traditionally taken one of two forms or models during the first two decades of its existence— firstly, the e-tandem model and, secondly, what I usually refer to as the blended intercultural model. (p. 369)

This type of learning is becoming increasingly popular in foreign/second language education and is particularly widespread in higher education (see Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012; Guth & Helm, 2010; Warschauer, 1996). Almost 20 years ago, Warschauer compiled the proceedings of a Symposium on Local and Global Electronic Networking in Foreign Language Learning and Research, which was held at the University of Hawai'i, was sponsored by the NFLRC, and brought together educators concerned with these issues from university and K–12 institutions throughout the world. At that time, most of the telecollaborative projects used e-mail and other Web 1.0 capabilities, with the goal of facilitating learning environments “based on authentic communication, collaborative learning, and creative, goal-oriented activity” (p. ix). Guth and Helm (2010) edited the first volume in a series *Telecollaboration in Education*, focusing on the pedagogical processes and outcomes of engaging learners in different geographical locations in virtual collaboration together. Their volume updated the use of earlier Web 1.0 tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat, and threaded discussion, discussing the educational shift to Web 2.0 tools, such as wikis, blogs, social networking, and 3D virtual worlds. The second volume in the series, edited by Dooly and O'Dowd, synthesized the many methods and theoretical approaches that have been and are being used to investigate the different configurations of foreign language interaction and online intercultural exchange (OIE).

The 1st International Conference on Telecollaboration in University Foreign Language Education at the University of León in February, 2014, provided a broad overview of telecollaboration and how intercultural telecollaboration can contribute not only to second/foreign language learning and intercultural awareness, but also to general educational goals, internationalization of education, and electronic/digital literacies in higher education.⁶ Of the 75 presentations at the conference, including three plenaries, one-third of them dealt with telecollaboration that was focused on goals and issues larger than language and culture learning, while two-thirds were concerned specifically with the teaching and learning of foreign/second language and culture.

Among the presentations that focused on or targeted language and culture learning, the enduring impact of *Cultura* was fully evident. One of the plenary speakers touted

⁶ See the UNI-Collaboration project, sponsored by the European Commission, <http://www.uni-collaboration.eu>

the *Cultura* model as one of a select few that have impressive longevity and reach in terms of successful models of telecollaboration.

Strengths and limitations of *Cultura*-based exchanges

Cultura-inspired projects are often based on the premise that language and culture are inextricably connected and on a view of culture as a dynamic, ever evolving process of expressing both individual and collective identities, worldviews, ethics, morals, and values. As such, culture cannot be “taught” in the traditional sense of teachers imparting knowledge to students, but must be experienced by the learners as they co-construct cultural knowledge with others and develop what Byram (1997) termed Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). ICC involves five elements: attitudes (of curiosity and openness), knowledge (of social groups and their products and practices), skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. This view is evident to varying degrees in all of the chapters of this volume and in most of the *Cultura*-based presentations at the 2014 Telecollaboration Conference.

The 2014 conference presentations not only reinforced previous studies and reports of the benefits of online intercultural exchange, but also reiterated some of the limitations of *Cultura*-based exchanges. *Cultura*-style online exchanges provide a student-centered collaborative approach to integrating online technologies into the classroom and actively engaging students in virtual intercultural communication with geographically distant peers. However, there are to be sure shortcomings of bilingual exchanges and limitations of telecollaboration between language learners. O’Dowd and Ritter (2006) reviewed the literature on telecollaborative exchanges up to that date and discovered many examples of “failed communication,” when online intercultural exchanges did not result in successful communication or negotiation of meaning between the learners. They developed an inventory of factors that could lead to cases of so-called failed communication, divided into four levels: individual, classroom, socioinstitutional, and interaction. They also emphasized that points of tensions in intercultural exchanges should not categorically be avoided, but rather that such differences should be used as rich points to explain and discuss cultural contexts and practices that learners could analyze and make conscious efforts to understand. Lamy and Goodfellow (2010) summarized the various kinds of success in telecollaboration for language learning, as well as the many challenges that have been reported. They praise the field for its willingness “to review its own effectiveness regularly... and to move from the notion of ‘conflict as accidental finding of research’ to ‘conflict as object of research’” (p. 109). Successes include personal and cultural benefits, linguistic and sociolinguistic improvements, development of communication skills, critical cultural awareness raising, and teacher professional development. On the other hand, difficulties, tensions, and failure can be ascribed to a wide variety of factors, for example, negative transfer, differences in negotiation or interactional “styles,” professional misalignments, practical constraints, teacher workload, and conflicting worldviews.

O’Dowd (2011) discussed several additional criticisms of traditional approaches to telecollaboration, some of which were also found in the metasyntesis of *Cultura*-inspired projects in Chapter 2 of this volume. Firstly, there are organizational, institutional, and curricular difficulties with such exchanges, and teachers often find a lack of time to devote to such exchanges, particularly when they do not

have institutional support or have different curricular goals and requirements than their partners. Secondly, short-term exchanges can actually have more negative than positive consequences on learners' intercultural awareness, as noted in a number of studies (e.g., Belz, 2003; Chun & Wade, 2004; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Thirdly, as Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) suggest, earlier proposals of a so-called "clash of genres" (Kramsch & Thorne) that result in dysfunctional intercultural exchanges may be questionable, as it is over-simplistic to compare one monolithic cultural communicative style (say, of the French) with another monolithic cultural style (say, of Americans). And finally, Hanna and de Nooy (2009) propose that class-to-class telecollaborations represent a limited level of "authenticity" in the sense that interactions are restricted to learners in classrooms and may not represent authentic communication beyond the classroom. They "found students often mired in a learner identity that is hard to shake off and that appears underpinned by certain classroom practices" (p. 187), but that participation in public Internet discussion forums offered opportunities for learners to develop an identity with a real audience.

Organization and individual chapters

The volume is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the *Cultura* model with a retrospective chapter by two of the creators of *Cultura* and a chapter presenting a meta-synthesis of *Cultura*-based projects based on an extensive survey of instructors who have implemented their own intercultural exchanges. The second part includes two research studies on the acquisition of ICC during *Cultura*-inspired exchanges: the first between classes of English as a Foreign Language in Taiwan and France, and the second between an EFL class in Germany and a German sociolinguistics class in the US. Although the latter does not involve either Asian or Pacific languages, it is included as an example of the type of research that can be conducted to assess the affordances, learning gains, and limitations of *Cultura*-type OIEs. The third part contains three chapters providing detailed descriptions of "best practices," that is, projects that were initiated at the NFLRC workshop in 2008 involving Asian (Chinese and Japanese) and Pacific (Filipino) languages, and how they were successful in realizing most of the goals that they had hoped the *Cultura* model would achieve.

In Part I, Chapter 1, Gilberte Furstenberg and Sabine Levet provide detailed insights into "*Cultura: From Then to Now*," including the key features and essential components of the model. They also reflect on possible reasons for the longevity of the model, and why it has been such a compelling and enduring prototype for OIEs. A wealth of captivating examples from the many exchanges that they have conducted over the years illustrates the discovery process that students go through in expanding and deepening their understanding of their own and the other culture. They also discuss the role of the teacher, which is primarily to provide opportunities for their students to share, reflect, discuss, and confront different points of view and to scaffold these explorations and analyses. They suggest ways in which intercultural understanding can be evaluated and how linguistic goals can be integrated into the exchanges. Finally, they discuss some of the new technologies that have been used in recent years, such as video conferencing, blogs, and wikis, emphasizing that such tools are not, per se, enough to make meaningful communication happen. The *Cultura* model is adaptable and has been adapted in

a myriad ways, always keeping in mind the goals of intercultural learning and how technologies can best serve these goals.

In Chapter 2, “A Meta-Synthesis of *Cultura*-Based Projects,” Dorothy Chun reports on an extensive survey of 18 instructors who have conducted *Cultura*-inspired intercultural exchanges. The purpose of the meta-synthesis is to find out about the goals of these instructors that led them to adopt the *Cultura* model, how they built toward these goals in the implementation of their projects, and whether they were able to achieve these goals. Survey respondents were asked about the learning outcomes that they desired for their students and how they were able to assess the outcomes. The chapter discusses the varied implementation processes and the common goals and challenges, ending with specific recommendations that might inform the design of future intercultural projects. Simply using the model by no means guarantees successful intercultural exchange. Meticulous planning and goal setting, mutual commitment to the project, curricular alignment, close communication, choice of appropriate tools and technologies, and flexibility in following students’ suggestions and allowing their input are among the most important aspects to focus on.

Part II consists of two empirical studies of the acquisition of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Chapter 3 by Meei-Ling Liaw and Kathryn English, “A Tale of Two Cultures,” uses the Lacanian concept of *extimacy* and Bakhtin’s concept of *exotopia* to analyze a variety of task-based written work by students in Paris and students in Taichung who were both learning English as a Foreign Language. Quantitative analyses of linguistic features reveal that French participants used lower percentages of “social process” words in their online forum postings, and the Taiwanese students used these types of words significantly more. This means that the Taiwanese wrote more about their family, friends, and other people than their French counterparts, suggesting a higher degree of interpersonal connectedness. Qualitative analyses within the framework of Lacan’s *extimacy* explored students’ perceptions of “self” and “other,” in contrast to Bakhtin’s *exotopia*, which involves more collective, culture-bound perceptions. As the online interactions intensified during the exchange, the participants developed interpersonal relationships with each other, and the levels of *extimacy* and *exotopia* deepened for both groups of students. Two of the Taiwanese students were able to extend their intercultural communication from the “lab” setting to the “real world” and actually visited Paris, experiencing firsthand what it means to be an “intercultural speaker” (Byram & Fleming, 1998).

In Chapter 4 by Dorothy Chun, “Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence Through Online Exchanges,” Byram’s (1997) concept of ICC and Kramsch’s models of discourse analysis (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Ware & Kramsch, 2005) form the basis of the analysis of data obtained from an intercultural exchange between university students learning German in the US and students studying English at a German university. The data reveal how culture is embedded in language and how the learners employed different discourse styles in their online postings, demonstrating their pragmatic ability to perform various types of speech acts, such as expressing curiosity or interest, negotiating meaning, seeking to understand the other, hedging, and reflecting on their own and the other culture.

⁷ This article was originally published in the *CALICO Journal* 28(2), pp.392–419 and is reprinted here with permission of the journal’s editors.

The students in the two groups interacted according to their own pragmatic norms, with the Americans asking more questions than the students in Germany, but not always possessing the pragmatic ability to realize that it is not only through questions that one can signal interest or curiosity. Both sides did demonstrate ICC in their synchronous chat session, employing an appropriate combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to interact with their interlocutors from a different culture. This type of analysis can serve as a model for future research on OIEs with Asian and Pacific languages.

Part III contains three chapters focusing on Asian and Pacific languages. Chapter 5, “Intercultural Learning on the Web: Reflections on Practice” by Song Jiang, Haidan Wang, and Stephen Tschudi, describes a project designed to teach culture to Chinese and American business students through a series of online interactive tasks based on the *Cultura* model. The web-based interactions helped to minimize cultural barriers and bridge the cultural gap, deepening mutual understanding between the two groups and also enhancing their interpretative and expressive abilities. The participants of both groups compared and discussed paired authentic cultural artifacts, worked through any points of differences in their understanding, and thus gained insights into cultural differences. For example, in comparing the results of their word associations, they came to realize that the “same” word in different cultures may represent a completely different concept with accompanying cultural implications. The students’ observations and reflections indicated that they were able not only to notice key differences but also to hypothesize about these differences and thus reflect deeply on underlying cultural values. One difficulty encountered was that postings made in L1 by both sides contained authentic language about relatively complex ideas and consequently demanded a high level of L2 reading proficiency. Insufficient target language reading proficiency thus had a somewhat negative impact on the exchange.

In Chapter 6, Nenita Pambid Domingo discusses the “UH-UCLA Filipino Heritage Café and the Fil-Ams’ Quest for Identity.” Three exchanges among Filipino language classes in the US were conducted in 2008, 2009, and 2010, but the chapter focuses on the first exchange between the University of Hawai’i and the University of California, Los Angeles. Unlike most *Cultura* exchanges between students in different countries, the Filipino Heritage Café was adapted to two campuses that have large enrollments of Filipino Americans. Most were heritage learners who grew up in Filipino households and practiced Filipino customs and traditions. They had a range of proficiency in the language, from none to the ability to speak but with no formal training in the grammar, reading, or writing. The goals of the exchange were to improve linguistic and cultural competence, provide a virtual community of learners to examine Filipino identity, and allow the students to compare their experiences with Filipino culture with others in a different geographical location. Students felt that the exchange allowed them to dive deeper into the roots of the language as well as the culture that they are all a part of, in addition to improving their writing and grammar. Similarly, instructors noted increased participation from students in terms of quantity and quality in language production and writing. In addition, the built-in analytical tasks allowed students to compare and contrast the varying points of view expressed, forcing them to think critically and to see the world from the eyes of another, conceivably promoting mutual understanding.

The final chapter, Chapter 7 by Yukiko Watanabe, Yoichi Tsuji, and Cindy Wong, describes “A High School Japanese and English Intercultural Exchange Project: Design, Implementation, and Evaluation.” Most *Cultura*-inspired projects have been conducted at the university level, so this exchange provides insights into how the *Cultura* model might be adapted for the high school level. The goals of the project were to provide opportunities for students to learn authentic language use from their peer counterparts and to learn about the diverse cultural perspectives of the value systems that underlie customs, opinions, and behaviors. Byram’s (2008) Principles for Intercultural Citizenship Education were closely aligned with the *Cultura*-based tasks that the students undertook. Although there were a number of unanticipated challenges, the students enjoyed the online exchange: They were excited by seeing each other’s developing second language, and their interest in learning the other’s language was piqued. A striking result was that, compared to the text-based tasks, the audio-visual materials seemed to appeal more to the high school students, and they were able to identify behavioral characteristics of the other students, while also taking steps toward reflecting on their own behaviors.

Commonalities among the projects

Although the projects were by no means uniformly designed or implemented, they shared commonalities in many different ways. As might be expected, the projects differed in their initial goals, with some placing a greater emphasis on linguistic improvement and others on intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The proficiency levels of the students also varied, as did the specific *Cultura*-based tasks that students performed. Some projects allowed greater use of L1 than others, depending on the L2 proficiency of the participants. Some projects used both asynchronous and synchronous forms of computer-mediated communication, while others used primarily asynchronous postings to word association questionnaires and online discussion forums.

Despite these many differences, all of the projects report gains in both linguistic and cultural competence and awareness. Across all of the projects, the chapter authors recount that careful planning of program objectives and tasks plays a significant role in the success of the exchanges, both to ensure the active and enthusiastic participation of the students and to give the learners themselves the responsibility of being experts in their culture. This in turn assures that participants on both sides are given a kaleidoscopic and multi-layered view of the target culture. In addition, the role of the teacher changes. Although direct participation of the teachers may be reduced, they must be vigilant “behind the scenes” in planning tasks and following up in the classroom. One of the commonly stated pedagogical requirements is that instructors must create clear guidelines for the students in terms of what is required or expected in the students’ postings. Many instructors express the advisability of seeking and heeding student input, so as to ensure the relevance of the exchange. Constant communication between project instructors is imperative, as is the need for adequate technical support. Both teachers and students must be given the technical training needed to navigate the websites and to appropriately use the technologies employed for the online tasks (see O’Dowd, 2007a, 2013).

The affordances of the Internet allow native speakers to play the role of expert cultural informant and participants often succeed not only in learning about the target culture, but in seeing their own culture through the eyes of others. Learners

on both sides are exposed to authentic materials and language that have been created by their counterparts, making it more relevant than anonymously created cultural artifacts.

Common challenges reported by all of the projects involved organizational and infrastructure challenges (e.g., coordinating academic calendars, different time zones, technology policies, and technological difficulties). Differences in how the exchange was integrated into the respective curricula or syllabi affected the motivation of the participants. Except for the *Cultura* exchanges at MIT, all of the other projects incorporated *Cultura*-based activities into their normal curriculum, and many instructors found that there was insufficient time allotted to the *Cultura* activities to achieve all of the intended goals, particularly in-class time for follow-up of the online postings and discussion that were often done outside of class.

Specific findings for Asian and Pacific languages

The three chapters discussing exchanges with Asian and Pacific languages had unique circumstances that set them apart from the majority of previous *Cultura*-inspired projects. The Chinese-English exchange involved business students, unlike the great majority of exchanges that are between language (or culture) classes. The Japanese-English exchange took place between two high schools, whereas most exchanges that are reported in the literature deal with university level participants. And the Filipino exchange between classes at the University of Hawai'i and UCLA involved heritage learners in the United States and not native Filipino speakers.

Common to the Chinese and Japanese exchanges was the challenge of mixed levels of linguistic proficiency both within the individual classes and between the U.S. classes and their overseas counterparts. Since Chinese and Japanese are much more difficult linguistically for English native speakers than many Western European languages, reaching higher levels of proficiency requires much more time. In the cases of the two exchanges reported in this volume, the students in the US had much lower linguistic proficiency in Chinese and Japanese, than their respective partner classes' proficiency in English. This led the Chinese instructors at UH to suggest that exclusive use of L1 (which is a hallmark of the "traditional" *Cultura*) may not always be optimal. They found that their U.S. students learning Chinese were not able to take part in Chinese language-related activities with a uniform level of competence (e.g., some were not able to have in-depth discussions with their peers). Similarly, the Japanese instructors found that their beginning and low-intermediate language learners had great difficulties understanding academic prose and were not able to speak or write in L2 about cultural comparisons. One positive note, however, was that the high school students studying Japanese were able to watch video clips posted by the instructor in Japan and were able to identify cultural similarities and differences much more easily than in text-based online forum posts. This suggests that learners with lower linguistic proficiency, particularly in more difficult languages like Chinese and Japanese, might still benefit from online exchanges that use multimedia materials (in addition to text-based materials). Although the mixed levels of language proficiency was also mentioned by many survey respondents in the meta-synthesis chapter, the problem seems to be especially acute for more "difficult" languages like Chinese and Japanese, where a greater degree of language scaffolding and support is warranted.

Despite the additional challenges for the exchanges involving Asian languages, the overall consensus of the chapters in this volume is that designing appropriate tasks and materials for targeted sets of learners, as well as garnering the same level of commitment from partner classes, help ensure the success of *Cultura*-inspired intercultural exchanges. Ample time must be built into the syllabi and curricula for learners to explore and discover the nuances and intricacies of their own and other cultures, resulting in rewarding and memorable experiences, whether they be virtual or face-to-face.

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