Promoting Intercultural Learning through Synchronous Video Exchange:
A Talk Abroad Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The current study explores utilizing the ACTFL cultural framework to structure synchronous video-based speaking activities and subsequent class discussions. The study includes 39 students in two sections of an intermediate-level college Spanish course who engaged in five 30-minute conversations with native speakers of Spanish via Talk Abroad during one semester. Quantitative and qualitative data from the semester suggest students' oral proficiency and critical cultural awareness improved. A comparison of survey data indicates that student-reported satisfaction and learning via Talk Abroad was comparable to that of virtual exchanges coordinated by professors during previous semesters. These findings suggest third-party providers can provide students a similar level of learning and engagement for less of an investment in time, technology, and institutional resources than has been reported in previous studies.

KEYWORDS

ACTFL, Computer Mediated Communication, Critical Cultural Awareness, E-Collaboration, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Michael Byram, Spanish, Teaching Culture, Telecollaboration, Virtual Exchange, Web-Based Teaching And Learning

INTRODUCTION

As our world becomes smaller, intercultural abilities are needed across all sectors of the economy and government. Those who develop intercultural skills will be better able to communicate across lines of difference and to avoid imposing their own viewpoints on people from diverse backgrounds. Language researchers have identified telecollaboration as a means to improve both foreign language learning and intercultural competence (Belz, 2003; Chun, 2015; Furstenberg et al., 2001; Guth & Helm, 2010; Schenker, 2013). Given these benefits, O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) suggest virtual exchange "go beyond being an isolated activity pursued by practitioner researchers in the area of CALL and should instead form part of the common battery of educational tools (e.g. MOOCs and the flipped classroom) used by university educators across academic disciplines." However, researchers mention a variety of challenges with virtual exchanges, including: increased pressure on teachers, technical and scheduling difficulties, unstable project partners, varying educational goals for students, communication failures and reinforced stereotypes. (Chun, 2014; Goodwin-Jones, 2013; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Schenker, 2012; Ware, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Unfortunately, these real and perceived difficulties have prevented virtual exchanges from becoming as pervasive as research indicates they should be (O'Dowd, 2018). A service provider approach can make telecollaborative projects accessible to educators without the time, international partners or technical know-how to create their own cultural

or linguistic exchange project. While utilizing a service provider model provides a way to overcome many of the challenges presented by traditional virtual exchanges, little data has been gathered about the educational value of this approach. (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; O'Dowd, 2018)

The current study suggests ways to utilize the American Council on Teaching Foreign Language (ACTFL) cultural framework to structure synchronous video-chat sessions, a method that allows for sustained cultural comparisons during the conversations and subsequent reflection activities. This approach takes inspiration from the Cultura project, developed at MIT in 1997, which began as an email exchange between France and the U.S. to help students relativize their cultural values. However, two of the project's founders concede that the project, largely based on exchanging written questionnaires, does not fully utilize today's interactive internet and mobile app capabilities (Furstenberg & English, 2016). As videoconferencing tools grow in popularity, O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) suggest more data be gathered about building students' intercultural abilities through virtual exchanges via synchronous video platforms.

This article reports on an observational study of 39 students in two sections of a college-level intermediate Spanish class at The College of New Jersey which combined a structured approach to cultural analysis with five 30-minute video-chat sessions with native Spanish speakers using the synchronous, video-based platform, Talk Abroad. Talk Abroad offers trained conversation partners in seven languages, including Spanish. (Students in the study spoke with partners from 13 countries.) Talk Abroad differs from other popular videoconferencing tools (e.g.; Blue Button, Zoom and Skype) in that students pay and conversation partners are paid. However, unlike other platforms, Talk Abroad provides trained conversation partners accustomed to intermediate-level interlocutors. Talk Abroad shares similarities with the Soliya platform, which provides training to both sets of dialogue partners; however, Soliya aims mainly to build cross-cultural understanding through conversations in English rather than providing target-language practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has long been argued that cultural learning be taught alongside language learning (e.g.: Bryam, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Fantini, 1997). Michael Byram introduced the term "critical cultural awareness" in 1997 as the most essential of the five elements (or *savoirs*) that make up intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The other *savoirs* are: knowledge of self and other, skills of interpreting and relating to others, skills of discovery and interaction, and attitudes of openness and curiosity. Byram defines critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practice and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (1997). In fact, Byram's "perspectives, practices and products" form the cornerstone of ACTFL's 1999 cultural standards, revised by ACTFL in 2015, which ask learners to: "Interact with competence and understanding; use the language to investigate, explain and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied, and; use the language to investigate, explain and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied" (National Standards, 2013). Visualizing the "three Ps" as a triangle with "Perspectives" at the apex and "Products" and "Practices" at the bottom reflects their intertwined nature, through which perspectives, or cultural values, inform the practices and products. A large-scale U.S. survey carried out by ACTFL in 2011 about the extent to which teachers, schools, and colleges had adopted the 1996 National Standards found that: "The Cultural Framework with the 3 Ps (products, practices, perspectives) is neither taught nor assessed by a sizeable number of teachers" ("Impact of Foreign Language Standards" 2011). This is unfortunate particularly since the ACTFL cultural framework "provide[s] a very powerful notion of how to work with culture in ways that students and teachers would find accessible" (2011). Arens (2010) emphasizes the value of the Communication and Cultures Framework for college professors in the U.S., notes that post-secondary education largely ignores the National Standards project as a whole. And although K-12 teachers are more familiar with the

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