

Enhancing EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity through a cross-border writing instruction

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Abstract: Language and culture are inseparable since individuals express themselves out of their cultural background, thus highlighting the importance of the cultural cultivation. Research has shown the positive effects of embedding foreign cultures in the writing process. However, intercultural competence is still not adequately reflected in current English as a foreign language (EFL) education. In addition, students feel demotivated to write in conventional writing courses, thus signifying an urgent call for innovation. As writing instructions that incorporate intercultural competence are insufficiently implemented, the current study, therefore, aimed to examine how EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity could be enhanced via the use of a cross-border writing instruction. A total of 44 sophomore English-majors in two required English Composition classes were respectively paired up with their American peers from a public liberal arts college. Data included students' responses to "Intercultural Sensitivity Scale" and focus-group interviews. The findings revealed positive affordances from the cross-border writing instruction, that pre-class activities (reading relevant materials, answering comprehension questions online, reviewing instructional videos) and online interaction with foreign peers enhanced the students' intercultural sensitivity. The participants held positive perceptions about the intercultural experience with foreign partners and such learning experience enhanced observation of the similarities as well as differences of diverse cultures.

Keywords: intercultural sensitivity, cross-border instruction, writing

1. Introduction

Traditional approaches to teaching writing widely used in most EFL writing classes (drill on grammar, vocabulary, and finding and "red-penning" all inaccurate language usage) has not effectively motivated students to love writing in a foreign language. Innovative instructors, therefore, constantly look for new methods and strategies to make the best use of what students do well and to teach new skills effectively. As the point of communicating is to allow students to reach beyond themselves into the larger world, or even across the globe, developing students' competence for effective intercultural communication with people from different cultures is crucial, thus accentuating the understanding of the target culture as language and culture are indivisible and interrelated (Heidari, Ketabi, & Zonoobi, 2014; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). However, the interaction of culture and EFL pedagogies has been insufficiently implemented and remained as an underexplored issue (Chan, 2006), evidenced by its "peripheral to the real business of language instruction" (Kearney, 2010, p. 332) and its insignificance in the curriculum (Byrd, Hlas, Watzke, & Valencia, 2011; Tsou, 2005; Warford & White, 2012).

As learning in intercultural contexts receives much more attention and online learning platforms are widely integrated into language education, how to innovate conventional instructions has been critical issues worth investigation. Therefore, this study was designed to enhance EFL learners' sensitivity to the target culture via the interaction with American partners in a cross-border writing instruction. According to the purposes of the study, the following research questions were formulated to guide the exploring procedures:

1. Did EFL learner improve their intercultural sensitivity in the intercultural writing instruction?

2. What were the students' overall perceptions about the intercultural interaction?

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The participants were 44 sophomore English-majors from two English composition courses in central Taiwan. The participants' writing proficiency was at an upper intermediate level because they had received training in writing for two years. The American e-pals were 50 undergraduate students from a multicultural communication class at a public Midwestern liberal arts college. Students from both sides were randomly paired up.

2.2 Instrument

The 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 2000) was employed to examine if the online interaction with foreign partners enhanced students' intercultural sensitivity. The scale covered five constructs, including interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency with .86 reliability coefficient.

2.3 Instructional design

Two topics (similarities/differences in holidays and parenting styles between Taiwan and America) were chosen for interaction between Taiwanese and their American partners. Before the in-class writing activities, the students read the reading materials carefully developed by the instructors from both sides and answered related comprehension questions online. The students from both sides then interacted online by exchanging their perspectives with their partners.

3. Results

3.1 Intercultural sensitivity in a cross-border writing instruction

The pre-survey and the post-survey of the intercultural sensitivity survey revealed that all of the mean scores of the five constructs of the post-survey were significantly higher than those of the pre-survey. The results showed that most of the students enjoyed interacting with the foreign partners, gave positive responses to their culturally different counterpart during their interaction, and generally had a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between their culturally-distinct counterpart and themselves

Table 1: An example of a table for the ICCE proceedings.

	N	interaction engagement	respect for cultural differences	interaction confidence	interaction enjoyment	interaction attentiveness
Pre-survey	44	3.55	4.14	3.28	3.87	3.52
Post-survey	44	3.74	4.31	3.62	4.08	3.75
Mean difference		0.19*	0.17*	0.34**	0.21*	0.23*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

3.2 Similarities/differences observed between different cultures

During the online interaction with their foreign partners, most of the students sensed the similarities as well as differences between Taiwan and America. One student pointed out that, "In Taiwan, we usually

evaluate an individual in terms of academic grades. However, my partners told me that they would also be evaluated by engagement in extracurricular activities, term papers, or sports”. Some students even pointed out the differences in giving feedback among students from both sides. “American partners gave me feedback that is more straightforward and to the point, while my classmate tends to give me indirect and general comments”, explained a few students.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that the cross-border writing instruction created an appropriate online context for learners with diverse cultural backgrounds to communicate effectively and interact in greater depth, leading to subsequent enhancement of intercultural sensitivity and mutual respect for as well as acceptance of different cultures.

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