

Using an online social network site as a learning community to enhance EFL learners' cultural awareness

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Abstract:

EFL students suffer from low awareness of the target culture and low actual intercultural communicative competence due to an insufficient input and decontextualized learning environment; the current study, therefore, aimed to use Internet social networking, specifically Facebook, as a learning community framework to enhance EFL students' cultural awareness via cross-cultural interaction with American e-pals. The participants were 15 English majored students in Taiwan and 20 undergraduate students in the U.S. The participants were asked to engage in cross-cultural communication on chosen topics (self-introduction, school life, and Taiwanese night markets or American county fairs) with the American students. A mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research was employed to analyze the data. While qualitative data included focus group interviews and reflective papers, quantitative data consisted of evaluation of the students' cultural awareness. The major findings were: (1) Students demonstrated a moderate level of cultural awareness, (2) Using Facebook helped students to overcome the differences in time zones, to gain in cultural awareness, to clarify stereotypes, and to recognize their improvements, (3) Students found benefits in the comfortable learning environment, including classroom atmosphere, cultural awareness, authentic readers, writing skills, motivation, and autonomous learning. In conclusion, the results revealed the merits of creating an online learning community for EFL students. In addition, the framework of the instructional design provides researchers and instructors with directions to enhance the cultural awareness of students in an English writing class.

Keywords: online learning community, cultural awareness, critical thinking

1. Introduction

Language and culture seem inseparable as language is the expression of ones' cultural background. The literature is replete with statements that students' cultural awareness facilitated the learning of a target language as students used their cultural knowledge to comprehend the sentences in an authentic learning context, as documented in Heidari, Ketabi, & Zonoobi (2014), Mitchell & Myles (2004), and Papademetre & Scarino (2006). Through the interaction, students compared and contrasted the cultural similarities and differences to achieve cultural reflection, allowing them to understand the viewpoints of the native speakers. Previous studies have indicated a close relationship between critical thinking and cultural awareness (Ingulsrud et al., 2002; Lee, 2011; McAllister et al., 2006; O'Dowd & Eberbach, 2004). To better understand the messages they received from the people in other countries, people applied critical thinking skills to achieve cultural reflection (Ingulsrud et al., 2002; Lee, 2011). Students needed the critical thinking skills, including analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating, to understand the messages of people from other countries. The critical process helped students to understand the viewpoints of others (Hanvey, 1976; Deardorff, 2006).

While some studies have focused on the use of critical thinking to clarify student misunderstandings and cultural stereotypes related to the target language (Schwartz, Lin, & Holmes, 2003; Tsai, 2011), other researchers (Deardorff, 2011; Lee, 2012; Wu, Marek, & Chen, 2013; Ziegahn, 2005) have focused on applying critical thinking to improving the cultural awareness of students with respect to cultural differences and cultural backgrounds. Among tools that facilitate student critical thinking, social

network sites, particularly Facebook, provide students an authentic context to interact with people from other countries. Through the interactive process, EFL student can analyze a conversation, comprehend the main idea of an e-pal, and accept the different cultures, as well as reflecting upon and examining their own perceptions. Students develop critical thinking skills in the process of analyzing the ideas they receive from their peers (Shih, 2011; Wass, Harland, & Mercer, 2011).

Previous research that emphasized the use of the social network site as a communicative tool to connect students with e-pals from other countries has attempted to promote the learners' intercultural communication and cultural awareness (O'Connor, 2012; Wang, 2011). The results have shown that the students' knowledge grows as the result of the interaction with native speakers via social network sites (Grosbeck, 2009). Through sharing of information or articles, students can not only better understand each other's cultural backgrounds but also learn from the communication, including comprehending and comparing the differences between the mother language and the target language. Asynchronous online discussion on Facebook allows students to leave messages offline and to reply to the messages anytime and anywhere. The platform not only provides students with opportunities to connect with international friends and to share messages and files but also creates a learning environment which expands the students' ability to identify the similarities and differences between cultures (Commander, Zhao, Gallagher, & You, 2012; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Wang, 2011; Wang, 2012). After receiving the cultural knowledge, students compare the cultural similarities and differences. Moreover, students reflect on their previous knowledge to consider whether they had some misunderstanding about the culture of the target language (Itakura, 2004).

The idea of establishing an online learning community via social media echoes the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the theory of social constructivist learning (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as the theory of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), all of which emphasize the importance of social interaction and indicate that knowledge and skills, such as cultural reflection and communicative competence, progress as a result of the interaction and help of capable peers. Knowledge is produced as the result of social interaction with others, as ideas are shared and explored, making social interaction a key to learning (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010).

The current study was designed to improve awareness of the target culture and enhance actual intercultural communicative competence of EFL students in Taiwan, who often suffer due to insufficient input and a decontextualized learning environment. The researchers used Internet social networking, specifically Facebook, as a learning community framework to enhance EFL students' cultural awareness via the cross-cultural interaction with American e-pals in an authentic context. The study particularly focused on two issues, (1) to what degree the students' cultural awareness improved, and (2) benefits resulting from using Facebook as a communication tool.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants were 15 English majored students (two males and 13 females) taking an advanced EFL writing course at a four-year academic university in central Taiwan. The Taiwanese participants' writing proficiency was at the upper intermediate level because they had received training in writing for two years. The American e-pals (three males and 17 females) were undergraduate students in a multicultural communication class at a public Midwestern liberal arts college.

2.2 Instructional design

The students in the two classes were assigned to write three essays (a self-introduction, school life, and Taiwanese night markets or American county fairs) relating to their cultural and educational backgrounds, and to discuss their essays with their e-pals via private Facebook groups. The purpose of the topics was to encourage students to engage in more discussion with their e-pals, and to gain cultural awareness via the online social interaction. Facebook was integrated into this study to explore whether the students' cultural awareness, intercultural communication competence, and critical thinking skills were enhanced via the learning community.

Students discussed issues relating to their cultural background. To help their partners to comprehend cultural issues they express, students used the functions in Facebook, including sharing messages and uploading photos as well as videos, to assist in conveying meaning. At the end of the study, the Taiwanese participants were asked to write reflective papers addressing how their understanding of their e-pal's culture had changed. The students were asked to address five questions in their reflective papers. The questions asked about the students' understanding of cultural similarities and differences, reflections about misunderstanding of Western culture, perceptions of using Facebook as a communicative tool, as well as overall ideas about the cross-cultural communication. Two native English speakers were recruited to analyze the reflections using a critical thinking analysis framework developed by Wu, Marek, and Chen (2013), including cross-cultural recognition and reflection.

A mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research method was employed to analyze the data. While qualitative data included focus group interviews and reflective papers, quantitative data consisted of the evaluation of the students' cultural awareness.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Cultural awareness in cross-cultural interaction

In terms of cultural awareness as the result of using an online cross-cultural learning community, the American reviewers and the researcher in this study evaluated the reflective papers of 15 students. All of the reflective papers were examined through critical text analysis. In the analysis, the students' cultural awareness (A) was determined by the number of cross-cultural recognitions (C) in which the students noted particular differences or similarities in two cultures), and reflections (R) in which the students compared and contrasted the recognized difference or similarity. Ideally, there would be one reflection for each recognition. The formula $A=R/C$ was applied to assess the students' level of cultural awareness.

The data for recognitions varied between three and 10, as evaluated by at least one of the reviewers. The data for reflections by individual students varied from one and six identified by the reviewers. The reviewers found an average of 6.53 recognitions in each paper and an average of 3.53 reflections per paper. Applying the $A=R/C$ formula, the researchers determined that the students averaged .56 reflections per recognition, defined as a cross-cultural critical thinking (A) value of 56 %, suggesting that the students in the current study performed critical thinking at a moderate level (see Table 1) and that students were not always able to compare and contrast the differences deeply even though they were aware of cultural differences.

Table 1: Evaluation of students' level of cultural awareness

Student	Reflection			Cross-cultural Recognition			Cultural Awareness
	Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3	Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3	
A	6	5	6	10	10	10	.56
B	4	6	4	6	4	6	.87
C	5	4	3	9	7	9	.48
D	3	4	4	5	6	4	.73
E	4	4	2	6	8	7	.47
F	3	2	1	6	5	4	.40
G	1	1	1	6	7	7	.15
H	4	5	5	6	7	5	.78
I	4	6	5	8	8	7	.65
J	5	3	4	8	8	7	.52
K	4	5	4	4	3	4	1.18
L	2	4	4	7	7	7	.47
M	1	1	1	3	5	3	.27
N	3	3	4	8	9	1	.37
O	2	4	3	7	6	5	.50
Mean		3.53			6.53		.56

The students' lack of ability in cross-cultural critical thinking is not surprising. This was the first experience for the Taiwanese students in a curriculum design intended to cultivate their critical thinking

skills, making it difficult to train the students to think critically in a short period of time. The typical learning environment in Taiwan does not teach or encourage critical thinking. In previous classes, the students in this study had most often received information from teachers and followed the guidance of their teachers, including detailed instructions about the content of compositions as well as the concepts behind the topic. The students' development of critical thinking, therefore, was inhibited by the learning environment of previous classes.

3.2 Benefits of using Facebook as a communicative platform

With regards to the benefits of using Facebook as a learning community platform for cross-cultural collaboration, students expressed their beliefs about the benefits of the powerful functions of Facebook. Using Facebook helped students to overcome the differences in time zones, to improve in cultural awareness, to clarify stereotypes, and to record their improvements. Using portable devices to connect to Facebook via the Internet enabled students to leave offline messages. Therefore, no matter what country the students were in, they replied and received the message at any time after connecting to the Internet. Moreover, the students found Facebook to be much more convenient than the older method of cross-cultural communication consisting of sending international letters.

Before having opportunities to interact with native speakers, students received their cultural knowledge from soap operas, movies, or books. This resulted in cultural stereotypes. On the other hand, when they had the opportunity to interact with native speakers, students received authentic information which clarified their misunderstandings. The Taiwanese participants also were pleased by their improvement in use of American slang. They thought that the most powerful function of Facebook is that it links friends together. Therefore, the opportunity to interact with native speakers meant that they could also read the messages which the e-pal exchanged with other American friends. In this way, they were able to examine and emulate the writing style and the vocabulary used by the native speakers in an authentic context.

Overall, as a platform for engaging in cross-cultural communication, students in this study perceived that Facebook overcame the problem of time differences between the two countries. Through uploading photos and videos, students comprehended the objects and activities which were described by their e-pals. Their cultural awareness was increased through the process. Furthermore, when communicating with the native speakers, the students were able to more deeply understand the culture and life and to learn from the slang which native speakers used while chatting with their e-pals. Also, students found that interacting with native speakers in an authentic environment caused them engage in self-reflection and to clarify misunderstandings. Overall, the students considered that interacting with native speakers through the social learning community was a positive experience.

4. Pedagogical implications and suggestions

The EFL teacher should help students to promote critical thinking in the context of reflection about culture. For instance, to enhance the students' critical thinking skills, teachers can require students to write a culture-related essay. Through this process, students will have the opportunity to compare and contrast the cultural similarities and differences. To guide students in their cultural reflection, teachers should use open-ended questions. After students achieve a deeper understanding of the culture of target language, the teacher can continue the activity and offer students opportunities to write a culture-related research paper which may also help students to understand the culture more deeply and to practice cultural critical thinking.

The EFL teacher should use social network sites to form learning communities for students to scaffold the abilities of each other. Given that EFL students in Taiwan have less opportunity to practice their writing abilities, online interaction on social network sites enable students to better understand the western culture.

Future studies could include the American students' opinions and reflections about the interaction. In-depth interviews with the American students could also be adopted so that their feedback provides additional insights into the effect of online social network use on EFL learners' cultural awareness.

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