ESL Learners' Intercultural Competence, L2 Attitudes and WEB 2.0 use in American Culture

Jelena Vuksanovic

University of South Florida - USA

Abstract

This study explores ESL learners' intercultural communication, L2 attitudes, and their relationship to the use of Web 2.0 tools and technology. Survey responses were obtained from 24 intermediate ESL speakers living in the United States. The results reveal there is low correlation between learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and use of technology. However, the correlation is stronger for learners' ICC and L2 attitudes. Although the findings in this study are not statistically significant, they indicate that there is potential for further investigating the variables at hand. Additionally, it is argued that intercultural competence should be made a part of the ESL classes, and that learners' attitudes are imperative when it comes to interacting with people from other cultures.

Keywords: *intercultural competence, L2 attitudes, Web 2.0*

Introduction

Language and culture are inseparable. According to Arabski and Wojtaszek (2012), there has been a new emphasis on the relationship between culture and language in much of the current research in second language acquisition and foreign language learning. Culture is defined differently by many researchers, and there is no one agreed-upon definition. One such definition is provided by Chamberlain (2005) who defines culture as the representations of "the values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world" (p. 197).

Intercultural communication is essential for successful communication among speakers of different languages. Intercultural competence is the capability of relating to and understanding people from other countries (Byram 1997). Interactions among such speakers are shaped by both extralinguistic and linguistic elements, and communication breakdown can occur if the interaction is not successful. Therefore, intercultural exchange and incorporating intercultural content is very important for L2 learners and the language-learning task.

One of the biggest advocates of adopting an intercultural approach to language teaching is Michael Byram. According to Byram (1997), learners must be able to understand ambiguities and interpretations, and much of this may come from personal experience. Therefore, different discourse systems require careful understanding from the students, and thus it is imperative to examine how learners' attitudes, motivation, and own cultural identity play a role in developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). According to Chun (2011), "ICC involves an understanding not only of the culture and language being studied, but also the readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment about the other culture and willingness to reflect on one's own culture" (p. 393). Byram (1997) states that the importance of establishing and maintaining relationships is just as important as the efficacy of information that is

exchanged between interlocutors. There is a great importance placed on people's ability to understand and relate to others from different cultures.

Although ICC has received much attention in recent research, not many studies have been conducted on exploring the relationship between ESL learners' attitudes and intercultural competence, and the use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies to learn about American culture. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of research on intercultural competence, specifically investigating how ESL learners evaluate their intercultural competence, and exploring learners' attitudes towards learning American culture using various Web 2.0 tools and technologies.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Much of recent research has focused on raising cultural awareness and developing or enhancing intercultural competence in the field of second language acquisition (Abrams 2002; Belz 2003; Chun & Wade 2004; Kramsch & Thorne 2002; Wade 2005). Among that research a focus has been placed on the pedagogical approaches to developing ICC. Byrnes (2009) has found that there has been a shift in the role culture plays in the field of second and foreign language teaching. Furthermore, Belz (2003) states that intercultural conflicts are inevitable and educators should take this as a learning opportunity and help students confront this. The following sections provide a review of literature relevant to ICC and attitudes, and ICC and computer mediated communication (CMC).

ICC and Attitudes

According to Byram (1997), ICC is made up of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and cultural competence. There are three domains in ICC: affective, cognitive, and behavioral perspective (Byram 1997). The affective domain is crucial in investigating intercultural competence. Within the affective domain, importance is placed on individual differences, such as attitudes, that may play an important role in developing intercultural communicative competence and becoming an intercultural speaker. Attitudes, according to Byram (1997), refers to someone's "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (p. 50). Nowadays, learners must evaluate their own attitudes and beliefs, as well as another person's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Elola & Oskoz 2008). Second language attitudes have been extensively examined in the field of second language acquisition, and their role in L2 learning is significant (de Saint Léger & Storch 2009; LoCastro 2001). However, the role of attitudes in the development of intercultural competence has not been as extensively researched. Additionally, the inclusion of attitudes in the intercultural competence models has been approached differently. Some researchers label this as intercultural awareness, and other as sensitivity and attitudes (Vogt 2006). Therefore, this lack of consensus and disagreement upon terminology may present different results in the studies that investigate the same affective component.

According to Vogt (2006), affective components are included in most notions of intercultural learning. Thus, it is important to examine individual's attitudes towards different cultures, as well as to evaluate their own intercultural competence. A study by Vogt (2006) examined the development of attitudes in ICC using Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence. Using e-mail exchanges between German and American students, Vogt analyzed attitudinal components via critical incidents, essays, and interaction journals. The results of the study showed that attitudes could not be measured using these instruments; however, the instruments can help teachers keep track of progression in order to provide feedback, as well as designate indication of attitude.

ICC and CMC

The development of intercultural competence using CMC has received much attention in research (Chun & Wade 2004; Elola & Oskoz 2008; O'Dowd 2006; O'Dowd & Ritter 2006; Wade 2005). Students have

access to many technological tools and applications, and use those to assist them in learning a second language. Additionally, teachers are taking it upon themselves to incorporate the use of technology to teach language and culture. O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) instruct those in positions of educators to collect and analyze online interaction regarding the subject of intercultural communication. Different approaches to assessing ICC can be taken, including program-specific interviews, questionnaires, and interviews (Chun 2011).

Online telecollaboration exchanges between individuals in different locations have been extensively documented, and the results show that such exchanges can increase individuals' cultural awareness (Abrams 2002; Kramsch & Thorne 2002). Within this research, studies have compared different types of communication: synchronous, which refers to same time communication, and asynchronous, referring to relay of communication with a time lag. Specifically, studies have examined discussion forums, text chats, blogs, and emails. In one study, Chun (2011) investigated online exchanges in asynchronous forum discussions and synchronous text chats between students in a German course and students in an English course. The results of the study showed that different kinds of media, synchronous and asynchronous, yielded different language and style of writing by the two student groups. Asynchronous discussion statements were syntactically more complex than the synchronous chat statements, due to the lack of true interaction and big time lags between posts. Data also show that both student groups demonstrated ICC by appropriately combing "knowledge, skills, and attitudes in real time" as they interacted with each other and indicating interest in the other culture (p. 416). Lastly, those students who indicated satisfaction with the chats had more in-depth discussion about the culture and politics.

Another aspect of the online tools that has been investigated with regard to developing intercultural competence are blogs and emails. Elola and Oskoz (2008) investigated how blogging can foster intercultural competence development in study abroad and at home context. They found that there was a positive effect on intercultural competence by interacting via blogs. In a study by Belz (2003), emails were investigated as to how they contribute to the development of intercultural competence between American and German students. It was concluded that these two groups of students endured misinterpretations, which reinforced cultural stereotypes of the particular target culture. Therefore, email did not positively affect the development of intercultural competence. O'Dowd (2006), on the other hand, found that email exchanges between English and Spanish students helped improve certain components of intercultural communicative competence.

Theoretical Framework

The definition of intercultural competence used in this study is the one

provided by Deardorff (2006). Deardorff used a Delphi-process in which she asked the top 23 intercultural experts from the United States to reach consensus on a definition of intercultural communicative competence. The agreed-upon definition of the 23 experts is that ICC is "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 13).

According to Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence, an individual goes through a certain cycle to achieve intercultural competence. The process starts with individual's attitudes, then moves to knowledge and comprehension, and then to skills. The model ends with internal and external outcomes, which are a part of the interaction level. Deardorff evaluates the degree of an individual's intercultural competence depending on attained level of attitudes, knowledge/comprehension, and skills. The data in this study were analyzed using all four components of the process model of intercultural competence model. According to Deardorff, attitudes include respect, openness, curiosity and discovery, and tolerant ambiguity. Knowledge and comprehension include individuals' cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. Additionally, skills include listening, observing, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating. Deardorff includes adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view and empathy as components of the desired internal outcome, and effective and appropriate communication and behavior in intercultural situations as the desired external outcome. Individuals'

degree of intercultural competence depends on the attained degree of all of the above listed factors which make up the process model of intercultural competence.

The following two research questions were investigated in the current study:

1. Does ESL learners' ICC relate to their use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies to learn about American culture?
2. Do attitudes toward the L2 and the L2 community influence how much one is interculturally competent?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in the present study consist of 24 intermediate ESL speakers from an English Language Program at a large university located in the southern United States. At the time data were collected, the students were enrolled in the English Language Program at the university, taking English classes which are content-based. The sample for this study includes students who have high proficiency in English as measured by their level of currently enrolled English classes. Of the total 24 participants who took part in this study, twelve were male and twelve were female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years. Participants' first language included Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, French, and Vietnamese. There was only one selection criterion for this study. As this was a convenience sample, the only specific criterion for selecting participants was that they should be enrolled in intermediate to advanced level English classes in the ELP program. Students who took part in the study have been living in the United States from two months to three years. The most common reason for studying English was for future employment.

Data Collection Procedure and Instruments

The present study used a bivariate correlation test of association using a statistical analysis software, SPSS, to examine learners' attitudes, intercultural competence, and use of various Web 2.0 tools and technologies to learn about American culture. The test of correlation was chosen because the research questions investigate relations between ICC and technology use, and relations between ICC and attitudes.

The variables in the research questions are continuous. Thus, the test of relationship looks at the strength and direction between the variables. The bivariate correlation test suggests that there is a certain amount of change in one variable which is associated with a specific amount of change in the other variable. However, this test does not warrant conclusions about causality.

Data for this study were collected using Survey Monkey, an online survey development software. The survey was emailed to the instructors at the EAP and Academic English program at the English Language Program. Instructors were instructed to ask for student volunteers to take the survey outside of class time. The survey consisted of several sections, which include questions about demographics and self-reports on the use of various Web 2.0 tools and technologies, as well as questions regarding intercultural competence and L2 attitudes towards the English language and the L2 community.

Participants' intercultural communicative competence was measured using an ICCQ (intercultural communicative competence questionnaire) consisting of three parts. The first part was adapted from Deardorff (2006), and consisted of 15 questions, which asked students to rate themselves on a scale from very high (5) to poor (1) regarding interculutral competences and interacting with people from other cultures. The second section asked students to rate themselves on nine Likert-like scale questions that asked them to identify which Web 2.0 tools and technologies they use to learn about American culture. The third section of the survey asked participants to rate their attitudes. In this part, students completed 21 questions, adapted from a questionnaire designed by Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh (2006). Students were asked to answer each question by selecting *not at all* (1) to *very much* (5).

Results

This section of the paper presents the outcome resulting from examining the collected data, which were analyzed by quantitative analysis. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the sample collected in this study. A total of 24 participants participated in the study. The mean score for attitudes is 4.1944, and the SD is .589. The mean score for intercultural competence is 3.9031, and the SD is .658. The mean score for use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies is 3.6331, and the SD is .896.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
L2Attitudes	24	3.00	5.00	4.1944	.58908
ICC	24	2.93	5.00	3.9031	.65874
TechUseR	24	1.78	5.38	3.6331	.89681
Valid N (listwise)	24				

To answer research question one, *Does ESL learners' ICC relate to their use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies to learn about American culture?*, two different variables were analyzed: intercultural competence and technology use. The intercultural competence variable was analyzed based on the mean of 15 questions on Deardorff's (2006) ICC questionnaire. The second variable, technology use, was calculated based on the mean score of nine questions created by the author of this paper. The first step of the analysis was to test the reliability of the questions comprising each variable. Cronbach's alpha was conducted to calculate intraclass correlation. Cronbach's alpha coefficient is an index of internal consistency reliability, which is used to ensure reliability of the questionnaire data. According to Larsen-Hall (2010) an acceptable level of Cronbach's alpha is anything above 0.70. After running the analysis using SPSS, Cronbach's alpha on the 15 questions comprising the intercultural competence variable is 0.946, and Cronbach's alpha on the Web 2.0 tools and technologies items is 0.701, both of which are acceptable. The results of the Cronbach's alpha confirm that the reliability is high and further analysis can be completed. Following this, the data were analyzed for the test of relationship using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient.

A Pearson's correlation between ESL learners' ICC and use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies to learn about American culture found the effect size of the correlation to be small (r= -.119, N=24, R-squared= .01), suggesting the correlation coefficient is not highly reliable. The correlation between ICC and use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies was not statistically significant (p=.579). Cohen (1992) defined effect sizes for R-squared as R-squared= 0.01 is a small effect size. Table 2 shows the scatterplot which indicates the relationship between the two variables being investigated in research question one: ICC and technology use. The scatterplot shows a downward slope for the regressions line, which indicates that the relationship between these two variables is negative.

Table 2: *Scatterplot for ICC and Web 2.0 Use*
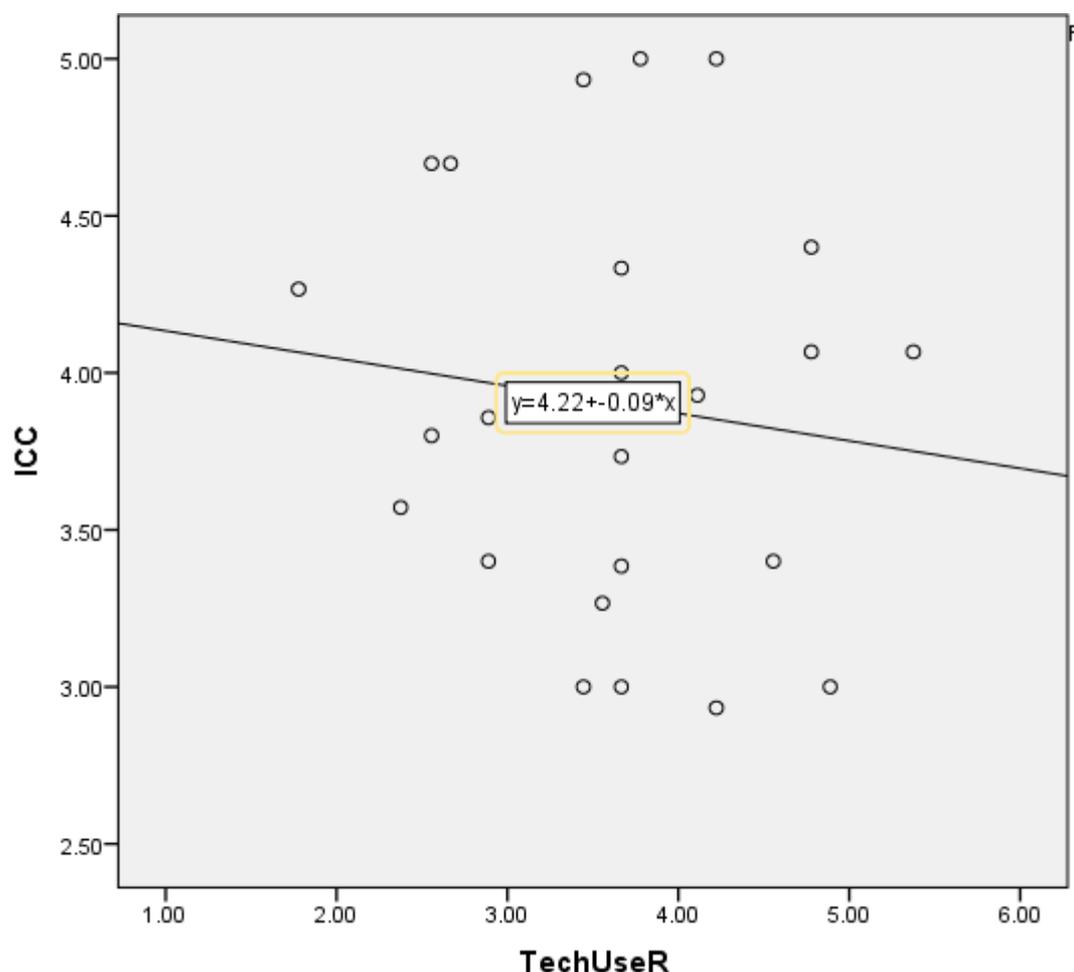
To answer research question two, *Do attitudes toward the L2 and the L2 community influence how much one is interculturally competent?*, a total of six questions were analyzed to determine participants' attitudes, and fifteen additional questions to determine their ICC. Cronbach's alpha was conducted to calculate intraclass correlation. It was found that Cronbach's alpha on the questions related to attitudes is 0.841. Therefore, the reliability is high.

A Pearson's correlation analysis between ESL learners' attitudes and ICC found the effect size of the correlation was medium (r= 0.346, N=24, R-squared= .11). The correlation between ICC and ESL learners' attitudes was not statistically significant (p=.097). Cohen (1992) defined effect sizes for R-squared as R-squared= 0.09 is a medium effect size. Table 3 shows the scatterplot which indicates the relationship between the two variables investigated in research question two: L2 attitudes and ICC. The scatterplot shows an upward slope for the regressions line, which indicates that the relationship between these two variables is positive. Since the data are not tightly clustered around the regression line, we can infer that the correlation is not very strong.

Table 3: *Scatterplot for ICC and L2 Attitudes*

y=2.28+0.39*x
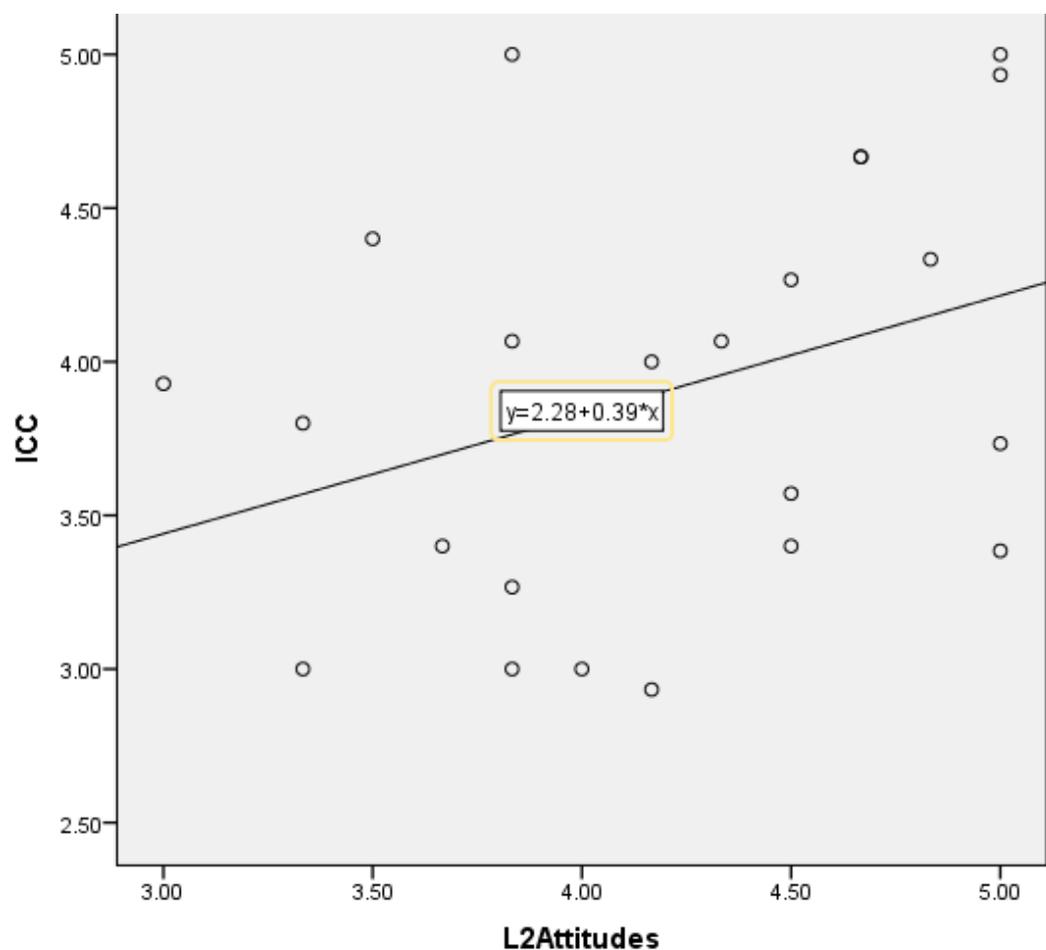
Discussion

The findings for research question one, which investigates whether or not learners' ICC relates to their use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies to learn about American culture, show that there is no statistically significant (p= .579) correlation between ICC and use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies. Thus, learners' use of various Web 2.0 tools and technologies (e.g., blogs, YouTube, wikis, Facebook, and Internet in general) to learn about American culture does not correlate with their degree of intercultural competence. As Deardorff (2006) mentions, the overall degree of a person's intercultural competence depends on the acquired degree of attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, desired internal and external outcomes. Each of these elements play a role in the overall degree of intercultural competence. The effect size 0.01 indicates that there is a small effect between the two variables. Thus, we can only explain a small percentage of the variance in one variable by looking at the variance of the second variable.

Although the results of this study were not significant, it is still important to investigate the relationship between intercultural competence and the use of technology, in this case Web 2.0 tools and technologies. In today's digital age, learners use various resources to learn about the L2 language and culture, and the most convenient way is the use of technology. This is affirmed by the amount of research that has been conducted in the field on using technology to develop intercultural competence (see, for example, Abrams 2002; Belz 2003; Chun & Wade 2004; Elola & Oskoz 2008).

In regards to the effect of L2 attitudes towards English and the L2 community on the obtained degree of intercultural competence, the results show that there is no statistically significant relationship (p=.097) between the two variables. That is, learners' attitudes toward the L2 community and the English language are not statistically correlated with the learners' degree of intercultural competence. The effect size, which is used to quantify the difference between groups or variables, is .11, which indicates that there is a medium effect between the two variables. The effect size for the second research question is bigger than that of the first, indicating that the difference between the variables in the second research questions, ESL

attitudes and ICC, is bigger that the difference between ICC and technology use. Thus, we can only explain a medium percentage of the variance in one variable by looking at the variance of the second variable. The questions in the survey that were used to measure attitudes could have impacted the significance of the results for this study. However, although the results are not significant, and there is no correlation between the two variables, attitudes may still play an important role on the development of intercultural competence. Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) both include the attitude component in their model of intercultural competence. Therefore, it is important to investigate L2 attitudes in the ESL context, especially as it relates to the development of intercultural competence.

Implications and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate ESL learners' intercultural competence. The study further aimed to see the correlation between intercultural competence and the use of Web 2.0 tools and technologies, as well as how the L2 attitudes toward the L2 and the L2 community correlate with the degree of intercultural competence. Several implications can be drawn from understanding ESL students' intercultural competence. First, the degree of intercultural competence a person has depends on several factors, all of which play an important role in how well a person is able to understand other cultures and the language, in this case English, which is being studied (Chun 2011; Deardorff 2006). Additionally, high degrees of intercultural competence mean that one is not only in the position to avoid judging other cultures, but is also able to reflect on one's own culture (Chun 2011). Intercultural competence should be made a part of the ESL classes, as is clearly attested by ICC research.

Additionally, learners' attitudes toward the L2 and the L2 community are quite important when it comes to interacting with people from other cultures. Although the results of this study were not significant for both the influence of ICC on use of Web 2.0 tools and technology and L2 attitudes toward the L2 and L2 community on the degree of intercultural competence, these results still indicate whether the relationship between the variables is positive or negative. It is, therefore, important to continue to investigate the role attitudes play in developing intercultural competence. Measuring attitudes directly, according to Vogt (2006), is impossible. However, it is important to see if attitudes play a role in the way intercultural competence is developed. Future studies should include a triangulation of instruments when assessing attitudes, and their impact on use of technology to learn about American culture.

In today's global world, where students have a chance to learn English and study abroad, intercultural competence is considered an important asset, especially to the students who experience study abroad for the first time. Students' attitudes and view of not only their culture, but other cultures, play an important role in students being able to adjust and take on a perspective that allows them to better adapt to both cultural and linguistic struggles they may face.

References

Abrams, Z. I. (2002). Surfing to cross-cultural awareness: Using internet-mediated projects to explore cultural stereotypes. *Foreign Language Annals, 35,* 141-160.

Arabski, J., & Wojtaszek, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Aspects of culture in second language acquisition and foreign language learning*. Heidelberg, DE: Springer.

Belz, J. A. (2003). Linguistic perspectives on the development of intercultural competence in telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology, 7*(2), 68-117.

Byram, M. (2000). Assessing intercultural competence in language teaching. *Sprogforum, 18*(6), 8-13.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Sydney, AU: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M., Nicholas, A., & Stevens, D. (2001). *Developing intercultural competence in practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M. (2008). *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship: Essays and reflections*. Clevedon, UK: Multilignual Matters.

Byrnes, H. (2009). Revisiting the role of culture in the foreign language curriculum. *The Modern Language Journal, 94*, 315-336.

Chamberlain, S. P. (2005). Recognizing and responding to cultural differences in the education of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. *Intervention in School and Clinic,40*(4), 195-211.

Chun, D. M. (2011). Developing intercultural communicative competence through online exchanges. *CALICO Journal, 28*(2), 392-419.

Chun, D. M., & Wade, E. R. (2004). Collaborative cultural exchanges with CMC. In L. Lomicka & J. Cooke-Plagwitz (Eds.), *Teaching with technology* (pp. 220-247). Boston, MA: Heinle.

Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin, 112*(1), 155-159.

de Saint Léger, D., & Storch, N. (2009). Learners' perceptions and attitudes: Implications for willingness to communicate in an L2 classroom. *System, 37*(2), 269-285.

Elola, I., & Oskoz, A. (2008). Blogging: Fostering intercultural competence development in foreign language and study abroad contexts. *Foreign Language Annals, 41*(3), 454-477.

Fantini, A. E. (2006). Exploring and assessing intercultural competence. Retrieved June 22, 2001, from http://www.sit.edu/publications/docs/feil_research_report.pdf

Hall, J. K. (2002). *Teaching and researching language and culture*. London, UK: Longman/Pearson.

Hinkel, E. (2005). *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lange, D. L., & Paige, R. M. (2003). *Culture as the core: Perspectives on culture in second language learning*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Larson-Hall, J. (2010). *A guide to doing statistics in second language research using SPSS*.

New York, NY: Routledge.

LoCastro, V. (2001). Individual differences in second language acquisition: attitudes, learner subjectivity, and L2 pragmatic norms. *System, 29*, 69-89.

Kramsch, C., & Thorne, S. (2002). Foreign language learning as a global communicative practice. In D. Block & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Language learning and teaching in the age of globalization* (pp. 83-100). London, UK: Routledge.

O'Dowd, R. (2006). The use of videoconferencing and e-mail as mediators of intercultural student ethnography. In J. Belz & S. Thorne (Eds.), *Internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education* (pp. 86-120). Boston, MA: Thompson Heinle.

O'Dowd, R., & Ritter, M. (2006). Understanding and working with "failed communication" in telecollborative exchanges. *CALICO Journal, 23,* 623-642.

Stahl, B. C. (2003). Cultural universality versus particularity in CMC. *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, *7*(4), 47-65.

Vogt, K. (2006). Can you measure attitudinal factors in intercultural communication? Tracing the development of attitudes in e-mail projects. *ReCall*, *18*(2), 153-173.

Wade, E. R. (2005). *Enhancing German language learners' intercultural communicative competence through the on-line exchange project ICE* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of California, Santa Barbara.

About the Author

Jelena Vuksanovic is a Ph.D. candidate in the Second Language Acquisition and Instructional Technology program at the University of South Florida. She works as an adjunct instructor in the English Language Program at USF. Her research interests include second language acquisition, applied linguistics, instructional technology as applied to ESL, L2 motivation, emotions, and emotional intelligence. Her dissertation focuses on investigating the relationship between language learning motivation and emotions.

Author's Address

University of South Florida
4202 E Fowler Avenue
Tampa FL 33620
United States