

An Analysis of Skype Exchanges for Promoting Intercultural Learning and Understanding Among University Language Students

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Abstract: This paper reports on a project designed to promote intercultural learning and understanding between language students across three universities in Australia, Mexico and Germany. It examines students' self-recorded Skype exchanges and assesses them within the debate over the inclusion of interculturality in language learning and teaching. By examining the negotiation of meaning that occurs between exchange partners, the study highlights the key elements involved in intercultural mediation, where rapport building may have a significant impact on negotiation of intercultural knowledge and attitudes. Micro-level discourse analysis is applied to culture-related events in the Skype conversations with a view to contributing meaningful insights into intercultural communication in instructional contexts.

Keywords: interculturality, Skype exchanges, discourse interaction, speech functions, critical culture awareness, higher education.

1. Introduction

Intercultural competence is commonly understood as the ability to de-center, relativize one's point of view, negotiate meaning and build relationships in real-time intercultural encounters. In current debates, intercultural competence is being questioned by some scholars in light of "an increasingly polarized world that seems to be characterized by conflicts, inequalities and injustices" (O'Dowd 2021). Some authors (see the volume edited by Deardorff 2009, also Jackson 2020) acknowledge the difficulty of defining intercultural competence with the taken-for-granted assumption that doing so will lead to greater understanding and reduction of ethnocentric attitudes. Many empirical studies have been conducted in educational settings using online intercultural exchanges because of the opportunities these provide for learners to engage in intercultural communication. However, the results have been mostly inconclusive regarding the development of critical cultural competence, which is considered the cornerstone of Byram's model of intercultural communication competence (Byram 1997, 2002; Helm 2016; Alvarez Valencia & Fernandez 2019). Therefore, there is need for more research based on fine-grained analysis of interactions involving intercultural partners.

The present study is part of a larger project seeking to address interculturality, using exchanges between university students from different language and cultural groups. It was designed to promote intercultural learning and understanding between language students across three universities located in Australia, Mexico and Germany using Skype. These exchanges, based on cultural themes, involve reflection on commonalities and differences. They explore the ability to acknowledge various points of view while interpreting and negotiating meaning, and they address social and personal aspects that contribute to building relationships in real-time intercultural encounters. The aim in this study is to investigate characteristics of such exchanges that can be said to lead to intercultural learning.

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This paper uses data excerpts from the larger project, which can be loosely considered as case-study based. It examines examples of students' self-recorded exchanges between two Australian and German student dyads to illustrate key elements involved in intercultural mediation (Liddicoat 2014, Kohler 2015). These are occasions where rapport building, the development of personal relationships between participants, may have a significant impact on the negotiation of intercultural knowledge and attitudes. Micro-level discourse analysis is applied to culture-related events found in the online intercultural exchanges with a view to contributing meaningful insights into intercultural communication research in instructional contexts.

The study seeks to answer two research questions:

1. What key elements of intercultural communicative competence, based on Byram's 1997 model, can be identified in language learners who participate in online intercultural exchanges?
2. How do language learners co-construct interculturality through discourse moves?

Intercultural exchanges cannot of themselves be taken as proof or evidence of culture learning and are not as important as how they mediate multidimensional aspects of culture in interaction (Liddicoat 2014, Kohler 2015). Discourse is not a matter of transmitting information from A to B. Kramsch (2011: 359) writes that intercultural communication is "a much more complex, changing and conflictual endeavor than just a L1/C1 self-understanding another L2/C2 self from a third place in between". It is a situated activity. Interculturality must be understood as the process through which cultural meanings are discursively constructed in ongoing interaction (Carbaugh 2007, Young & Ortega 2009, Holmes 2015).

Section 1 builds upon previous theories that examine the notion of intercultural communication competence, briefly considering the contribution of empirical studies for intercultural communication in foreign languages in the context of online intercultural exchanges. Section 2 describes the project and methodology. Section 3 applies micro-analysis to selected data from the German-Australian exchanges to illustrate how interlocutors negotiate connections, manage intercultural differences, and – in so doing so – shift their cultural perspectives. The discussion section focusses on the strategies emerging through the co-construction of discourse. Conclusions are drawn about how to incorporate these into teaching contexts.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Intercultural communication competence

Understanding of intercultural communicative competence is based on the premise that individuals need to adapt to interlocutors in varied contexts in increasingly diverse and multilingual societies. It is commonly understood as involving the "knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman 2003: 192). Fundamental is the idea of a dialogic exchange between interlocutors who bring their different perspectives with a view to understanding of differences.

The most comprehensive and influential model of intercultural communication competence to date is Byram's (1997, 2012), which categorizes components of intercultural communicative competence along five dimensions: (1) attitudes (*affective* dimension): i.e., curiosity, openness to suspending disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own; (2) knowledge of social groups and their practices (*cognitive* dimension); (3) skills of interpreting and relating; (4) skills of discovery and interaction (*behavioral* dimension); and (5) critical cultural awareness (*social* and *psychological* dimensions): a key concept that emerges from the interplay of the other skills (1997: 49-53). Central to the development of

intercultural competence is the skill of de-centering to reflect critically on one's own and the other's perspective (Byram et al. 2002), "to see cultural phenomena both from an external and an internal perspective" (Liddicoat 2014: 261). Liddicoat & Scarino (2013) argue that the ability to de-center is not innate but needs to be developed through education.

Amidst efforts to integrate these dimensions into second/foreign language education, concerns have been raised about relying on an outdated model to measure a culturally defined set of skills (Martin 2015). Critics question, for example, whether intercultural awareness can be learned. Is it a component of knowledge or cognition, or a component of an individual's life skills, enabling the person to overcome ethnocentric prejudices? Dervin (2010) writes that there is no way of knowing, let alone measuring in an educational context, if someone is genuinely open to others and possesses critical self-awareness and self-analysis. Byram (2012) himself acknowledged the difficulty that may arise if these skills are seen as discrete units of knowledge and verbal behavior instead of being connected in holistic fashion.

Critics from non-Western traditions (e.g., Shuang Liu 2012) raise concerns about a Western cultural bias in modelling intercultural communication competence dimensions: one that tends to assume universal outcomes. Shuan Liu argues that the reason why scholars cannot agree on a single definition of intercultural communication competence is because it is context-bound: "the same behavior or skill may be perceived as competent in one context but not another." Ting-Toomey (2011: 287) writes that it varies according to what constitutes proper/improper behavior and respectful/disrespectful communication for a given culture. Assessing desirable and prescribed behaviors and other dimensions of intercultural competence seems unethical given that recognizing what qualifies as competent differs from group to group.

Critics such as Blommaert and Backus (2011) draw attention to the fact that this knowledge or capacity does not develop along a linear path of ever-increasing complexity but occurs in response to ongoing interaction with others, dependent upon individuals' life experiences and conditions of learning. Assessment, therefore, should not be predicated on a straightforward developmental progression. Hammer (2015) argues in favor of a constructivist paradigm that shifts the intercultural lens beyond individual skills and traits to the process by which intercultural competence is constructed between interlocutors.

Misconceptions about what constitutes intercultural learning derive from how the notion of "culture" has been understood. Most scholars agree that culture is multidimensional and remains "complex and elusive" (Lo Bianco 2003). It has been traditionally associated with national characteristics and practices and mostly been approached "as if individuals 'carry' culture instead of enacting interculturality through dynamic representations, identifications, and relationships" (Collier 2014). Piller (2007: 211) writes that "we do not have culture but that we construct culture discursively". Without a frame of reference, comparisons between cultures, which understand another culture in contrast to one's own, may reinforce stereotypes and value judgments.

Recent researchers (Collier 2015, Dervin 2010, Hall & Pekarek-Doehler 2011) plea for attention to the relational interpretation and negotiation of culture, also known as *intercultural mediation* (Liddicoat 2014). The cultural content of online exchanges cannot be taken as proof of or evidence for learning and is therefore not as important as how interlocutors negotiate the multidimensional aspects of culture through interaction. "As a result, research in the intercultural field has given greater attention to focussing on interaction itself and how meanings and cultural identities are negotiated" (Woodin 2018:3).

Most empirical studies, according to Avgousti (2018), rely on Byram's model (1997: 49-53). Applying Byram's model in computer-mediated communication, Belz (2007) writes that an attitude of openness includes (a) willingness to seek interaction with a partner in a mutually respectful relationship; (b) demonstration of interest in the other (i.e., asking

questions about the other's culture); and (c) readiness to question one's own cultural beliefs and practices.

A significant body of research has been conducted on online intercultural exchanges, examining the linguistic and interactional resources through which intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills and critical cultural awareness are constructed. In dialogic interaction between intercultural partners, the ability to coordinate knowledge, attitudes and skills within the constraints of real-time communication requires a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic resources in the co-structuring of discourse. I turn to these now.

2.2 The contribution of online intercultural exchanges

Numerous claims have been made about the potential of online, multimodal intercultural exchanges to develop awareness of cultural differences (e.g., Goodfellow & Lamy 2009, Kramsch 2009), but often "the current evidence base for such claims is insufficiently broad or substantial" (Lewis & O'Dowd 2016: 34). It is important to understand how technologically mediated exchange facilitates or limits interactional possibilities (Tudini & Liddicoat 2016). In her comprehensive review of empirical studies on the contribution of online intercultural exchanges to foreign-language education, Avgousti (2018) found the most frequently reported finding was that online intercultural exchanges encourage "knowledge about one's own and others' culture". Students reported that synchronous communication was the most effective tool for discussing culture. Studies (e.g., Wang & Chang 2011) using interviews have demonstrated that intercultural participants show curiosity, openness, and knowledge about their own and the target language/culture.

It is clear that online intercultural exchanges encourage experience of otherness and active cultural learning (Tudini 2003); they may even enhance critical cultural awareness to an extent. One must, however, remain cautious, as many studies do not provide clear evidence of how participants achieve cultural competence. There is a real need to focus the analytical lens on what learners actually say and how they respond to each other.

For the current project, Skype was selected as the most appropriate online tool for negotiation in a language-learning environment: with guidance from instructors, it provides an authentic frame of reference for language and culture mediation, combining audio information with visual cues. Interlocutors are forced to communicate face-to-face in real time and think on their feet.

3. Description of the project and methodology

3.1 Participants and data

The data used in this report is part of a larger study that ran 2014-2016. It involved pairing two cohorts of undergraduate students from an Australian university with students from Mexico and Germany. The researchers chose to focus on overseas students who had advanced levels of English so that language difficulties would be minimal. In this paper, I focus exclusively on two German-Australian dyads as a case study applying micro-analytical discourse analysis to gain in-depth insight into interculturality. The students spoke English either as their first language (Australia) or were advanced learners of English (Germany).

Participants were recruited in their regular language and linguistics classes and required to email each other to arrange a first meeting on Skype. This first contact was to introduce themselves and, in pairs, organize a minimum of three sessions via Skype outside class time. Participants were expected to record their conversations for a minimum of three 15-minute sessions over the 12-week semester and to submit the recorded conversations for analysis. The only incentive offered to students was the benefit they would derive from participating in such a project. Out of those who met the requirements, three pairs of students for the Australian-German cohort and four pairs for the Australian-Mexican cohort were retained for

analysis. The Australian-Mexican cohort will not be considered within the scope of this paper. Some preliminary results including the Mexican-Australian data were published in Fornasiero *et al.* (2020).

Opening questions on broad cultural themes were provided to all exchange partners. These were selected based on their relevance to everyday encounters and served as prompts for exchanges on cultural knowledge. General themes included social conventions in everyday situations, young people's social life, cultural celebrations, attitudes towards other cultural groups and minorities, conflict in relationships, and social issues such as same-sex marriage, euthanasia, binge drinking, and the environment; see Appendix A. Some partners tried to stick to the order of the questions, but this was found to be too constraining. Some students elaborated freely, following topics that were of interest to them. The learning objectives for the German/Australian dyads were to (1) develop intercultural understanding beyond the classroom through a sustained conversation and (2) discuss general cultural topics and expand their horizons.

3.2 Methodology

The data was transcribed and conversations thematically categorized into culture-related events. Culture-related events can be defined, following Zakir *et al.* (2016:26), as “any part of a dialogue... in which the students focus on any interest, explanation or inquisitiveness about their own or the partner’s culture”. The study used simplified speech-function analysis adapted from Eggins and Slade’s systemic functional approach (1997). Transcripts were coded according to the discourse functional moves indicated in Table 1. The speech-function analysis gives the study a fine-grained focus: it enables the researcher to pay attention to the way interlocutors position themselves when faced with a stranger engaged in the co-construction of knowledge.

Table 1: Relevant discourse moves adapted from systemic functional analysis.

initiate	demand fact	request for factual information
	demand opinion	request opinion
continue	prolong or append	development of response move
react	respond/reply	supportive or confrontational response to other’s proposition
	respond/develop	elaborate on information or opinion in response to a request
rejoinder	rejoinder/track	demand further details related to other speaker’s proposition
	rejoinder/challenge	rejection of prior proposition or offer of alternative explanation
	rejoinder/response	response to other speaker’s “rejoinder/track” or “rejoinder/challenge” move

The first two initiating moves are requests for facts or opinions. Facts and opinions were distinguished, per Eggins and Slade (1997: 193), by considering verbal expressions indicating statements and others (“say”, “know”, “think”, “believe”) indicating mental processes, as well as telling expressions of epistemic modality and evaluative lexis (“it’s interesting”, “it depends...”). The other discourse-functional moves are *continue*, *react* and *rejoinder*, all of which sustain the conversation. Continue moves keep negotiating the proposition set up by the initiating moves. Respond/reply moves are supportive or confrontational reactions to the other speaker’s proposition, and respond/develop moves build on the other speaker’s propositions by expansion. Rejoinder moves prolong the exchange further. They include

rejoinder/track, which demands further details or clarification from the other speaker; rejoinder/challenge, which disconfirms the position of the other speaker, downplays the significance of a proposition or offers an alternative view (dis-alignment strategy); and rejoinder/response, which confirms or provides clarification (alignment strategy).

The coding of the data was checked by two raters and disagreement in interpretation was resolved to ensure consistency and reliability.

To understand how students developed their interactions, we looked at how freely they exchanged ideas on the topics provided, and we looked for instances of negotiation of cultural meaning. It was assumed, first, that greater interactivity would be indicated by the sequencing of topics within the exchange (i.e., whether partners initiated topics or stuck to the prompt questions, whether they followed up on topics initiated by their partner, and how often they shifted topics); and, second, that the variety of interactional features used would indicate positioning and strategies of (dis-)affiliation (e.g., whether partners attempted to find points of alignment or offered personal information).

The multilayered analytical approach primarily focused on the discourse functions of interactional moves using simplified speech-function categories. Culture-related events were transcribed and coded to answer the two research questions. What follows is detailed discussion of the findings in relation to these questions. Findings related to Byram's model will be reported under three broad categories to see in what ways students displayed (1) skills of discovery and interaction, (2) attitudes toward openness and curiosity, and (3) ability to change perspectives.

4. Analysis and discussion

Due to students' lack of consistency providing audiovisual recordings, the researcher relied on audio recordings only. I have selected excerpts from sessions 2 and 3 between Jo & Di, and session 2 between Belle & Brita. These two dyads exemplify differences identified in the study regarding quality of engagement and degree of interactivity.

4.1. Identifying key elements of intercultural competence

All transcriptions provide evidence of the students' skills of discovery and interaction through engagement in discussing culture-related events. Byram and Stevens (2001: 6) defines the skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*) as the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction". Participants interacted with each other on the basis of learning and experience.

Belle (Session 2, T38): I have a girlfriend who is from Germany as well. She came to Australia. I met up with her and we went for a for a holiday, I guess from Melbourne back to Adelaide, and we drove. And it was funny because I discovered that she talked in kilometers and I talked in hours.

Similarly, attitudes of curiosity and openness to suspend disbelief were evidenced across all interactions. In the same session Brita, the German partner, interrupts Belle, who wants to switch to another topic, with "maybe (but) I do have a lot of questions". Di, the Australian participant in the other dyad, asks her German partner, "so do you think that Germans have more manners", and describes a particular cultural group in Australia: "maybe they expect you to be intellectual, but if you speak in another language they don't expect that of you". Di recognizes that her view is subjective and so keeps referring to her personal experience in Norway, making comparisons with other cultures to relativize her views. These findings show "interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and other cultures and cultural practices" (Byram 1997: 92),

which can be taken as an attitude of de-centering: “i.e., relativising one’s own culturally determined attitudes and behaviours” (Lewis & O’Dowd 2016: 68). Still, there are noticeable differences in the way each dyad’s conversation unfolds in relation to cultural dimensions as well as in their level of engagement.

In the two discussion excerpts below, one finds several overlapping cultural dimensions. Di (the Australian partner) and Jo (the German participant) start the discussion with cultural stereotypes related to geographical distances, kangaroos, and wineries, then move on to discuss exports (cars, weapons), which leads to a discussion about politics.

Di: ...Even between where I live and the city, we can have kangaroos running in front of you. You can get bad damage on your car. I see many dead many killed on the road here.

Jo: So, what about the kangaroos; do you have too few or too many is it just right?

Di: Where I live there are families of kangaroos; you can see them...; but I think they are culled. I really don’t know about that. People don’t care about kangaroos much... but I think just because there are more of them than koalas, koalas we are losing. And I eat kangaroo meat. I think it’s very good but it’s not farmed like beef and lamb but sometimes the.... So, you asked about what do you know about my culture so what do I know about yours. I don’t really know much; I’ve seen the winery because all our vines are from Germany.

Jo: I think we export a lot of cars and technology: VWs, weapons. I think we produce tanks, rifles.... We still have soldiers in Afghanistan and they shoot with crook[ed] barrels.

Di: Oh my God.

Jo: ...I think they are peace keepers officially but they keep buying these new weapons.

Di: Talking about politics... whether it’s making any difference....

As the discussion unfolds, both partners are critical of their own national culture; however, they close the exchange by establishing common ground (Jo says: “we have a similar problematic situation at the moment”) and expanding on the political situation in Germany (14 lines after introducing the topic of politics).

As they discuss stereotypes earlier in the exchange, they display awareness of group identity and accepted behavior, stating their group membership but, at the same time, introducing nuances to relativize their ‘own culturally determined attitudes and behaviours’ (Lewis & O’Dowd 2016: 68).

Di: ...I wonder, as a German how do you see yourself?

Jo: We are always punctual; we are always on time. I don’t know whether we Germans we think that is true. I went to China. I don’t know whether it’s a German stereotype. I speak the language so I belong to that culture and we also have a long history of literature.

Di: I am Australian... very laid back. And I think that’s true. We don’t want to be stressed and we look forward ...and in some way it’s true and.... We want to do sport, lie on the beach or surf. These are things that we want to do. It’s this feeling of doing what we want... across the board but... and this is a stereotype in some way but there are people.... So, they go out to concerts somewhat more because that’s part of my life, too.

In the exchanges between Belle (Australian) and Brita (German), similar cultural knowledge is evoked rather than discussed. Within a few turns one finds a succession of topics: the weather, the indigenous population, Australia as a penal colony, differing accents, South Australia as a wine region, the weather (again) and seasons, and so on. Within this exchange, culture appears as individual and fragmented. The only noticeable self-reflective comment drawing a connection between language and culture is when Belle makes the evaluative comment “It was funny because I discovered that she talked in kilometers and I talked in hours” (Session 2, T38).

The co-existence of various dimensions of culture in the data are representative of participants’ engagement in cultural learning. Belle and Brita’s exchanges make use of a slightly more limited range of cultural dimensions than those of Jo and Di, reflecting more superficial engagement. Belle and Brita have a long exchange (T9-45) revolving around a succession of demands for information and statements (e.g., when Australia is being associated with kangaroos), often followed by acknowledgments from both partners. Brita (the German partner) displays curiosity towards her partner’s culture by asking about differences (T19): “can you tell me something about it. Is it different from (the rest of) Australia?”; and wanting to ask more questions (T46): “maybe (but) I do have a lot of questions” – in response to Belle attempting to move to a different topic.

4.2 How do language learners co-construct interculturality?

With the transcripts coded using speech functions, one is able to gain deeper insight into the relational dimension of the exchanges and the strategies used by the participants to position themselves, revealing how interculturality is enacted. Sequences of discourse moves from Jo & Di’s transcripts stand out, revealing both sustained interactivity (manifested by the presence of rejoinder moves) and the use of a range of negotiating strategies.

By contrast in Belle and Brita’s exchanges, culture is negotiated as an ongoing pattern of acknowledgement of each speaker’s contribution with rapid shifts of micro-topics and both speakers offering consensual perspectives. Whereas Belle adopts a didactic role, Brita is more concerned with curiosity towards her partner’s culture, asking about differences. The only rejoinder move found in a lengthy exchange comes from Brita, who reports what she has heard from an Australian exchange student about Australian aborigines:

Brita: And Alana, the girl from Melbourne, she always talked about like the Indigenous people... they don’t really... she said they are unemployed and that they are drunk and they take drugs and all that stuff.

This prompts an extended response from Belle, who feels the need to introduce a more nuanced perspective:

Belle: Ok. Oh gosh. Ok, hmm, there is a stereotype that that happens and there’s certainly people that might do that but it’s not specifically indigenous people that are drunk and take drugs so, hmm..., it’s a very unusual topic in Australia because historically at school we haven’t been taught much about what actually happened to the indigenous Australians in the history... I think there’s a very strong stereotype in Australia that indigenous Australians are drunks and they don’t go to school and they’re uneducated, but there’s definitely a lot that’s probably not so true if you know what I mean.

Belle rejects the stereotype by alluding to the historical events that have shaped Australia and the way that history has been taught in schools. However, there is no indication that she feels compelled to reassess her own beliefs, and her response does not clarify which perspective she herself adopts.

By contrast, discussing a similar stereotype, Di uses her own experience, offering a subjective viewpoint:

Di: ...But in general, we should not generalize, but I think the general public believes... because we've heard about it that a lot... that they actually trash the houses a lot, do you know what I mean by trash.

Jo: Yeah.

Di: So, we are not happy about that at all; in fact, they had to come – the people who own the building had to come. The people have had to come and fix the house.... The stove was damaged beyond repair; we saw it coming out, the stove coming out and things like that... so I have to say I feel I don't really want to have them there. People we think don't conform or something.... He has a mental health problem but he had or has; I am not sure now. And this sounds very prejudiced coming from me. But he had, he had an aboriginal girlfriend. I think they both get drunk at night and they scream at each other so we've had the police.

In response, Jo remarks on the police presence on the streets of her own town on Saturday nights then quickly disengages from the topic. The exchange concludes with Belle's evaluative comment: "yeah, it's a shame", establishing common ground.

While both dyads clearly engage in sustained interaction on culture-related topics, speech-function analysis confirms Belle and Brita's superficial engagement with the topics being discussed and lesser degree of interactivity compared to Di and Jo. The long exchanges between Di and Jo corroborate Chun's (2011: 416) study of German-American synchronous chats, which examined the ability to engage in sustained exchanges rather than engaging in short back-and-forth questions and answers, in part by "contributing unsolicited thoughts".

4.3 Negotiating strategies

Negotiating strategies found in the data include alignment and dis-alignment, adjustment and flexibility in acknowledging and responding to difference. What is most noticeable in the data is the strategy of alignment, realized through acknowledgements but also through drawing on similarities of interest and similarities between the two cultures. Such affiliative strategies can be seen prominently throughout all transcripts.

Affiliation can be found in Session 2 between Belle and Brita. Brita is trying to open the topic by alluding to differences based on observation of groups of young people, but Belle dismisses this, emphasizing the similarities rather than differences between them. At times, Belle adopts a didactic position as she expounds the tourist highlights of her region, sticking to facts about her own culture – in line with Suarez-Garcia and Crapotta (2007), who report that their students see themselves as representatives of their cultures. The unfolding interaction in this dyad follows a sequence of demanding and giving factual information rather than opinion. Regrettably, this prevents Brita from asking further questions on sensitive material, limiting the potential benefit of the exchange to intercultural understanding. This affiliation strategy works differently in Di and Jo's exchanges, leading them to reassess their cultural stereotypes.

Di: Yeah, certainly cyclists who are out for the exercise and who do it regularly, they usually have other tracks or they are obeying the rules keep to the left or in your case to the right but I think casual bicycles – people who go for a ride casually – they think they can go through a red light.

Jo: I think sometimes it's the same in our culture when we are not allowed to use a mobile phone when we are driving.... But if a [policeman] sees you and sometimes they

must be going somewhere else and they don't pick them up... picking up a call with one hand so I don't know it's not enforced they can't seem to enforce it enough....

Tudini and Strambi (2017) found that negotiating commonality is a key component of online intercultural chats that contributes to rapport building. On similar lines, Zakir et al. (2016: 24) note:

We notice that participants frequently try to find something in common with their partners abroad. This can be interpreted as a need, or willingness, to identify with one another in order to get “closer” and make the interaction more pleasant and friendly.

While the need to make the interaction “more pleasant and friendly” can be interpreted simply as performing relational work, I think that what is happening here goes further than the social aspect of maintaining good rapport. An alignment strategy can be used as a way to avoid discussing sensitive topics and keep the conversation on neutral ground, thus closing the conversation rather opening it up towards establishing common ground. As pointed out by one of the reviewers, this might be due to unfamiliarity between participants. In their study, Alvarez Valencia and Fernandez (2019) conclude that this alignment is used as a strategy to avoid conflict, as interlocutors may not be familiar enough to engage in deeper discussions on controversial topics. Such a conclusion though would need to be confirmed by examining a larger corpus of data involving a variety of cultural groups; my own research group found counterexamples in the Mexican-Australian data not reported here.

Another set of negotiation strategies featuring prominently in these exchanges relates to distancing. If dis-alignment can be seen as a face-threatening act in interaction between near strangers, drawing in a third party's opinion or beliefs is an alternative way of distancing oneself from a stereotypical view about one's culture. There are numerous examples of this in the data: e.g., Jo responds to Di's challenging question “so do you think that Germans have more manners” with “my friend whom I was talking to she said it was very rude”; when Di says “the general public believes”, she distances herself from endorsing a generalization about minority groups. Distancing is also realized through self-reflective comments: e.g., when Di comments “and this sounds very prejudiced coming from me” or when Belle offers the evaluative comment “it was funny because I discovered that she talked in kilometers and I talked in hours”. Reflections on one's own culture and the partner's culture through questioning or evaluative comments can lead to new cultural understandings. Consider this excerpt from Di and Jo's third session:

Di: How do you live your life in Germany, but how do you live your life somewhere else?

Jo: Well, I can only imagine what it would be like to live somewhere else.

In developing her response, Jo reflects on what cultural identity marker to adopt, using the example of German food as a marker of group membership. In distancing herself from traditional German food and imagining a new context she displays her individuality, independent thinking and attitude of openness toward participating in her partner's culture:

Jo (session 3): In the beginning, probably when I would get homesick, I would try to live on the traditions that I've got here. But there are not many traditions that I will really try to take with me. So, maybe food... food is also tradition or culture thing... we eat certain foods on certain days. There are many families who eat certain things on Christmas... like fish probably. I think most people eat fish. But my brother and I, we don't like fish so there has never been fish at Christmas but maybe that's something I would introduce to my life if I were to live abroad. I would suddenly adopt traditions

that I didn't have when living in Germany because I live here and I know I am German but when I am abroad maybe I'll have to try harder to be some kind of German who lives abroad. I will maybe try to be more... person at first and then try to go out and learn new things new stuff. That's interesting; I haven't thought about that before.

In dis-aligning herself from the stereotype, Jo displays critical cultural awareness (Byram 2012).

4.4 Achieving critical cultural awareness

Particular attention should be given to critical cultural awareness, which Byram places at the center of his model (1997, 2012). Among the five objectives described as modes of assessment for intercultural attitudes is demonstration of learners' "willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment" such as "viewing these aspects from the other's interpretations and evaluations" (2012: 92).

Changing perspective or decentering is achieved through use of distancing strategies, including multi-voicing to relativize one's thoughts as seen in some of the previous examples (e.g., "but in general, we should not generalize, but I think the general public believes... because we've heard about it that a lot..." or when Jo says "my grandmother, she'd say what kind of person is this? They don't belong here. German is a very hard language"). Using multi-voicing to relativize one's thoughts is a recurrent strategy in the data.

Another form this may take is reporting hearsay from a third party, as when Brita says "my friend said [aborigines] are unemployed and they are drunk, they take drugs and all that" or when Jo says "I talked to a friend yesterday about the Skype and the questions and she says..." Di's evaluative comment "it's interesting... depends who your lecturer is" (L93) introduces a variation on point of view while providing a supportive comment.

Evaluative comments and modality markers appear as changes in epistemic stance, such as the use of "maybe" or "could" to soften assertions and convey possibility. For example, Di says about a particular cultural group in Australia: "maybe they expect you to be intellectual, but if you speak in another language, they don't expect that of you". She recognizes that her view is subjective when she keeps referring to her personal experience in Norway and uses comparisons with other cultures to relativize her view. Jo shows evidence of the ability to change perspectives when, in response to Di's question "how do you live your life in Germany, but how do you live your life somewhere else?", Jo responds "well I can only imagine what it would be like to live somewhere else", then imagines another scenario.

In summary, the transcripts analyzed in this paper provide evidence of participants' critical engagement via negotiating strategies associated with increased cultural awareness. To answer the first research question, key elements found in the data include the ability to interpret and relate information about oneself and one's culture to cultural others, showing a degree of awareness of and reflection on one's own and others' practices and perspectives. Of the two dyads, this pattern was most evident in Jo and Di's exchanges, as they were inclined to add spontaneous thoughts and share aspects of their personal lives. By contrast, Belle & Brita showed less engagement, displaying fewer signs of reflexivity and flexibility as they sought to establish consensus at a more general level, therefore maybe missing opportunities for critical reflection at a deeper level. To answer the second research question, "how do language learners co-construct interculturality through discourse moves?", speech-function analysis is extremely useful, providing a richly detailed look at the nature of the interactivity going on in the exchanges and allowing for in-depth examination of the relational dimensions and positioning of the participants within these. Examination of students' dialogue excerpts using this approach could be helpful for pedagogical purposes by raising students' awareness of patterns of interactions that are effective in intercultural encounters.

4.5 Limitations to this study

It needs to be acknowledged that this study presents limitations. Data collection and analysis were limited to interactions produced by a small number of participants who agreed to volunteer for this project. Students were reluctant to participate since the tasks were not assessed and they had to arrange the exchanges in their own time outside the university. They were required to hand over three recordings of Skype sessions (of 15 minutes minimum duration), although they were encouraged to do more. The poor audio quality of some of the recordings disqualified them from inclusion in the study.

Critical cultural awareness is an ongoing process that develops over time. Three Skype sessions are not sufficient to engage participants in deep reflections. It is to be expected that comparisons of cultural aspects of the two language communities seem to dominate the conversational exchanges. The brief analysis provided in this paper cannot adequately support claims about acquisition of intercultural communication competence, though it does give insight into its emergence.

As social encounters are not stable, a longitudinal perspective would provide more comprehensive understanding of this developmental process. Such a study would require accessing similar data between participants from different cultural groups at different points in time over an extended period to obtain consistent results.

Initially, the plan was to give students a pre-interaction survey to gain information about their linguistic and intercultural knowledge and a post-interaction survey to assess their feelings about the process, but that was abandoned for lack of participation. Some did the pre-test but not the post-test, or vice versa. Follow-up interviews or debriefing sessions would also have been useful to complement the study and clarify interpretations. All these things are part of the logistical challenges that go with inter-institutional projects.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to provide better understanding of how language learners engage with one another while discussing aspects of culture using Skype. I wanted to find out how these online exchanges provide opportunities for heightened awareness about the multidimensional aspects of culture and foster the development of cross-cultural communication abilities for language learners. Analysis focused on how cultural meanings are discursively constructed in interaction. In this way, the approach employs a dynamic model of cultures and identities mediated through technology in a language-learning environment.

This paper was able to identify specific interactional features present in these exchanges that are conducive to enhanced cultural understanding. The data provided examples of learners showing engagement through initiating topics, responding to and sustaining conversation, providing information about oneself, and much more. Evidence of topic development, displays of alignment through rejoinder moves, and use of emotive words and phrases to signal engagement and reciprocity is concordant with a number of studies in the field (e.g., Belz 2003, O'Dowd 2003, Ware 2005, Ryshina-Pankova 2018). By documenting learners' emerging awareness of their own and others' cultural knowledge and attitudes, this study makes a distinctive contribution to scholarship on interculturality. The approach taken here has shown how learners negotiate cultural meanings, mediating positions through displays of affiliative and dis-affiliative strategies. The micro-level discourse analysis adopted enabled capturing the relational dimension of interaction through the positioning of the participants. With more fine-grained analysis, this approach could lend itself to capturing the affective dimension of interculturality, which has received limited attention in the traditional models of intercultural communication (Holmes 2015).

Promoting critical understanding of culture and language through authentic contact between language learners, under the guidance of an instructor, offers robust opportunities for

intercultural learning. A potential outcome of this study is development of practical, innovative language pedagogy better suited to equip 21st Century learners with the intercultural communicative abilities they need to manage the challenges of an increasingly complex, mobile and interconnected world. Examination of culture-related conversations between students of different language and cultural groups can serve as a springboard for more critical reflection. By using excerpts of online intercultural exchange transcripts as class materials, it may be possible to increase foreign language learners' ability to interpret, evaluate, and negotiate interculturality and move beyond the bounds of national, "essentialist" cultures.

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Appendix: Prompt questions for exploring cultural themes

1. Information gathering and description: conduct a brief conversation around each other's country location, place, region. What do you already know about each other's country? Reflect on what it means to be a German or an Australian person.
2. Describe a particular festival or celebration of historical significance for your own cultural identity.
3. Information gathering and reflection: what do young people do and where do they go when they go out? In what ways is your social life similar or different to that of your friends? What do you think of those similarities or differences?
4. What prejudices do you have about other people? What are they based on? ...Appearances? ...Behaviors? Where do you think they come from? ...Your family background? ...The media? How do you deal with stereotypes?
5. Explore a social issue (e.g., same-sex marriage, euthanasia, binge drinking, the environment). Express your personal opinion.
6. Explore a particular everyday situation (e.g., gift giving, how to accept/refuse an invitation, a family meal, the use of space in your home/city/university). Can you draw similarities/differences with your partner's cultural practices?
7. Explore personal relationships within different environments: dealing with conflict within the family environment, friendships, girls/boys, socializing, taboo topics.
8. Recall two or three occasions when you found a display of polite behaviour particularly striking and try to work out why this was. What do you think of the statement one often hears: "everyone is rude these days"? Does it make any sense?