

# Developing linguistic and cultural perspectives of English as a foreign language through email discussion

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*This study investigated the role of email discussion in developing both linguistic and cultural perspectives of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Iran. English has been taught through grammatical instruction which, while allows linguistic development, overlooks its cultural aspects in Iranian settings. Cultural values and rules in English textbooks are not modified due to the instrumental uses of L2 in high schools and academic contexts. This research hypothesized that using email discussion may compensate for such shortcomings and strengthen the level of L2 cultural awareness as well as their writing competency. The subjects comprised of 418 EFL teachers and learners dealing with EFL in Iranian universities. Research instruments were pre-test and post-test cultural-oriented essays developed by the researcher. The treatment period was conducted in the fall semester of 2007. Data were statistically analyzed through SPSS 11.5, and the results showed that there was a significant difference in both English cultural awareness and written output between those subjects who used email discussion and those who did not. The experimental group who used email discussion outperformed the control group who did not use it as a teaching aid in writing cultural-oriented essays ( $p < .05$ ). The EFL instructors also believed that email discussion could enhance the EFL learners' cultural awareness and improve their writing of cultural-oriented essays ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, email discussion and information exchanges can play a facilitative role in teaching and learning L2 language and culture.*

## Introduction

While teaching language in foreign language environments has received an enormous amount of attention over the past 60 or more years, teaching culture remains one of the biggest challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environments. This is due to the nature of culture – which is a non-linguistic skill – often being taught to learners as a secondary aspect through communicative language learning tasks (i.e., ceremonies, eating habits, communicative rules, etc.), causing many instructors problems with precisely how to go about teaching cultural skills. One method that has gained in popularity over the past several years is the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Carney (2006, p. 37), for example, describes how pedagogical tools such as asynchronous email, synchro-

nous chat, or videoconferencing can increase the ways in which learners are required to use the target language to interact with others, while at the same time enhancing their intercultural awareness. One of the more popular forms of CMC used in the EFL classroom is email discussion, and it has been shown to have the potential to have a great impact on language teaching and learning with regard to both linguistic (e.g., Stockwell & Harrington, 2003) and cultural elements (e.g., Gray & Stockwell, 1998).

There is already a large body of research that suggests that technology can positively affect the language learning environment, and a number of research studies (e.g. Lin, 2003) have emphasized the advantages of CALL and focused on the role of computer technology in language instruction. Lasagabaster and Sierra's (2003) findings revealed that students have a positive attitude toward learning a language with computers, while Blake (2000), Hayati (2005), and Warschauer and Healey (1998) suggest that integration of technology can facilitate learning processes. Chatel (2002) notes that using appropriate software and websites enhance not only the learning of but also the practical application of the English language. Indeed, the spread of the computer into the language classroom for many aspects of language learning – including culture – has gained momentum over the last several years, as suggested by Lowe (2001), whose study on the use of computers in learning language and culture during the 1990s indicated a shift in the view of computer technology in SLA as questionable in the early stages to one where it is now considered an integral part of education.

Much has also been written about CMC for language and culture learning, and teachers and students alike may benefit through using emails, chat rooms, voice mails, searching websites, and web logs (see Belz & Thorne, 2005; Carney, 2006 for a discussion). This study focuses on the use of emails as an asynchronous means of performing extensive drills involving exchanging emails about cultural values and writing short cultural essays on related topics. While emailing is frequent as NS-NNS exchanges, sending and receiving emails by monocultural background learners and their teachers is still a relatively new concept. The present research aims to determine whether using email discussion can enhance EFL students' knowledge of L2 culture as manifested in short essays on various cultural topics and perspectives, while at the same time develop their writing skills in English.

### **Email for Language and Culture Learning**

A survey of the literature shows that research into culture acquisition through CMC in EFL environments is still comparatively scant, despite the recognized potential. As soon as networks became available, they attracted the interest of researchers from very early on. During the fledgling years of the World Wide Web, Hawisher and Selfe (1991) stated that in the classroom context, computer networks could provide a new dimension to the classroom, and through the integration of technology into writing classrooms, EFL teachers would be able to focus on L2 cultural elements. They argued that computers develop social construction of knowledge, where "students spend a lot of time writing, class becomes more student-centered than teacher-centered, [and] opportunities for collaboration increase" (p. 59). With the potential for increased participation in an electronic classroom when compared to a conventional one, (e.g., Murphy, 1997) learning opportunities also increase. Furthermore, as Hawisher and Selfe (1991) note, "the role of the teacher- researcher is particularly valuable in computer/writing research" (1991, p. 79), meaning that networked interaction (i.e., CMC) is a powerful tool that

allows teachers to be more aware of learner development and thus fulfil their roles more effectively. Thus, the role of the teacher can shift from being predominantly an observer to one where, through the computer, they can lead their students to learning objectives and L2 cultural values (Hawisher & Pemberton, 1991, p. 79).

The literature is not completely devoid of research into linguistic and cultural acquisition through email, although the balance is strongly in favor of the former rather than the latter. There is evidence of linguistic development when learners engage in email interactions with native speakers (e.g., Stockwell & Harrington, 2003), although when these interactions occur solely between nonnative speakers, the results are far less convincing (Stockwell, 2005). Despite this, as Stockwell argues, there are certainly advantages of using students within a single country or even a single institution, such as not needing to deal with the timing of semesters, or with how to make the process more interesting and valuable for the native speakers. Cultural acquisition studies primarily focus on interactions between native and nonnative speakers, such as those between Japanese and Australian learners by Gray and Stockwell (1998) and Stockwell and Stockwell (2003) where learners discussed fixed weekly topics about lifestyles in the two countries. A similar study is by Fedderholdt (2001), who conducted research suggesting email-based information exchanges between Japanese and Danish learners contributed to increased learner motivation for writing grammatical points and enhanced knowledge of each others' cultures. Whether an arrangement where students with a shared cultural background communicate with each other through email can contribute to cultural development, in contrast, remains largely unexplored.

## **Writing About Culture and Feedback**

The importance of feedback in the writing process has been recognized for a good many years (e.g., Cohen, 1991; Muncie, 2000). Feedback can (and should) be a learning experience, which provides a link between consecutive writing lessons. During feedback, learners are invited to recognize the shortcomings and strengths of their own writing in order to discover the problems with their writing and consider possible improvements. When the content of the writing is also of prime importance, as in the case of writing cultural-oriented essays, feedback becomes more complex. Paraphrasing Gabrielatos (2002), we might argue:

In order to help EFL learners become more effective writers [in cultural essays], we need to make a crucial distinction between accuracy and writing skills. That is, a learner may be able to write sentences which are satisfactory for his/ her level in terms of grammar, syntax and vocabulary and still be unable to produce an effective text [concerned with L2 culture]. (p. 8)

Tribble (1996) and White and Arndt (1991) suggest a procedure to give appropriate feedback in responding to students' essays. They argue that teachers and learners should know the various stages of feedback in order to make optimal use of the feedback at certain linguistic and cultural levels, and that feedback which come from different sources is potentially more useful to learners. In the context of the current study, where learners exchange information via email discussion and file attachments, these are adapted as follows:

1. The teacher (symbols , notes , etc.)
2. Students (peer / pair / group correction)
3. Teacher and students correction (cooperative correction)
4. The learner her / himself (self-correction)

Writing about cultural perspectives in short essays is a complex skill, and its development involves much more than the accurate use of grammar and a good range of vocabulary. Naturally, in addition to these, sufficient awareness of L2 culture is also necessary, meaning that a comprehensive EFL writing program requires the systematic treatment of a large number of interrelated elements. Gabrielatos (2002, p. 13) proposes a cyclic framework of teaching procedures comprising four stages: awareness-raising, support, feedback, practice, and then feedback.

Acquiring writing skills has been considered a process rather than a product (e.g., Zamel, 1987), and that the writing process is not a linear one which easily fits into a pre-taught format, but rather a recursive process during which authors form and clarify their ideas. Zamel reported that it includes stages of "rehearsing, drafting and revising which interact together repeatedly in order to discover meaning" (p. 268). Meaning in the current context could be applied to a better comprehension of culture, thus these processes are vitally important.

Computer-based email interactions may be thought to provide an ideal environment for including these stages. As Clark (1992, p. 122) points out, one-to-one interaction benefits ESL students by "allowing them to work with the teachers and practice a range of language skills and providing them a safe arena for risk taking." Thomas (2004) emphasizes the use of computers in correcting written work in teaching English culture with technology. He states:

Many forms of writing are undertaken on computers since word processing programs allow editing and formatting, typing shortcuts, spelling, and grammar checking, storing different versions, adding pictures, footnotes, hyperlinks within the same document and to the Internet, as well as working online with someone at a remote computer. Collaborative writing also takes place via email, chat and computer-mediated-communication facilities. (p. 1)

Word-processing software such as Microsoft Word, for example, offers spelling and grammar checking, both of which provide suggestions which can be accepted or rejected (Godwin-Jones, 2000). This feedback may facilitate not only the correction process but also has the potential to promote cultural awareness concerned with British and American spelling. It should be noted, however, as Godwin-Jones argues, using computers to provide feedback in correcting written essays and assignments may not be as reliable as the feedback which comes from teachers, meaning that teacher supervision is both necessary and beneficial in providing grammatical and cultural feedback correction.

Thus, it is evident that the computer can provide some degree of assistance in the writing process regarding provision of feedback, but human interlocutors cannot be omitted from the process at this point. Through email, learners have the potential to interact with human interlocutors, but many learners are in an environment where they cannot have access to native speaking partners, and are thus left with no other alternative but to interact with either the teacher or other learners. The current study investigates interactions between learners and the teacher for the development of both writing skills and cultural awareness.

## **Methodology**

### **Subjects**

Subjects in this study were 400 non-native intermediate students majoring in English Translation enrolled in various courses in the Fall semester of 2007. Their average age was 17. There were also 18 non-native instructors who have been teaching EFL in the English Translation department for about 12 years on average, with an average age of 32. The research population was

selected based on non-random judgment sampling. The TOEFL test was administered as a test of writing proficiency (see Sharpe, 2006) to select relatively homogeneous groups of students. The students whose scores were around the mean were selected as the research population. The subjects ( $n=400$ ) were selected out of the 650 available students. These students were then randomly divided into two groups based on systematic random sampling as an experimental (i.e., henceforth CALL) group ( $n=200$ ) and control (i.e., henceforth non-CALL) group ( $n=200$ ). The instructors ( $n=18$ ) were selected based on non-random judgment sampling.

### **Instruments**

For the purpose of this experiment, the following instruments were used:

1. A writing proficiency test from TOEFL was selected. The test was used to enable the researcher to select a homogeneous group. The reliability coefficient was calculated through Cronbach Alpha ( $r = .90$ ).
2. A pre-test of writing a two-paragraph cultural-oriented essay (c.f., Sharpe, 2006) was administered to both groups to examine the level of their L2 cultural awareness before conducting the research treatment. Its reliability coefficient was calculated based on Cronbach Alpha ( $r = .84$ ).
3. To figure out the role of computer emailing and cultural exchanging, 12 topics (i.e., one topic per week over 12 weeks) of two-paragraph essays were selected from Bailey and Powell (1979, p. 26) focusing on L2 cultural values. The writing of the cultural-oriented essays in the two groups was conducted through guided topics which were kept the same in both groups.
4. A post-test of writing a cultural-oriented essay was developed for the final exam. Its reliability coefficient was calculated through Cronbach Alpha ( $r=.79$ ). The subjects were asked to write a two-paragraph essay which included a topic sentence, specific supports, and a reworded sentence. It was to be around 200 to 300 words. They were examined to identify the errors concerned with spelling, grammar and syntax, vocabulary, subject-verb agreement, and cultural and social awareness.
5. The teachers were asked to give their ideas on the role of email discussion in teaching L2 cultural values and indicated their responses through a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from Gorsuch's study (2003, p. 17).

### **Procedure**

Subjects were administered a TOEFL writing proficiency test indicating the level of homogeneity of the subjects. This test was administered to the 650 EFL learners to indicate their English proficiency level of which 400 intermediate EFL students were selected and divided into two groups (i.e., CALL,  $n=200$  and non-CALL,  $n=200$ ). The proficiency test involved a cultural-oriented essay writing assignment. A descriptive analysis of the subjects' essays was employed to examine students' performance in describing L2 cultural and grammatical elements every week across the 12 sessions. The 12 cultural-oriented topics for 12 sessions were determined, and the learners were also familiarized with how to use email exchanges for writing two-paragraph essays in an instruction session in class at the beginning of the semester. The subjects in the CALL group had a week to complete the tasks. The same time was allotted to the non-CALL group to accomplish the tasks as homework and hand it to the researcher in the following week. The topics of the essays were arranged to cover L2 cultural values, social norms and cer-

emonies, such as participating in parties, making friends, family relations, national holidays, etc. These topics were fixed weekly, and both groups handed their essays to the researcher either via email (in the CALL group) or in class as hard copies (in the non-CALL group). The essays were collected and examined weekly. The learners received appropriate feedback provided by the researcher via email discussion (in the CALL group) or through face-to-face interaction (in the non-CALL group). There were not any differences among the subjects regarding the number of email exchanges. Therefore, the number of essays written by learners during the semester was the same in both groups. Both groups received appropriate feedback on linguistic and cultural awareness similarly.

Two teaching treatments were implemented: (1) the CALL group accessed the computer and sent the essays via email and received feedback through email discussion outside the university while (2) the non-CALL group participated in "traditional" writing classes and received feedback through pen and paper procedures throughout the whole semester. The email exchanges were conducted in a teacher-learner partnership. They discussed selected L2 cultural matters via email and the teacher facilitated the writing processes of the two-paragraph essays each week.

Rating included both linguistic and cultural elements. Two raters analyzed the writing samples, using an expert validated scoring guide. A pre-test and post-test was administered in the fall semester of 2007. The error categories were based on Gabrielatos (2002), Kolb (1984), Huang (2002), and Tribble (1996) as follows:

1. The spelling is correct and consistent (i.e., American or British)
2. There is accurate and appropriate use of grammar and syntax.
3. There is accurate and appropriate use of vocabulary in the context of the situation.
4. There is appropriate use of subject and verb agreement.
5. There is appropriate indication of cultural rules and social values.

The researcher and his colleague examined 800 essays including the pre-test and post-test cultural-oriented essays. The inter-rater reliability coefficients were analyzed through a Pearson correlation coefficient and all of the tests were reliably scored with significance set at either  $p < .01$  or  $p < .05$ , as shown in Table 3.

The duration of treatment for both groups was two hours a week for 12 weeks, with a total of 24 hours of instruction for both groups. Data were collected each week and examined following the inter-rater procedures and discussed in the following session in the classrooms of both groups. The subjects were required to write a two-paragraph essay on a cultural-oriented topic in 30 minutes in the post-test phase. The essay was descriptive and was kept to a length of 200 to 300 words. The subjects were given three alternative topics selected from Bailey and Powell (1979) based on specific cultural events (e.g., Christmas Day, a wedding party, the role of parents in the family, etc.). A chi-square ( $X^2$ ) analysis was used to test the teachers' attitudes towards the questionnaire items about the role of email discussion and information exchanges in teaching L2 cultural values. The results are discussed in the next section.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the research showed that the CALL group proved to be more proficient in terms of writing the cultural-oriented essays. An analysis of Paired Samples *t*-tests showed that

there was a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) between the non-CALL group and the CALL group in writing the two-paragraph essays.

The results of pre-test analysis among both the CALL and non-CALL groups indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of writing proficiency, as is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Paired Samples Test (Pre-test)**

Pair 1	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
PRTEXPGR – PRTCONGR	.1000	2.65370	.59338	-1.1420	1.3420	.169	399	.868

Notes: PRTEXPGR (Pre-test of Experimental Group)  
 PRTCONGR (Pre-test of Control Group)

The comparison of pre-test means and standard deviations showed they were approximately the same, while the post-test scores showed a significant difference between the two groups. In other words, both groups performed differently after 12 sessions of instruction, with the CALL group outperforming the non-CALL group ( $p < .05$ ), as is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Paired Samples Test (post-test)**

Pair 1	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
POTEXPGR – POTCONGR	3.1000	4.22897	.94563	1.1208	5.0792	3.278	399	.004*

\* Significant at the ( $p < .05$ )

Notes: POTEXPGR (Post-test of Experimental Group)  
 POTCONGR (Post-test of Control Group)

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was manipulated to establish the inter-rater reliability through computing the correlation between the scores of the two raters. A total of 24 essays were compared (i.e., 12 essays were analyzed in each group). The essays were selected based on stratified random sampling. The rationale behind this was the computation of inter-rater reliability coefficients to test the raters' accuracy. The computed Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was .574 in the CALL group and .537 in the non-CALL group. Correlation was

significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed. The results in the CALL group ( $r = .574$  ( $n = 12$ ),  $p = .000$ ) and in the non-CALL group ( $r = .537$  ( $n = 12$ ),  $p = .000$ ) indicated that there was a significantly positive and strong relationship between the scores. The Pearson correlation coefficients for individual error categories of inter-rater reliability coefficients are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Inter-rater reliability coefficients**

Statistics (Reliability)	Pearson correlation coefficients	
	Experimental group	Control group
Groups Tests		
Pre-test	.720**	.631**
Quiz 1	.621**	.465*
Quiz 2	.844**	.713**
Quiz 3	.658**	.502*
Quiz 4	.614**	.653**
Quiz 5	.365*	.500*
Quiz 6	.758**	.513*
Quiz 7	.652**	.498*
Quiz 8	.601**	.487*
Quiz 9	.584*	.738**
Quiz 10	.503*	.767**
Quiz 11	.849**	.537*
Quiz 12	.675**	.483*
Post-test	.526*	.786**

\*\* Correction is significant at the 0.01 level (2 – tailed)

\* Correction is significant at the 0.05 level (2 – tailed)

Inter-rater reliability coefficients showed that the pre-test/post-test and 12 quizzes were significantly correlated at either ( $p < .01$ ) or ( $p < .05$ ). The results showed that inter-rater analyses were more highly correlated in the experimental group than in the control group.

The chi-square ( $X^2$ ) analysis of the questionnaire item which evaluated teachers' attitudes toward the use of email discussion for enhancing cultural awareness showed that the EFL instructors believed in the effectiveness of the computer in facilitating learners' L2 culture development in their descriptive writing ( $X^2 = 6.64$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In other words, the results revealed that they believed that interaction through the computer with the teacher played a significant role in learners' L2 cultural awareness.

The results of the study confirmed previous research conducted by several researchers that the computer has the potential to play a role in linguistic and cultural development when used as an integrated part of a language learning curriculum (e.g., Hayati, 2005; Hitotuzi, 2008; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2003; Lowe, 2001). The results also confirmed findings from researchers regarding the need to provide appropriate feedback in the writing process (e.g., Cook, 2003; Sokolik, 2001). The results also coincided with Lowe (2001) and Fregeau (1999) who argue that writing is a dynamic and ongoing process which takes place between the teacher and the students.

It should be noted that not all previous studies have suggested that technology will necessarily provide benefits to learners. Chen's (2006) findings on essay error rates contradicted the results of the present study in that he proposed that instruction plus computer did not impact on writing development any more than traditional instruction. Chen (2006) did find that the rate of errors was reduced in the experimental group, but the one-way ANOVA failed to show any significant difference between the experimental and control groups. Chen's study did, however, focus on linguistic aspects of the interactions rather than the cultural ones.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

The current study suggests that learners' cultural-oriented writing proficiency may benefit from the use of email exchanges with their teachers. It was important to note, however, that the need to provide sufficient feedback in the process of writing was evident in the present study. Teachers indicated that using email enabled them to give a greater amount of feedback, which may have contributed to the higher rates for the CALL group over the non-CALL group.

In terms of cultural acquisition, at the very least, the shortcomings of word-processors outlined by Godwin-Jones (2000) such as the unreliability of spelling and grammar checkers in choosing appropriate lexical and grammatical choices did not prove to be a problem. While such weaknesses certainly do exist, it may be assumed that they are unlikely to affect L2 cultural penetration in the EFL learners' mind.

To conclude, the results of the post-test ( $t = 3.275, p < .004^*$ ) indicated that there was a significant difference between the group who used email in writing culture-oriented essays and the group who received conventional / traditional instruction. Furthermore, through the study it became evident that teaching L2 culture through email in EFL settings needs competent teachers with a knowledge not only of the technology, but also of specific techniques for the teaching of writing as a process.

There were of course several limitations of the study that limit the general implications of the results. First and foremost, the study failed to provide a quantifiable definition for "culture", meaning that accurate measures of cultural acquisition were not possible. While raters indicated that they felt that improvement in cultural awareness was evident in the post-test measures, the generalizability of these results must be treated with caution. Secondly, learners' experience with computers and email – as well as their pre-test cultural awareness – and how this affected their individual development in both writing and cultural awareness was not investigated. In order to get a clearer picture of how the email exchanges may have contributed to learner development.

Problems with the current study which also deserve mention were the need to control for weaknesses such as computer availability in poorer communities, a lack of Internet access, and

the unavailability of necessary software and hardware. In addition, the concern proposed by Gousseva (1998) that writing via email may increase the level of anxiety due to the novelty of the electronic interaction experience was difficult to determine in the current study. Further background information regarding learners' experience with email in advance of the study would shed light onto the effect of email experience and the potential to contribute to linguistic and cultural development.

Despite its limitations, the study did suggest that email discussion may teachers run essay writing courses to motivate their students to overcome L2 cultural barriers and expand their knowledge of English language and culture in an alternative context to the more formal context of the classroom. There is the potential to save instructors some time in providing feedback regarding spelling and grammar, in that these tools are often available in the writing software used by learners. While these tools are still limited, further technological developments in the future may provide greater accuracy and support for learners. As Carney (2006, p. 49) argues, "as technology continues to develop, other tools also might hold great potential for language development." This statement carries a lot of weight, especially in EFL contexts where there is a lack of direct contact with native speakers.

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