

Intercultural exchanges in the blogosphere

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*This paper reports on a semester-long blog project in which a group of **US** third-year university students studying Chinese as a foreign language collaborated with a group of Chinese native speakers enrolled in a university in Taiwan. Specifically, this study investigated the language learners' reactions to learning the Chinese language and culture through blogging, and examined the presence of intercultural competence in blog exchanges using Byram's (2000) intercultural competence guidelines. Data included blog entries, pre and post-blogging surveys, and informal discussions with the participants. The results showed that: (1) the language learners had a positive experience in the blog project with many Chinese language and culture gains, and (2) the Taiwan and the **US** groups' instances of intercultural competence fell within different categories in Byram's (2000) guidelines, with the Taiwan group reflecting their role as Chinese culture experts and the **US** group reflecting their role as culture learners of Chinese.*

Introduction

Since the emergence of the Internet, e-learning, defined as "online access to learning resources, anywhere and anytime" (Holmes & Gardner, 2006, p. 14), has offered the possibility for language learners to interact and collaborate with Internet users who speak a target language anywhere in the world through a virtual learning environment. Language educators are familiar with first-generation web tools applied in language education, which include e-mail, discussion forums, and instant messengers. On the other hand, the potential for creating more

opportunities for online collaboration in language learning via second-generation web tools such as blogs, wikis, and RSS feeds, has not yet been fully realized in language education (Godwin-Jones, 2003). In order to address this lack of familiarity with blogs applied in the language education setting, the goal of this paper is to examine the use of blogs in a Chinese as a foreign language class in the hope of adding useful findings to the still relatively scarce literature on the use of blogs in foreign language education. Specifically, this paper focuses on the language-learner participants' reactions to using blogs as a language and culture learning tool and examines the presence of intercultural competence in the blog exchanges.

Literature review

What is a blog?

The term, blog, shorthand for Web log, is often considered an online journal (Green, Brow & Robinson, 2008). However, a blog is not only a place where writers publish their journals, but also a means to share information in interactive ways. One of the popular blogging websites, Blogger, defines blog as "a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links" (Blogger, 2010). Blogging software has many functions that facilitate thoughtful exchanges among bloggers. For example, blogs allow users to visit other bloggers' posted texts, hyperlinks, images, and multimedia. Bloggers can make comments on others' blogs. Owners of blogs can add and delete postings. These interactive functions have made blogs a popular communication tool in cyberspace.

Since blogs emerged in the late 1990s (Dippold, 2009), the number of blogs has rapidly increased. According to Helmond (2008), there were 112.8 million blogs in 2008. Compared to an estimated existence of 10 million blogs in 2005 (Holmes & Gardner, 2006), the blogosphere has increased more than 10 times in three years from 2005 to 2008. Various reasons explain the dramatic increase of bloggers in recent years. Penrod (2007) identified five reasons why blogging has become such a popular medium for communication and information sharing. First, blogs are easy to publish. With the use of blogging tools such as Blogger and MySpace, bloggers can publish their writing in seconds. Second, blogging is pleasurable. Bloggers enjoy the immediate publication and feedback from other bloggers. Third, the blog is a flexible writing genre, meaning a blog can be adapted to a variety of writing purposes. Fourth, bloggers are able to create new personas. Bloggers may create numerous blogs to represent multiple dimensions of their personality. Finally, people, especially those who are marginalized in society, can empower themselves through blogging. When bloggers "tell their stories" through blogging, their authentic voices are developed and heard.

As the general public has utilized blogs as a popular means for information sharing and exchanges, language educators have started to view blogs as a valuable language teaching and learning tool. The applications of blogs in language education are discussed in the following section.

Blogs in foreign language education

172 Blogs can be utilized in language education in many ways. Campbell (2003) has introduced the use of three types of blogs in language education: The tutor blog, the learner blog, and

the class blog. The tutor blog serves as a resourceful place where language educators post class and supplementary materials and links. On the other hand, learner blogs are run by either individual or small collaborative groups of learners to share and comment by writing and reading in the target language to each other. Advantages of the learner blog are that learners have opportunities to practice writing and develop a sense of authorship. Finally, the class blog takes multiple forms. It can be used as a class bulletin board, a reference posting place for a class project, or a virtual space for an international classroom language exchange. The blogs investigated in this study are categorized as a type of class blog where the participants in two countries exchanged thoughts on their blogs in the target language, Chinese. This study chose to use class blogs rather than discussion forums because blogs give learners a sense of ownership and allow them to show their distinctive personalities (Winter, 2003). The researchers hoped that by having a sense of ownership of the writings on blogs, the learners would be motivated to participate in the blog project and develop their confidence in second language writing. More discussion about the blogs investigated can be found in the *Tasks assigned in the blog project* section.

Although they are still relatively scarce, studies on blogging in foreign language classes have begun to emerge in the past five years. The literature on blogging in foreign language classes reported numerous advantages in language learning (Bakar, 2009; Dippold, 2009; Ducate & Lomica, 2005; Ducate & Lomica, 2008; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Fellner & Apple, 2006; Hourigan & Murray, 2010; Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Murray, Hourigan & Jeanneau, 2007; Soares, 2008; Tan, Teo, Aw & Lim, 2005). Ducate and Lomica (2008) described how reading and writing blogs fostered the language learners' ownership, facilitated personal expression, and provided opportunities to learn about the target culture. For example, Ducate and Lomica (2005) found that participants who were not outspoken felt more comfortable sharing their comments with classmates in the anonymous environment of blogs. Bakar (2009) reported positive results of blogging in encouraging the learners to interact with each other and develop the learners' confidence. Fellner and Apple (2006) found a 350% increase in the number of words used in their language learners' blog entries in a seven-day intensive English as a foreign language course. Soares (2008) discussed how her language learners regarded blogs as a learning tool. Dippold (2009) concluded that blogs are potentially valuable tools for peer feedback. Moreover, Murray and Hourigan (2008) pointed out that blog projects offered new possibilities for innovative language teaching task design. Elola and Oskoz (2008) reported positive effects on developing their language learners' intercultural competence through blog interactions. Tan, Teo, Aw and Lim (2005) discussed how using blogs to create online portfolios could be an effective way to increase readership, and showcase learners' works and language growth. Despite the effective uses of blogs mentioned in current literature, researchers have identified several issues language educators need to consider when designing a blog project. Dippold (2009) mentioned three issues: 1) blog training for learners is necessary to maximize the usefulness of the medium, 2) language educators should create project tasks appropriate for the medium to facilitate, and 3) the purpose of the project should be meaningful for the learners. In addition, Hourigan and Murray (2010) stressed the importance of directing inexperienced student bloggers through scaffolding to increase their confidence in doing blog projects. Finally, Murray, Hourigan and Jeanneau (2007) suggested more research on pedagogical techniques in integrating blog projects into language learning in order to maximize language learning. As the literature on blogging is still in its emerging stage, more studies are needed to evaluate the role of blogging as a language and culture learning tool in foreign language

classrooms. Moreover, most of the current studies investigated learners responding to bloggers within the same class, while only a few studies investigated the potential of language and intercultural exchanges between language learners and native speakers through blogging. The purpose of this paper is to report on such potential in hope to contribute useful results to the current literature. More discussion about blog exchanges between two classes of learners follows in the next section.

Blog exchanges and intercultural competence

Language learning involves the learning of the culture of the target language (Byram, 2000). Blog exchanges could possibly be a means to learn a target culture for language learners. A blog exchange in the education setting is defined as “an arrangement by which two classes of students both maintain blogs, either individually or as a group, and then comment on each others’ blogs over the course of a certain amount of time” (Carney, 2007, p. 111). Blog exchanges between two classes of students, especially if one consists of target language learners and the other consists of native speakers of the target language, inevitably give rise to intercultural exchanges (Leja, 2007). Two recent studies (Carney, 2007; Elola & Oskoz, 2008) touched upon the relation between blogging and intercultural exchanges. Elola and Oskoz (2008) reported on the positive effects of blog exchanges on developing language learners’ intercultural competence while Carney (2007) identified instances of the presence of intercultural competence in the participants’ blog exchanges.

The term, intercultural competence, first linked to language teaching by Byram (1997), identifies five cultural elements language learners should attempt to acquire:

1. Attitudes: Learners are open-minded about others’ cultures.
2. Knowledge: Learners are knowledgeable about their own and other cultural practices.
3. Skills of interpreting and relating: Learners are capable of interpreting and relating a document or event from other cultures.
4. Skills of discovery and interaction: Learners have the ability of acquiring new knowledge of a culture and making use of the knowledge.
5. Critical cultural awareness: Learners are able to critically evaluate cultural practices and products.

In sum, Byram (2000) defines an interculturally competent person as:

Someone who is able to see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to a society – and is able to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It is also someone who has a critical or analytical understanding of (parts of) their own and other cultures – someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural. (Byram, 2000, p. 10)

In order to assess one’s intercultural competence, Byram (2000) developed the self-assessment guidelines in which concrete descriptions of learners engaging in developing intercultural competence were listed (See Table 1). This study adapted Byram’s guidelines as the criteria for data analysis in investigating the presence of intercultural competence in the

Table 1: Byram's (2000) self-assessment of intercultural competence guidelines

Categories	Descriptions	Examples from the blog exchanges
A. Interest in other people's way of life	1. I am interested in other people's experience of daily life, particularly those things not usually presented to outsiders through the media.	你們如果要出國去玩或是會離開很久的話會跟父母說嗎? (participant from Taiwan) Translation: [If you want to travel out of country or will leave for a long time, will you tell your parents?]
	2. I am also interested in the daily experience of a variety of social groups within a society and not only the dominant culture.	美國的老人家跟台灣的老人家想法似乎不太一樣。我所知道的美國老人是不跟小孩住在一起，是這樣的嗎? (participant from Taiwan) Translation: [The thoughts of American and Taiwanese seniors seem to be different. What I know about American seniors is that they don't live with their children, is it true?]
B. Ability to change perspective	I have realized that I can understand other cultures by seeing things from a different point of view and by looking at my culture from their perspective.	我覺得尊敬老師是很重要的。我很佩服中國人尊敬老師的觀念。但是在美國，文化不是這樣子。我想我會開始更尊重老師。(participant from the US) Translation: [I feel that respecting teachers is very important. I admire Chinese people's concept of respecting teachers. But in America the culture is not like that. I think I will start to respect teachers more.]
C. Ability to cope with living in a different culture	I am able to cope with a range of reactions I have to living in a different culture (euphoria, homesickness, physical and mental discomfort).	我剛剛到台灣的時候不太習慣。西方人跟東方人的想法或做法有一些不同。我後來發覺到在台灣的一些方法真是很棒。(participant from the US) Translation: [I wasn't use to it when I first moved to Taiwan. Westerners' and Easterners' thoughts and ways of doing things are different. Later I found that some of the ways Taiwanese do things are really excellent.]
D. Knowledge about another country and culture	1. I know some important facts about living in the other culture and about the country, state and people.	我喜歡你提出在美國上帝是重要的想法。因為美國人很多都是基督教徒。很開心看見你的話，你的話提醒我要記得我們文化背景不同的同時 也能有文化上的交流。(participant from Taiwan) Translation: [I like that you mentioned God is important in America. Because many Americans are Christian. I am very happy to see what you said. What you said reminds me that we can have cultural communications even if we have different cultural backgrounds.]
	2. I know how to engage in conversation with people of other cultures and maintain a conversation.	我覺得東方和西方的觀點都很有道理，西方人強調的是獨立自主，相信你是一個獨立而有主見的人。(participant from Taiwan) Translation: [I feel that western and eastern viewpoints are both reasonable. Westerners emphasize independence. I believe you are an independent person.]

Categories	Descriptions	Examples from the blog exchanges
E. Knowledge about intercultural communication	1. I know how to resolve misunderstandings that arise from people's lack of awareness of another culture's viewpoint.	雖然在大陸那邊是有一胎化政策，不過在台灣是沒有這一項政策的喔，像我就有一個弟弟和一個妹妹 (participant from Taiwan) Translation: [Although there is the one-child policy in Mainland China, Taiwan does not have this policy. I have a brother and a sister for example.]
	2. I know how to discover new information and aspects of another culture for myself.	大部分的美國人不願意跟老人一起住。在中國就沒關係對不對？ (participant from the US) Translation: [Most American people are not willing to live with seniors. But that's OK in China, correct?]

Method

Research questions

The objectives of this study were to investigate the role of blogs as a language and culture-learning tool for Chinese as a foreign language learners, and to examine the presence of intercultural competence in the blog exchanges. In order to realize the objectives, the following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. What are the language learner participants' reactions to learning Chinese as a foreign language through blogging?
2. What categories of Intercultural Competence are found in the blog exchanges?"

Participants

The participants of this study were divided into two groups: The **US** and Taiwan groups. The 15 participants in the **US** group were enrolled in the third-year Chinese language class in a mid-size public university in the western **US**. This group of participants will be hereafter referred to as the "**US** participants". The 29 participants in the Taiwan group were enrolled in the undergraduate level course, "strategies of teaching Chinese," in a teacher education university in Northern Taiwan. This group of participants will be hereafter referred to as the "Taiwanese participants." The age range of both groups of participants was between 19 and 25.

Research design

This study used action research as its research principle, as the researchers are also the instructors of the participants. Masters (1995) identified four basic themes of action research: Empowerment of participants, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge, and social change. In order to achieve these four themes, researchers need to go through "a spiral of action research cycles," which consists of four phrases: Planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Masters, 1995). This study carried out each of the four phrases with careful considerations given to the participants' knowledge of blogging, materials taught, scheduling issues inherent in the collaboration of groups in different countries with different semester schedules, and reactions of the participants toward the blog exchanges

during the project. The descriptions of how the four phases were carried out in a spiral of action research cycles are as follows:

First, a month before the blog exchanges took place, the researchers searched online for sites which provided blogging software and came to the decision of creating a class blog on Blogger, a user-friendly blogging site in the researchers' opinion. The class blog was later used to post blog discussion questions, discussion posting deadlines, class photos, and each of the participants' blog links. It served as the information and connection hub through which all participants could find one another and information about the class blog project. Moreover, the researchers planned to survey the participants' familiarity with blogs prior to the blog exchanges to ensure that the blog project would go smoothly. Next, the researchers made the blog exchanges mandatory in the syllabi to ensure participation. Details about the blogging tasks assigned and the percentage of grade received are discussed in the *Tasks assigned in the blog project* section.

In order to attract participants' interest and ensure a high level of involvement in the blog exchanges, the researchers decided to center the theme of the blog exchanges on Chinese proverbs, a theme the majority of the **US** participants expressed interest in learning. In addition, Chinese proverbs carry substantial traditional Chinese culture meanings, hence, they were suitable for potential intercultural exchanges between the **US** and Taiwanese participants. The researcher in Taiwan found and sent to the researcher in the **US** a set of entertaining multimedia **CDs** which included stories of the origins of the Chinese proverbs. The teaching plans were to show the multimedia **CDs** to the **US** participants, have a brief discussion about the proverbs in class to ensure that they understand the meanings of the proverbs, and assign the **US** participants blog assignments which require them to discuss Chinese culture concepts the proverbs try to convey. The researchers planned to show the Taiwanese participants the same **CDs** prior to the blog exchanges, but there would be no proverb discussions afterwards as the Taiwanese participants had learned the proverbs in their mandatory education and used them in their daily lives. The showing only served as discussion preparation for the blog exchanges for the Taiwanese participants. Finally, the researchers decided on the start and ending dates for the blog exchange project taking into consideration the semester schedule differences between the universities in Taiwan and the **US**. The researchers scheduled the project to begin two weeks after the semester started in Taiwan and end a week before the **US** participants took their finals.

After much planning and the initial launch of the project, the researchers observed many issues in the first week. For example, several participants still had problems creating a blog account after the researchers demonstrated in class how to create an account on Blogger. In order to solve this technical issue, the researchers assigned participants who had successfully created a blog account to assist the rest after class. This problem was taken care of the following day. Another issue arose when the researcher in the **US** enthusiastically chose one of the **CDs** teaching the most famous quotes originated from the greatest Chinese educator and philosopher in China's history, Confucius, for the first blog discussion. After showing the **CDs** and discussing the meanings of the quotes in class, some of the **US** participants complained about the length of the quotes and expressed the high level of difficulty to discuss them. After discussing and reflecting on this issue with the researcher in Taiwan, in order to encourage the participants' involvement and boost their confidence level in learning Chinese proverbs, the researchers decided to teach only four-character proverbs in each of the four remaining blog discussions. After the change in learning content, the **US** participants seemed to be more content about the content they

learned for the blog discussions. These adjustments in the study show the nature of “a spiral of action research cycles” in which plans and actions were adjusted according to the researchers’ observations and reflections on the participants’ reactions.

Finally, an issue about meeting the deadline for the final blog discussion arose toward the end of the blog project when some of the Taiwanese participants were highly involved in a school cheer-leading competition and the **US** participants had the Thanksgiving holiday. Because of the participants’ busy schedule and the upcoming holiday, the researchers decided to postpone the due date for the final blog discussion a week after the original due date. The participants were appreciative of this deadline change and all participated in the final discussion before the new deadline.

By going through the four phrases in the spiral of action research cycles, this action research project about blogging has empowered the participants’ voices, involved much collaboration, and brought changes to the traditional way of learning Chinese proverbs in a Chinese as a foreign language classroom.

Tasks assigned in the blog project

The blog project, lasting for 10 weeks of a semester, featured a total of five blog discussions in Chinese. The discussions related to the Chinese proverbs taught in class which included traditional Chinese cultural concepts such as showing filial obedience for one’s parents, giving and accepting gifts, sacrificing one’s life for friends, choosing a good son-in-law, and seeking fault in oneself rather than blaming somebody else. There are three phases the participants followed in each of the five discussions (See Table 2).

Table 2: Three phases of the blog discussion

Phases	Tasks	Time to complete tasks
Phase 1	The US participants responded to five discussion questions about the Chinese proverbs learned in class	Seven days
Phase 2	The Taiwanese participants read and responded to at least two US participants’ answers	Five days after the Phase 1 deadline
Phase 3	The US participants read other US participants’ answers and the Taiwanese participants’ responses and then responded to at least one US and one Taiwanese participant.	Two days after the Phase 2 deadline

In Phase 1, the **US** participants had seven days to respond to five discussion questions about the Chinese proverbs learned in class with a minimum of 50 Chinese characters for each answer. In Phase 2, the Taiwanese participants were to read and respond to at least two **US** participants’ answers in five days. Finally, in Phase 3, the **US** participants read other **US** participants’ answers and the Taiwanese participants’ responses and then responded to at least one **US** and one Taiwanese participant in two days. There was no minimum number of characters required for the Taiwanese participants’ responses or the **US** participants’ Phase 3 responses. The completion of the three phases of blog discussions required a duration of two weeks. The three phases illustrated in Table 2 were repeated in each of the five blog discussions resulting in a total project time of 10 weeks (See Table 3 for the blog project timeline).

Table 3: The blog project timeline

Blog discussions	US participants' discussion answers due	Taiwanese participants' responses due	US participants' responses due
Discussion 1	9/27/2009	10/2/2009	10/4/2009
Discussion 2	10/11/2009	10/16/2009	10/18/2009
Discussion 3	10/25/2009	10/30/2009	11/01/2009
Discussion 4	11/08/2009	11/13/2009	11/15/2009
Discussion 5	11/22/2009	11/27/2009	11/30/2009

The **US** participants earned 2% of their final grades by posting their Phase 1 responses on their blogs and 1% of their final grades by making their Phase 3 responses in each blog discussion resulting in a total of 3% of their final grades for each blog discussion. Hence, the **US** participants could earn up to a total of 15% for the five blog discussions in the blog project. According to the pre-blogging survey results, it was the first time for most of the **US** participants to undertake a blog project for an academic language course. Considering this, and the fact that it was the first time the **US** researcher designed a blog project for her class, she only counted blog project for a low percentage (15%) of the final grade to ensure that if the project did not go smoothly due to inexperience of the participants and the researcher, the participants' final grades would not be greatly affected. On the other hand, the Taiwanese participants were given 5% of their final grades by posting at least two responses for each blog discussion in Phase 2 resulting in a total of 30% of their final grades for the blog project.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Because this study focused on the learners of Chinese as a foreign language, most of the data collected were from the **US** participants. The data collection methods used in this study include pre and post-blogging surveys for the **US** participants, informal discussions about the blog project with the **US** participants, and both the Taiwan and **US** participants' blog responses. First, both the pre and post-blogging surveys are on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree". The items on the surveys were adapted from Ducate and Lomicka (2008) with several changes in order to fit the relevance of the blog project under study. The purpose of the ten-item pre-blogging survey is to learn about the **US** participants' knowledge and experience of blogging prior to the blog project. The purpose of the 15-item post-blogging survey is to know about the **US** participants' reactions to learning the Chinese language and culture through blogging. In order to easily interpret the survey results, the researchers counted the numbers of the **US** participants' answers on the Likert scale for each item and calculated the average score of each survey item. Second, the data concerning informal discussions about the blog project came from several sources including discussions with the **US** participants during and after class, and the participants' weekly learning reflection journals. The researcher in the **US** wrote down notes after every informal discussion about the blog project with the **US** participants in and after class. The researcher's notes and the **US** participants' journals were used as supporting data to help explain the results of the survey. Finally, the blog entries were analyzed: the researchers read the blog entries separately and attempted to independently identify instances of intercultural competence using Byram's (2000) guidelines. The unit of an

instance could be as short as a sentence to as long as a paragraph. Later, the two researchers sent their work to each other for review. If the researchers did not agree with each other on the categories for certain instances, they discussed these instances further and came to a conclusion on the category as a team. The inter-rater reliability before discussion was 87%.

Results

Pre-blogging survey results

Prior to the start of the blog project, the **US** participants completed the pre-blogging survey to evaluate their familiarity with blogs. The results of items 1 ($M = 4.40$) and 2 ($M = 3.87$) in the pre-blogging survey showed that most participants knew what a blog was and its functions (See Table 4). However, only few of the participants indicated in items 3 ($M = 2.27$) and 4 ($M = 1.80$) that they maintained their own blogs in either Chinese or their native language. These results confirm with the fact that blog is a second-generation web tool which is a newer technology and less familiar for people; hence, even though many of the participants had heard about blogs, they had not yet tried them themselves. By the same token, the result of items 5 ($M = 2.40$) illustrated that few participants read blogs on a regular basis in their native language. In addition, the result of item 6 ($M = 1.20$) revealed that none of the participants agreed with the statement that they read blogs in Chinese on a regular basis. Visiting blogs was obviously not a regular activity for the participants.

Table 4: Pre-blogging survey results

Survey items	# of participants					Mean
	(strongly disagree		strongly agree)			
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. I know what a blog is.	0	2	1	1	11	4.40
2. I know what functions a blog has.	2	2	0	3	8	3.87
3. I maintain (write) my own blog in my native language.	9	1	0	2	3	2.27
4. I maintain (write) my own blog in Chinese	11	0	0	4	0	1.80
5. I read blogs in my native language on a regular basis.	5	4	2	3	1	2.40
6. I read blogs in Chinese on a regular basis.	13	1	1	0	0	1.20
7. I have used blogs for an academic course in my native language.	12	0	2	0	1	1.53
8. I have used blogs for an academic course in Chinese.	13	0	1	1	0	1.33
9. I have visited a Chinese blog prior to this course.	7	3	1	1	3	2.33
10. I like the idea of using a blog in a language class.	3	2	4	4	2	3.00

The results of items 7 ($M = 1.53$) and 8 ($M = 1.33$) showed that the majority of the participants had not used blogs for an academic course either in Chinese or their native language.

These results are not surprising as the literature on blogging remains only at the emerging stage and many educators have yet to learn more about blogging before adapting this teaching and learning tool in their classrooms. The result of item 9 ($M = 2.33$) indicated that even though the participants did not read blogs in Chinese on a regular basis, few of them had visited a Chinese blog before. Finally, the result of item 10 ($M = 3.00$) showed that the participants did not have the same opinion on using a blog in a language class. The answers in item 10 were evenly distributed on the 5-point Likert scale with two to four participants selecting each of the 5 points on the scale. Since the majority of the participants had not tried using blogs for an academic course before, they could not give a sure answer to item 10.

Post-blogging survey results

Table 5 illustrates the results of the post-blogging survey for the **US** participants. Most of the participants responded in item 1 ($M = 3.53$) that they had a neutral or positive experience maintaining their blogs for the class project. However, the responses are mostly neutral when the participants were asked in item 2 ($M = 3.00$) if they felt free to express their feelings on the blog more than during class discussions. The results of the informal discussions with the **US** participants revealed that this result is related to the privacy issue on the blogs (See the *Informal discussions with the US participants* section). Next, when being asked if they enjoyed writing and reading the blogs for the project in items 3 ($M = 3.47$) and 4 ($M = 3.20$), most of the responses ranged from neutral to positive. Conversely, the results of items 5 ($M = 2.07$) and 6 ($M = 1.67$) revealed that once the participants completed the mandatory responses for the blog discussions, they did not spend extra time on reading or commenting on the blogs. More research is needed to explain the lack of enthusiasm for blogging after task completion. In addition, around half of the participants responded positively in item 7 ($M = 3.13$) about learning things about their peers from reading their blogs while the other half responded neutrally or negatively.

The majority of the participants responded in items 8 ($M = 3.80$) and 9 ($M = 3.60$) that they enjoyed reading the Taiwanese participants' responses and that the responses helped them learn the Chinese language and culture. Moreover, the participants responded extremely positively in items 10 ($M = 4.07$), 11 ($M = 4.07$), 12 ($M = 4.67$) and 13 ($M = 3.93$) about the improvement of their target language skills through blogging. They thought that the blog project helped them improve their Chinese vocabulary and literacy skills, and increased their knowledge of Chinese proverbs and culture. However, the participants disagreed with the statement in item 14 ($M = 2.33$) that they would continue writing their blogs in Chinese after the semester ends. Finally, most participants answered positively in item 15 ($M = 3.67$) that they would enjoy using a blog in another language class.

Informal discussions with the US participants

The data from the informal discussions indicated that in general, the **US** participants spoke positively about the blog project, but also expressed concerns that language educators should consider when designing a blog project for a class. Initially, the participants were excited about this opportunity to collaborate with native speakers of Chinese in Taiwan. Some participants expressed in their weekly reflection journals at the beginning of the semester that they looked forward to doing the blog project. However, after the completion of the first blog discussion, a small group of the participants came to the researcher in the

US after class saying that the Chinese proverbs they needed to learn and discuss on the blogs were too long and difficult. After re-evaluating the materials used for the first blog discussion, the researchers decided to only teach four-character Chinese proverbs in the rest four blog discussions to ease the participants' learning anxiety. The issue about materials being too difficult did not come up again after the first blog discussion.

Table 5: Post-Blogging Survey Results

Survey items	# of participants					Mean
	(strongly disagree)			(strongly agree)		
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Maintaining my own blog this semester was a positive experience.	0	1	6	7	1	3.53
2. I felt free to express my feelings on the blog more so than during class discussions.	1	4	6	2	2	3.00
3. I enjoyed writing the blog this semester.	0	3	4	6	2	3.47
4. I enjoyed reading my classmates' blogs this semester.	0	4	5	5	1	3.20
5. I read other classmates' blogs even if I have already finished responding to two peers.	6	5	2	1	1	2.07
6. I commented on classmates' blogs often (more than 2 times each blog discussion).	8	4	3	0	0	1.67
7. I learned things about my peers from reading their blogs that I would not have learned in class.	3	1	4	5	2	3.13
8. I enjoyed reading the Taiwanese students' responses this semester.	1	1	1	9	3	3.80
9. The Taiwanese students' responses helped me learn Chinese language and culture.	0	2	4	7	2	3.60
10. The blog helped me improve my Chinese reading skills.	0	1	2	7	5	4.07
11. The blog helped me improve my Chinese writing skills.	0	1	2	7	5	4.07
12. I feel my knowledge of Chinese proverbs and culture increased as a result of doing the blog project.	0	0	2	1	12	4.67
13. I feel my vocabulary has improved as a result of doing the blog project.	0	1	3	7	4	3.93
14. I will continue writing my blog in Chinese after the semester ends.	3	7	3	1	1	2.33
15. I would enjoy using a blog in another language class.	1	2	3	4	5	3.67

Nonetheless, the **US** participants brought up other issues in regard to the Taiwanese participants' responses around the time they did their second blog discussion. The **US** participants felt that the Taiwanese participants used many Chinese proverbs other than the ones they learned in class making the responses hard to read and understand for them. Using Chinese proverbs to support one's point of view is a common Chinese writing style. Hence, the Taiwanese participants were reminded that the group of people they wrote to were not native speakers of Chinese and that they needed to be more conservative about the number of Chinese proverbs they introduce in their responses.

Toward the end of the blog project, another issue arose when some of the **US** participants' discussions attracted many responses from the Taiwanese participants while some of them did not receive any responses. After learning about this issue, the researchers reminded the Taiwanese participants to respond to people who had not received any responses, but these reminders did not seem effective. The Taiwanese participants still preferred to respond to writings they thought interesting to them. Since the blog project was coming to an end when the researchers tried to solve the issue of imbalanced responses on the blogs, the researchers did not have time to try to use a different method to cope with the situation. However, the researchers would plan to try a different blog exchange rule for future blog projects, such as assign specific participants to answer to each other to cope with this issue.

Finally, one **US** participant expressed concern about privacy when the participants were taught a Chinese proverb, which has the literal translation of "liver and intestines are cut into inches", meaning feeling deep affliction. The participants were asked to write about a personal experience of feeling deep affliction, but felt that this kind of personal story was too private to be published online. As a result of participants feeling uncomfortable about discussing their own stories of feeling deep affliction on their blogs, the researchers changed the discussion question to talk about a story describing people feeling deep affliction.

The pieces of information derived from the discussions with the **US** participants and their weekly journals helped explain the post-blogging survey results presented earlier. For example, the researchers confirmed that some of the participants responded in item 2 that they did not feel free to express their feelings on the blogs because of the privacy issue. They were not anonymous on their blogs and did not feel comfortable to discuss personal experiences. In addition, the issue about the Taiwanese responses containing many Chinese proverbs the **US** participants did not learn probably negatively affected the **US** participants' level of interest in spending extra time to read and respond on the blogs after they completed their assignments. These issues that occurred in the middle of the blog project gave the researchers a deeper level of understanding of the language learner participants' reactions to the blog project. These findings are also valuable for language educators who plan to design blog projects for their own classes.

The findings of the presence of intercultural competence

A total of 175 instances of intercultural competence were identified in the participants' blog responses using Byram's (2000) guidelines. One hundred and two (58%) instances were observed in the Taiwanese participants' responses and 73 (43%) instances were found in the **US** participants' responses (See Table 6). Most importantly, the researchers observed that the two groups' instances fell within different categories of intercultural competence. In regard to the **US** participants' 73 instances of intercultural competence, 74% of them fell

within Category D2 (See Table 1 for Category descriptions). The rest of the instances were scattered among Categories B (10%), A1 (7%), C (5%), E1 (2%) and E2 (2%). Two categories, A2 and D1, were not present in the **US** participants' responses. On the other hand, the most observed categories in the Taiwanese participants' 102 instance of intercultural competence is Category E1 (47%), followed by A1 (24%) and D2 (24%). Categories B (2%), D1 (2%), and A2 (1%) were rarely present while Categories C and E2 were absent in the Taiwanese participants' 102 instances.

Table 6: Numbers and percentages of instances of intercultural competences found in the blogs

Total instances	Taiwanese participants		Total instances	US participants	
	Categories	Instances and percentage		Categories	Instances and percentage
102	A1	25 (24%)	73	A1	5 (7%)
	A2	1 (1%)		A2	0 (0%)
	B	2 (2%)		B	7 (10%)
	C	0 (0%)		C	3 (5%)
	D1	2 (2%)		D1	0 (0%)
	D2	24 (24%)		D2	54 (74%)
	E1	48 (47%)		E1	2 (2%)
	E2	0 (0%)		E2	2 (2%)

The following excerpts illustrate how most observed categories of intercultural competence were constructed in the participants' responses. Excerpt 1 shows an instance of Category D2 (74%) in a **US** participant's response and Excerpts 2, 3, and 4 illustrate instances of Categories E1 (47%), A1 (24%) and D2 (24%) in the Taiwanese participants' responses.

Excerpt 1 Instance of Category D2 from a **US** participant

“美國跟中國差不多。只有一個比較不一樣的觀念。如果一個美國人沒有後裔,但是他對他的父母親還是好的,他們會覺得他在尊敬他們。”

Translation: [America and China are more or less the same. There is only one concept which is different. If an American does not have children, but treats his parents well, the parents would still think he respects them.]

Category D2, *I know how to engage in conversation with people of the other culture and maintain a conversation*, is the most observed category in the **US** participants' instances of intercultural competence. Excerpt 1 is an example of a typical instance of Category D2 found in the **US** responses. Before Excerpt 1 occurred, the participants were in a discussion about the Chinese concept of showing filial obedience or devotion for one's parents. A man is not considered filial if he does not have a son to carry on the family name in the traditional Chinese society. In Excerpt 1, the **US** participant attempted to engage in a conversation about the concept of being filial by comparing and contrasting the cultural differences between America and China. The other Category D2 instances from the **US** participants all showed similar methods of engaging the conversation. They attempted to discuss the

Excerpt 2 Instance of Category E1 from a Taiwanese participant

“虽然在大陆那边是有一胎化政策，不过在台湾是没有这一项政策的喔，像我就有一个弟弟和一个妹妹。”

Translation: [Although there is the one-child policy in Mainland China, Taiwan does not have this policy. I have a brother and a sister for example.]

Forty-seven percent of the Taiwanese participants' 102 instances of intercultural competence fell within Category E1, *I know how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the viewpoint of another culture*. Excerpt 2 was a typical Category E1 instance from a Taiwanese participant to a **US** participant who made a comment about China. One can see that the Taiwanese participant acted the role of a Chinese culture expert in the excerpt in which the participant clarified that the one-child policy was only used in a certain area. The large number of Category E1 instances in the Taiwanese participants' responses indicated that their main role in the blog exchanges is the Chinese culture expert.

The data also illustrated a considerable number of instances in which the Taiwanese participants showed interest in *other people's experience of daily life, particularly those things not usually presented to outsiders through the media* (Category A1, 24%) and *engaging in conversation with people of the other culture* (Category D2, 24%). Excerpts 3 and 4 present examples of A1 and D2 instances in the Taiwanese participants' responses.

Excerpt 3 Instance of Category A1 from a Taiwanese participant

“我很好奇，为什么要搬出去才是孝敬？是因为什么原因吗？”

Translation: [I am very curious, why is moving out considered filial? Is there any reason?]

Prior to Excerpt 3 taking place, a **US** participant stated that it is considered filial in American society if individuals move out of their parents' houses when they grow up. This concept is much to the contrary of Chinese culture, which expects male adults to live with their parents in order to take care of them. Hence, in Excerpt 3, the Taiwanese participant was interested in learning more about the different concept of being filial in American society. These types of responses often came up when the Taiwanese participants learned aspects of American culture for the first time in the **US** participants' responses, or when they simply were curious about what Americans think and do in general.

Excerpt 4 Instance of Category D2 from a Taiwanese participant

“看得出来中國文化深受孔子影響，而美國文化是受聖經影響呢！”

Translation: [One can see that Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Confucius and American culture is affected by the Bible!]

After reading responses about the cultural differences between China and America, a Taiwanese participant made a reflective conclusion in Excerpt 4. The individual's conclusion is based on his or her observation that many of the Taiwan responses quoted Confucius and many **US** responses referred to the Bible. After reading all D2 instances from both the Taiwan and **US** groups, it seems that both groups engaged in the conversation by exchanging Chinese and American culture information to seek similarities and differences between them.

Results & discussion

This study, which set out to investigate language learners' reactions to learning Chinese through blogging and intercultural exchanges, yielded several results. In answering the first research question (*what are the language learner participants' reactions to learning Chinese as a foreign language through blogging?*), the blogging surveys and the informal discussion results indicated that the **US** participants felt positively about the blog project and experienced many Chinese language and culture gains. Nonetheless, several issues such as too many hard-to-understand Chinese proverbs in the Taiwan responses and the privacy issue in relation to the blogs possibly decreased the **US** participants' interest level in reading and writing blogs. As a result, none of them indicated spending extra time on the blogs or decided to continue maintaining their blogs in Chinese after the project ended.

In answering the second research question (*what categories of Intercultural Competence are found in the blog exchanges?*), the researchers found that the Taiwanese and the **US** groups' instances of intercultural competence fell within different categories. In regard to the **US** participants' instances of intercultural competence, the majority of them (74%) fell within Category D2, in which the **US** participants tried to engage in conversations with the Taiwanese participants by comparing and contrasting American and Chinese cultures. On the other hand, the most observed category in the Taiwanese participants' instances of intercultural competence was Category E1 (47%), followed by A1 (24%) and D2 (24%). In the instances of Category E1, the Taiwanese participants acted as Chinese culture experts to clarify any misunderstandings the **US** participants had. In the instances of Category A1, the Taiwanese participants were simply curious about the **US** participants' daily experiences and thoughts on the topics discussed. In the instances of Category D2, the Taiwanese participants tried to synthesize the culture information presented in the responses from both groups and came up with conclusions about the American and Chinese cultural similarities and differences.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the researchers observed that the blogs created discussion spaces where the language learners of Chinese could reflect, discuss, and practice the Chinese language and culture they learned in class. The blog exchanges also offered opportunities for the language learners of Chinese to confirm their ideas about Chinese culture learned in class and clarify cultural misunderstandings with the Chinese culture experts, the Taiwanese participants. Finally, this action research, although encountering minor issues and changes of plans during the exchange process, has illustrated that the language learners who participated in this study had a positive experience using the blogs as a language and culture learning tool in their class project.

These findings are in support of the results found in the majority of current studies about blogging in foreign language education, which identified many advantages of using blogging as a language teaching and learning tool. However, it is equally important that language educators need to recognize that developing an effective blog project takes careful planning and clear instruction. The issues identified throughout the study and any other foreseen issues should be taken into account when language educators design their own blog projects. In addition, more research on using blogs in the foreign language education setting is needed to understand possible effects of different blog project designs on

language and culture learning with the ultimate goal in finding robust teaching techniques for blog projects.

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