The Use of a Blog for the Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence: the case of Tunisian and American Students

Nadia Abid[1]*, *Asma* Moalla [1] *Iraj* Omidvar[2]

[1]University of Sfax, Sfax, Tunisia
[2]Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA

Abstract. This paper is a report on a three-month telecollaboration between two groups of students studying in ISEAH of Sbeitla in Tunisia and SPSU, Atlanta, GA, in the USA. By bringing together students from two culturally and linguistically different environments, the telecollaboration aims at helping them communicate interculturally and raise their intercultural awareness and understanding. By means of a blog, students exchanged, discussed, and compared information about their cultures in the form of stories of which they are the main characters. The telecollaboration was evaluated by means of a questionnaire inquiring about students' satisfaction with the use of the blog, the knowledge they gained of the foreign culture, their attitudes toward it, and the intercultural communicative skills acquired. The findings revealed participants' satisfaction with the use of the blog as a means of communication and intercultural learning. It was also found out that students' development of intercultural communicative competence manifested in their knowledge of the other culture and people, a change in their attitudes towards them, an ability to communicate with culturally different people, and an increased awareness of themselves and the other group.

1 Background

With globalization, information and communication technologies have become part of people's lives changing the way they communicate, socialize, work, and learn (O'Dowd, 2007). They no longer use traditional means of communication but more sophisticated and easier online tools such as e-mails, online telephony, instant messages etc. (Carney, 2006; O'Dowd, 2007). Along with these tools, the internet has provided them with more interactive social networking services such as blogs and Facebook where people from different social and professional networks express attitudes, discuss issues, and conduct businesses (O'Dowd, 2007).

In response to these technological, social, and cultural exchanges, a debate in foreign language education has raised the issue of the relationship between language and culture in education. Educationalists have become more aware of the need to integrate language and culture in teaching foreign languages (Byram, 1997; Wang & Coleman, 2009). New concepts have, therefore, emerged including intercultural learning, intercultural communicative

---

* Corresponding author: nadia.abid@flshs.usf.tn

competence, and intercultural communication. These concepts are currently present in the educational policies of different European countries, Australia, the USA and Canada, and in international bodies such as the UNESCO and the Council of Europe (Belz, 2007; O'Dowd, 2007).

In the context of new trends in intercultural learning, this paper reports on a course that aims at developing ICC through social media; namely blogs. The report describes the course, outlines its objectives and procedure, and reports on the evaluation of students' ICC and their perceptions of what they learned from the blog as a means of intercultural learning.

1.1 Online communication technologies and foreign language teaching

The widespread use of internet and social networks and the increasing number of their users has led educationalists to consider the use of internet and online communication tools in teaching and learning foreign languages and cultures (O'Dowd, 2007). According to O'Dowd (2007), the internet can serve both as a rich source of authentic materials in the target language and a useful tool for communication with students across different geographical locations (O'Dowd, 2007).

Different telecollaboration models were implemented in some European countries, the USA, Canada and Australia with the purpose of developing intercultural competence (Belz, 2007; O'Dowd, 2007; O'Rourke, 2007). For instance, e-Tandem learning (O'Rourke, 2007) connects two learners each of which is the native speaker of the other's target language through e-mails. While e-Tandem is based on language learning, cultura, a model created by Gilberte Furstenberg, Stoggy Wanyn and Sabine Level (1997) at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, uses emails to develop intercultural competence through online intercultural exchange and direct communication between two geographically-distant groups of students. Another form of telecollaboration is e-twinning. It is a project adopted by European countries to bring schools, teachers, and institutions together in a common virtual space.

Online communication technologies are also used to develop intercultural communicative competence in foreign language classes (Belz, 2007; O'Dowd, 2007; Wang and Coleman, 2009). The activities designed to apply such tools include telecollaborations, which are referred to as: "the use of online communication tools to connect language learners in different countries for the development of collaborative project work and intercultural exchange" (O'Dowd, 2007 p. 144). On the basis of reports on telecollaborations in American, Spanish, German, and French universities, educationalists argue that virtual intercultural contacts or telecollaborations between linguistically and culturally different groups of students have successfully contributed to the development of the learners' intercultural communicative competence (Aljarf, 2007; Belz, 2007; Carney, 2006; Elola and Oskoz, 2008; Wang and Coleman, 2009).

Online communication technologies as pedagogic tools have many advantages that make them a good option in the foreign language class. They constitute a social environment where communication, collaboration, self-expression and learning are possible. They can be a "balanced playing field" (O'Dowd, 2007 p. 19) where learners from different linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds come into contact, interact, and learn on more equal footing than they would in face-to-face situations (O'Dowd, 2007). Thanks to their synchronous and asynchronous modes, online communication tools allow more flexibility for teaching learners residing in different time zones. These tools, therefore, offer learners greater opportunities for direct contact with real audience of native speakers of the target language (Belz, 2007) and provide teachers and learners with a wealth of authentic materials in written and spoken forms (Wang & Coleman, 2003).

1.2 Blogs in Foreign Language Education

The blog is a shorthand for weblog that appeared in the late 1990s and considered as an online journal (Sung and Lin, 2010) where bloggers post and share texts, images, photos and videos in an interactive way. Thanks to their interactive nature, blogs have become a popular communication tool for language teaching and learning. In an EFL class, they function as a learning environment suitable for posting and sharing additional materials, reading and commenting on texts, and promoting intercultural exchange and understanding (Carney, 2006; Elola and Oskoz, 2008).

Additionally, blogs can increase learners' motivation to learn and participate in the foreign language classroom (Garcia Sanchez & Rojas-Lizana, 2012; Lee, 2011; Pinkman, 2005, Sercu, 2013). In this context, Sercu (2013) suggested that blogs have motivational as well as communicative potentials. She emphasized the positive impact of the use of a pedagogical blog on improving participants' skills of debating, arguing, and considering other points of view.

Furthermore, Blogs proved to be useful for the development of intercultural communicative competence (Belz and Thorne, 2006; Elola and Eskoz, 2008). The telecollaboration projects created in foreign language classes aimed at developing intercultural communication and intercultural relations (Elola and Oskoz, 2008). Indeed, there are different methods to promote ICC through blogging in foreign language classes and outside it. For instance, Lee (2011) reported that blogging in the Spanish and American telecollaboration project empowered participants to raise their intercultural awareness through ethnographic interviews. The literature reviewed above argued for the importance of blogs in intercultural learning and provided a framework for the course design and implementation of the current case study.

2. Case Study

The course is an online intercultural exchange between a group of American students situated in SPSU, USA and a group of Tunisian students from ISEAH, Sbeitla, Tunisia. The main activities of the exchange are carried out by means of a blog.

2.1. Learning Outcomes

The course designers set the following learning outcomes for the course. Students who attended the course:
- were introduced to and practiced conceptual tools adopted from intercultural and cross-cultural communication studies for understanding other cultures,
- gained experience from interacting with people living in another cultural, political, economic, and linguistic environment,
- had opportunities to develop intercultural communication, interaction, and collaboration skills,
- learned about and had practice producing journalistic multimedia narratives adapted to social media.
- learned to appreciate cultural diversity and tolerate difference,
- learned how to think critically and reflect on some aspects of the target culture.

2.2. Participants

The students who took part in the course were seven undergraduate American students of technical studies at Southern Polytechnic State University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. The other participants were 11 Tunisian undergraduate students of Business English ISEAH Sbeitla, a small town in Midwest Tunisia. Tunisian students had intermediate level in English and limited opportunities to practice English as they have no direct contact with native speakers of English and no idea of the American people and culture except for what they saw on TV (films and news). There were no specific criteria for the selection of students. For the

American students, the project was taken as an optional course of intercultural communication that was assessed and marked. However, the Tunisian students' participation was voluntary and outside their regular courses. They were given certificates of participation by SPSU administration as an acknowledgement for their devotion and commitment.

2.3. Logistics

To carry out the teaching/learning activities and achieve the purposes of the course, students, with the help of the administrative support from both institutes, had an access to computers with a reliable connection to the Internet. This permits to view video and audio clips online and to create and post electronic presentations online using social media tools and services, such as WordPress and Google Drive.

2.4. Procedure

Before the course started, there had been a one-month preparation by the teachers for the major components of the course: texts, tasks, assignments, students' meetings, interactions, evaluation etc. The course started with an introductory session in which students from both sides introduced themselves to one another. They talked about their likes, dislikes, interests, and ambitions. The second session was a reading comprehension task focusing on an intercultural issue which is dealing with stereotypes in an intercultural encounter.

Using and subscribing to the blog was a challenging task. The blog was created by the American teacher who explained its use to his Tunisian partners, his own students and to Tunisian students through a Skype session. The blog was created under the name of ISEAHS & SPSU: A Forum of Learning, Cultural Exchange and Friendship. It became functional and was used four weeks after the beginning of the course. Students were asked to write stories about aspects of their daily lives of which they were the main characters. They were required to write texts and take photos and then post their stories on the blog to be read and evaluated by their partners. The other students had to read and evaluate the form of the story (the positioning of the text and photos, the quality of the photos, the clarity of the text etc) and had to ask questions about the content. The questions were about what the students found similar or different in their own culture, what they found puzzling and what they wanted to know more about. Students wrote replies and discussed their partners' stories in the blog. Figure 1 presents the blog's homepage and the links to students' slices of life.
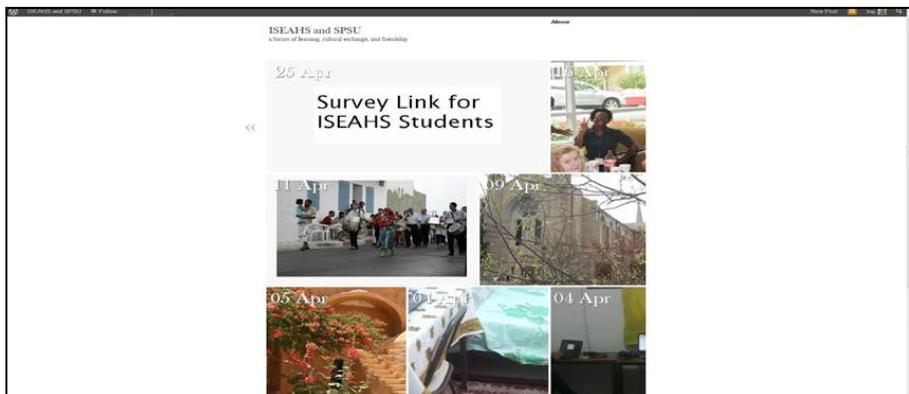

Fig. 1. The blog.

2.5. Example of a slice of life

The examples selected to illustrate the slices of life students wrote and posted on the blog were about food. The slice of life posted by two Tunisian students was about two female students who went back to their home town, Kasserine. On their way home, they stopped at a restaurant where sheep were slaughtered and travelers bought meat and had the cook/waiter grill it for them. The restaurant served, apart from grilled lamb, drinks and Chicha. The trip also included a visit to Chaambi Mountain, the highest mountain in Tunisia.

SPSU students read and commented on the two Tunisian students' stories. They mentioned the similarities between the Tunisian and the American cultures in this respect (trips/ mountains/ parks and historical monuments). SPSU students reported learning two things: barbecues were not only popular in the US and camping in national parks. SPSU students wanted to know more about the Roman ruins in Sbeitla, entry to Chaambi national park, the means of transport, entry fees, and whether girls were allowed to travel alone or with their families. The Tunisian students found the question a bit bizarre and plagued by stereotypes.

American students, however, found many different things such as the word "Chicha". In Tunisia, it means (hookah or narghile), whereas it is a drink in Venezuela. Moreover, while Tunisian students were puzzled at the fact that most Americans used cars, American students found slaughtering animals near the roadside restaurants very strange. They refused to see the slaughtered animals or the ones being slaughtered. The following is a reply by an American student.

- M. said:
  "I did not know that there was chicha in Tunisia. It is very popular in Venezuela, we drink it with lots of ice and a little bit of cinnamon!"

In order to respond to the questions of the American students, the Tunisian student wrote the following reply:

S. said:
"Chicha is very known in Tunisia. Most people like to drink Chicha of apple. Thanks".

The American student wanted to clarify more the word "chicha" as used in Venezuela and produced the following reply:

M. said:
"Ok, so I just found out that we have different definitions for the word chicha haha Chicha in Venezuela is a drink. Here's what it looks like: http://venezuelanclub.com/recetario/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/chicha-de-arroz.jpg"

Additionally, the slice of life shared by the Tunisian students triggered American students' curiosity about culture-specific issues like slaughtering sheep. Below is a reply posted by an American student to a comment about the story shared by his Tunisian counterpart.

| J. said:

"I really enjoyed reading your story! In the United States, taking trips like this is very popular. I especially liked how you described the roadside barbecue. In the

US, we have similar places that smoke and grill meat and people eat outdoors, although usually the animal isn't slaughtered there. It doesn't bother me, but some people do not want to see the animals."

The American student has also expressed his curiosity about the means of transport used to travel from one place to another. He has also added some details about his country.

"I am curious about how you traveled from your town to the park. Did you drive a car? Is there a bus or train, or some other kind of public transportation? In the US, almost everyone has their own car and drives themselves places, but I know this isn't the case everywhere.

I also wanted to know how common of an activity this is. Do people do this a lot, or just for special occasions? I take my dog to the park every weekend, but there are bigger parks farther away from the city that we only go to for special occasions."

3.Evaluation of the course

The course was evaluated in terms of two variables: students' development of intercultural competence after the course and their attitudes toward the use of social media as a learning/teaching medium. The first section of the questionnaire comprises questions about the components of the intercultural competence, i.e. knowledge of and attitudes towards the target culture and people after the course as well as their learning of how to communicate interculturally.

3.1 Participants' Knowledge

In response to the first questions about Atlanta and American people, Tunisian students affirmed that they gained some knowledge from the stories their American partners posted on the blog. They were informed about American students' religion, traditions, life on campus, life styles etc. S. (ISEAH) stated that: "Atlanta is a developed city in the USA. People there have different traditions and ways of life. And there are people from different countries."

For Tunisian students, American people are active, punctual, responsible, organized and modest. They are not racist and they respect people who are different from them. One Tunisian student (ISEAH) reported: "I often heard about American people and their energy, their love to their work, responsibility and their punctuality. And after our meeting I found it real."

As far as American students are concerned, they discovered that Tunisian students could speak English and that Tunisia had a revolution. They admitted that they did not know a lot about Tunisia and that the course has given them an idea about the location of the country, Sbeitla's history, the western landscape etc." One Tunisian student stated that:

"I've had my ideal of how their culture might be. But I did not want to jump to assumption. Living in America the thing I hear is negative things about Muslims. And I know they aren't all bad people. There are only a few giving them a bad name. Now, to be honest I was expecting them to be speaking Arabic and you or the other professor would translate what they were saying to us. So it was a pleasant surprise that they spoke English pretty well. I wish I heard about Tunisia specifically more on the news. It would have been interesting to hear about their culture from our perspective. I hear a lot about the Middle East but it is mostly the countries

we are fighting with, then the occasional news about Egypt. I did not know
they were having a revolution until we had this class."

In comparing university life in the two countries, Tunisian students reported they have
nearly the same life in campus with the exception of the comfort that American students
enjoyed. Using the words of T (Tunisia): "the school life seemed pretty similar based on what
we heard from their slice of life. Going to classes and having small dorm rooms." As for
differences, both parties agreed that they have different religions and different living
conditions. In this context, one Tunisian student explained that:

"There are differences between us and them especially in the way of living. In
fact, the campus that they have is totally different from the one that we have.
It is very comfortable and everything you need is available. Also our university
is very small if we compare it to your university. You have good opportunity
to enrich your knowledge and be cultured" (H, Tunisia)

3.2 Participants' attitudes towards their partners and their countries

When asking students about whether their attitudes towards America and Americans have
changed after the course, students from both sides reported that their attitudes have changed
positively. A student from Tunisia reported that the course has adjusted the stereotypes she
had:

"yes what I learned about the American people has changed my
attitudes towards them. In fact, what I learned before about
American people is that they are racist. Also, they hate Arab people
but what I discovered now is totally different. Indeed, they are good
and modest people-and despite the big difference between us, they
accept us as we are."

Similarly, American students admitted that their attitudes changed after the course. One
American student said in this context: "I always approach situations with a positive attitude.
My view of them has changed. I have an appreciation for the students there. With their
sometimes hostile environment, they're still able to focus on class. That's impressive."

Those findings lead to the conclusion that the course has succeeded in blur negative
stereotypes and forming attitudes of openness towards and acceptance of the other in his/her
difference. One American student explained: "You have to break things down a little more
because the normal thing for us is not normal for them" (V, USA).

3.3 Participants' development of Intercultural Skills

When asked about skills they gained on how to communicate with their foreign partners,
Tunisian participants highlighted the fact that communicating with a culturally-different
person requires both linguistic competence and intercultural competence. American students
reported that they learned how to ask questions and how to answer in details in order to be
able to get clear information from their partners and how to make research about others before
communicating. They found it necessary to avoid assumptions and to break things down. R
(USA) reported: "I have learned to break out of my shell, not to take certain things personal,
and to ask questions."

Tunisian students, on the other hand, focused more on the element of language as a tool
for successful intercultural communication. For some of them, language could be a barrier to
understand and be understood. One Tunisian student reported: "during the course, I learned

to speak clearly and pronounce very well so that they could understand what I was saying so it was a good occasion to learn how to communicate with people from the United Sates."

3.4 Participants' attitudes towards the use of the blog

As far as the use of the blog in the course is concerned, students reported that they were satisfied with the use of the blog.

Table 1. Participants' satisfaction with the use of the blog.

	Very satisfactory	Satisfactory	Neutral	Unsatisfactory	Very unsatisfactory
The use of the blog for communication	3	7	0	3	0

While some students thought that the blog was a good means to express themselves and talk about their own lives, other students expressed their dissatisfaction and reported that its use was a bit complicated. One American student described the blog as a: "cool feature. But it felt similar to talking on Facebook. Just easier to add photos in the picture." A student from Tunisia, however, thought that: "the use of the blog was unsatisfactory. For the purpose of communicating with American students, I and some of my colleagues were unable to open the blog and participate in it and discuss with the other students."

Students were also asked about the quantity and quality of both the oral and written communication.

Table2. Students' perceptions of the amount of the written communication in the Blog.

	Very insufficient	insufficient	neutral	sufficient	Very sufficient
Written	0	1	0	11	2

Table3. Students' perceptions of the quality of written communication in the course.

	Very bad	Bad	Neutral	Good	Very good
Written	0	0	0	11	3

As shown in table 2, 11 students found the amount of written communication sufficient and the majority (11 students) reported the quality of written communication in the blog is good. This implies that communication using the blog was effective and helped participants acquire knowledge of their partners' culture, relativize their attitudes, and improved their communication skills.

4 Conclusion

The use of blog has succeeded in bringing two culturally-different groups together where they exchanged, in a carefully-structured way, some aspects of their everyday life and culture. Students' satisfaction with the use of the blog is an indicator of the usefulness, practicality, and effectiveness of this tool for intercultural learning.

The intercultural exchange, which was made easier through the blog, had an impact on the students' knowledge about and attitudes towards the people they interacted with and their culture. This impact is shown in their positive attitudes towards one another, change of stereotypic views, and ability to communicate across cultural boundaries. Students' responses to the questionnaire have yielded positive findings and conclusions. They were satisfied with the use of the blog as it enabled them to have a unique and authentic experience where two different worlds came into contact to get acquainted, learn about each other's culture, and enhance their intercultural understanding.

Acknowledgments

References

R.S. Al-Jarf, Using online dialogue to develop cross-cultural understanding. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies*, **1** (1), 15-28 (2007)

J.A. Belz, The development of intercultural communicative competence in telecollaborative partnerships, in R. O'Dowd (Ed.), *Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers,* pp. 127-166, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters (2007)

A. Botha, S. Vosloo, J. Kuner & M. van den Berg, Improving cross-cultural awareness and communication through mobile technologies. *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning*, **1**(2), 39-53 (2009)

M. Byram, Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters (1997)

N. Carney, Telecollaboration for intercultural learning: an overview of projects involving Japan, *The JALT CALL Journal*. **2** (1), 37-52 (2006)

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

L. Lee, Blogging: promoting learner autonomy and intercultural competence through study abroad. *Language Learning & Technology*,**15** (3), 87-109 (2011)

R. O'Dowd, *Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers,* Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters (2007)

R. O'Dowd, Foreign language education and the rise of online communication: A review of promises and realities, in R. O'Dowd (Ed.), *Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers* pp, 17-40, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters (2007)

B. O'Rourke, Models of telecollaboration (1): e-Tandem. In R. O'Dowd (Ed.), *Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers*, pp. 41-61, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters (2007)

L. Sercu, Weblogs in foreign language education. Real and promised benefits (2013). Retrieved from:
file:///C:/Users/UTILIS~1/AppData/Local/Temp/Weblogs%20in%20foreign%20language%20education_Real%20and%20promised%20benefits_Lies%20Sercu.pdf

K. Pinkman, Using blogs in the foreign language classroom: Encouraging learner independence, *The JALT CALL Journal*, **1**(1), 12-24 (2005)

J.G. Suarez & J. Crapotta, Models of telecollaboration (2) : Cultura. In R. O'Dowd (Ed.), *Online Intercultural Exchange: An Introduction for Foreign Language Teachers,* pp. 62-84, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters (2007)

L. Wang, & J.A. Coleman, A Survey of internet-mediated intercultural foreign language education in China, *ReCALL*, **21**(1), 113-129 (2009)