Initiating Intercultural Communicative Competence through Telecollaboration:
A Case of Language-Exchange Classrooms of Arabic and English

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Abstract: This paper investigates to what extent telecollaboration can be integrated as an effective medium for the enhancement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the foreign-language classroom. The data was obtained over one semester from a series of asynchronous exchanges in language-exchange class settings using Google drives shared between United States-based students learning Arabic as a foreign language at three American universities, and students at a Saudi university in Saudi Arabia learning English as a foreign language. The one-on-one interactions covered a variety of topics related to cultural knowledge, perspectives, values, practices, behaviors, and products. The data from this collaborative online project also included two reflection surveys that students responded to before and after the study. Byram's 2021 model (including its objectives) was applied, and the findings reveal that many ICC objectives are clearly reflected in students' telecollaborative exchanges, indicating that this type of exchange can be used effectively as a tool to develop students' intercultural competence. The findings also show a noticeable increase in students' interests in cultural learning and understanding the culture of others.
Keywords: telecollaboration, online collaboration, intercultural communicative competence, foreign-language classroom, cultural learning.

Intercultural communication has been seen as a core aspect of language learning and development, which it would result in better learners with sustained cultural and linguistic personality (Guryanov et al., 2019). This is demonstrated in the Can-Do Statements of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2017), which outline performance indicators for language learners. The Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) also encompasses both language and culture in its general competencies: knowledge, skills and know-how, existential competence, and the ability to learn. This research attempts to explore the influence of implementing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) practices in two culturally and linguistically unlike groups through asynchronous telecollaborative exchanges. These partnerships took place between students in the United States and Saudi Arabia who are learning each other's language (Arabic and English, respectively) as a foreign language.

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In addition, the focus of the current research seeks to detect key themes of the instances of discourse and then map them with the descriptors of ICC in Byram's (1997) model. This is to provide the students with a channel to participate in intercultural communicative activities as to enable them to become interculturally competent citizens (Byram, 2008) as part of their foreign-language learning experience. The students were provided with the opportunity to practice their linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural skills with native speakers of the other language and to obtain timely peer feedback.

Review of Literature

Telecollaboration in Language Learning

Telecollaboration, also known as virtual exchange, has grown in popularity as an innovative online pedagogy that enables learners from various geographic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds to work together using a range of emerging communication technologies (Wu, 2021). Telecollaboration is applied as a learning practice to help students learn a new language and its culture. Belz (2003) refers to telecollaboration as the usage of social networking tools, applications, or software for the exchange between first, second, or foreign languages. According to Jackson (2012), this field has expanded because of the unprecedented development in social networking tools and information and communication technologies. Therefore, telecollaboration is considered an interactive experience and shared knowledge that often results in cultural exchange, as participants are exposed to various cultural practices and social norms of two or more cultures, societies, or communities. O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) indicated that telecollaboration is commonly used for collaborative purposes and cultural exchanges. They also showed that it seeks to employ social tools among language learners in remote geographical locations to stimulate collaborative work and intercultural exchange, overcoming cultural, and linguistic boundaries. In addition, telecollaboration is understood to be an "internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural/national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context with the aim of developing both language skills and intercultural communicative competence" (Byram, 2021, p. 4) through well-structured activities. Helm (2015) clearly distinguished telecollaboration from other educational practices as it is characterized by "bilateral, bilingual, bicultural exchanges lasting more or less one semester" (p. 204).

Telecollaboration is seen as beneficial for language teaching programs, as reported by Sadler and Dooly (2016), who clarified that such a program could directly promote experiential learning and problem-based learning practices because of various experiences among participants. This is consistent with Müller-Hartmann and Kurek (2016), who argued that telecollaborative-oriented language-learning programs enable individuals to be independent enough to develop their own intercultural contexts. This is supported by numerous technologies that are freely accessible, regardless of their geological and cultural boundaries (Helm, 2013). Furthermore, Çiftçi and Savaş (2018) confirmed that students' language and intercultural learning have produced promising outcomes. In an experimental study, Freiermuth and Huang (2021) found that a telecollaborative tool (Zoom) encouraged the development of different avenues for English-language learners' competence, especially by creating new means of meeting online in a face-to-face mode. However, it has raised challenges related to scheduling activities and connectivity. Studies on telecollaboration have also shown useful insights regarding the linguistic gains among students and instructors as they become more able to deal with different linguistic roles, fix communication breakdown, and enhance intercultural competence (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020).

Intercultural Communicative Competence in Language Learning

Scholars have argued that culture is inevitable in language classes (Byrnes, 2002; Kramsch, 1993). Kramsch and Hua (2016) propose that the link between language and culture in applied linguistics only became an issue in the 1990s with the identity politics of the time and the advances made in language acquisition research. Multiple factors have led to reconfirm the belief that language and culture are inseparable constructs in the language classroom. These include globalization and social discourse perspectives in language learning (McCarthy & Carter, 1994). With Hymes's (1972) notions of communicative competence, the "appropriate" use of language, and the inseparable relation between language and culture in foreign-language learning, scholars further emphasized the need to build learners' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997, 2004). According to Risager (2007), the cultural dimension of foreign-language teaching moved from the communicative approach to the intercultural communicative approach to emphasize the language use in different cultural contexts. The concept of intercultural communication competence (ICC) has grown to cover issues related to global competence, transcultural communication competence, and intercultural sensitivity (Fantini, 2009). Such terms refer to the ability to step beyond one's own culture and function appropriately with speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Huang, 2021) considering dimensions of attitudes, curiosity, openness, affection, motivation, and empathy toward one's own and other cultures (Gong et al., 2022). Rossiter and Bale (2023) state that interculturally competent individuals are those who can nurture their cultural awareness and sociolinguistic awareness and those who can easily listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, and interpret things. In fact, ICC has been influenced by emerging technologies via using telecollaboration (Eren, 2023; Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023).

Language-learning classes supported by ICC and technology emphasize the role of awareness and knowledge (cognitive), attitudes (emotions), and skills (behaviors) in facilitating positive social interactions with members of various cultural groups (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). ICC utilizes computer-mediated communication tools for second- or foreign-language learning through intercultural engagement (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). ICC involves the following components: intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical intercultural awareness (Byram, 1997). Yang and Zhuang (2007) also reported that ICC comprises numerous types of competencies including knowledge competence, practical communication competence, acculturation competence, global mindfulness competence, and intercultural cognitive competence. Indeed, such crucial competences have been described as inseparable from ICC (Deardorff, 2006). It is fundamental to understand culture whenever ICC is encountered. Several studies highlighted the positive role of telecollaborative-focused ICC through guided collaboration and use of informal resources using digital tools and social applications technologies (Helm et al., 2012; Thorne, 2010). Furthermore, peer exchanges, shared portfolios, and common reflections are practiced in this experiential process of learning. Other studies have focused on the participants' perspectives concerning the assessment of ICC in a telecollaborative exchange. For instance, Oskoz and Gimeno-Sanz (2019) found that telecollaboration assists language learners with becoming aware of different communicative styles in multiple cultures, thus facilitating successful intercultural communication. Lee (2020) also found that participants in a Spanish-American telecollaborative project using blogs showed great curiosity toward the other (target) culture, gaining innovative cultural knowledge along with advanced critical cultural awareness.

Byram's Model of ICC

Byram's model of ICC has positively contributed to a better understanding of telecollaboration and has recently identified socially-oriented tools. Researchers have emphasized the development of this model for computer and online-mediated communications for the purpose of encouraging language learning (Ware & Kramsch, 2005). Byram's (1997) ICC model built on Hymes's (1982) sociolinguistic and communicative competence concepts and Habermas's concepts of sociocultural competence (Byram & Morgan, 1994). Byram (2009) further elaborates on the notions of the intercultural speaker and intercultural competence. The five dimensions of Byram's (1997) model are: knowledge (*savoirs*); interpreting/relating skills; discovery/interaction skills; attitudes; and critical cultural awareness. In his latest version of the model (Byram, 2009), the critical cultural awareness *savoir* has been moved to the center of the ICC model to emphasize its centrality in modern second and foreign-language education.

According to Byram's (1997) model, knowledge represents the result of socializing. It affects identity and refers to how social groups and identities function for oneself and for others. Knowledge is not restricted to superficial (stereotypical) characteristics but is extended to social processes and identity formation in general, as well as how social interaction is manifested in a target culture. Interpretative skills, as well as discovery and/or interaction skills, are useful for the conscious application of knowledge—how to use existing knowledge and how to bridge gaps in this existing knowledge while interacting to ensure successful communication. The former addresses the ability to interpret and explain a document/event from another culture and relate it to one's own culture. The latter's focus is on the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture/cultural practices and to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills in real-time communication and interaction (Müller-Hartmann, 2007). Attitudes of the intercultural speaker, conditioned by knowledge, skills, and cultural awareness, are part of a dynamic whole that is necessary for acting in intercultural communication. They condition the success of intercultural relations and should not be just positive or presuppose willingness but attitudes of curiosity and openness with respect to others' meanings, beliefs, and behaviors (Byram, 2021). Critical cultural awareness can be seen as the culmination of the four other dimensions as it refers to the ability to evaluate critically one's own and the other's culture. Byram (2021) defines critical cultural awareness as the ability to evaluate critically based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures. Byram's (2021) model can be used in the analysis of students' exchanges in terms of general descriptors that are explained by sets of curricular objectives linked to the dimensions outlined in the model. Therefore, the current research attempts to answer the following main research questions:

1. What objectives of ICC are characterized in the semester-long, telecollaborative interactions between students in Saudi Arabian and American contexts in their writings and reflections on their own learning experience?
2. How does students' interest in ICC-based telecollaborative communication change throughout the semester-long telecollaborative exchanges between Saudi Arabian and American participants?

Methods and Data Sources

Participants

Participants in this research were students in intermediate and upper-intermediate foreign-language classes: Arabic taught at a large state university and two liberal arts colleges in the northeastern United States, and English taught within a college of arts in a public Saudi university in Saudi Arabia. Twenty-two US-based Arabic-language students participated in this research, while twenty Saudi-based English-language students participated. Students from one cohort were paired with students from the other cohort. Each pair shared their own Google drive for their asynchronous exchange. The online exchanges were not part of the courses that students were enrolled in, and participation was voluntary. The exchanges took place over a 12-week period during one academic semester.

Students' textual materials were obtained from the three research instruments used in this research: essays written in the foreign language, feedback written in the native language, and pre- and post-self-reflection surveys in the native language. This analysis provides insights into students' perspectives of culture on each side and their ICC development in general. Adopting Byram's (1997, 2021) model, the data analysis drew on a content-analytical approach that was developed within the critical discourse analysis tradition (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). This approach has been presented by way of examining two different levels of textual representations: (1) the general level of the key topics of discourse stratifying its contents, and (2) the in-depth level, which focuses on discourse elements (Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008).

As stated, there were two data sets: written products were assessed by analyzing the writing activities and students' feedback on them in terms of manifesting Byram's curricular objectives. ICC progress of learning was assessed through the self-reflective surveys administered before and after the study. The analysis qualitatively compared the types of discourse produced in the exchanges. The less Eurocentric context of this research between English and Arabic languages fills a gap in the literature regarding these two languages by examining intercultural communication in a pedagogically structured, telecollaborative mode that offers students opportunities for authentic practice outside of class on a regular basis. The researchers were not the instructors of the courses in which the telecollaborative project took place. This allowed students to write their exchanges freely without worrying about any interference or grade-related considerations. The activities that students performed in this study were not part of their classroom curriculum. The level of motivation that students showed throughout the study, however, emphasizes the benefits of integrating ICC-based telecollaborative exchanges in curricular development and language-teacher education programs.

Procedures

The participants agreed to voluntarily participate in this research, which was based on a reviewed ERP. Before starting the activities, students were asked to complete an initial self-reflection questionnaire. They were then asked to write four short essays (approximately 150 words each) in the target language and give written feedback/commentaries (approximately 100 words) in the native language on each of the four essays written by their partner within a timeframe of two to three weeks for each essay and its feedback. After completing the activities, students were asked to complete a follow-up self-reflection questionnaire. The intercultural mediation activities of this project, which the participants worked on, were as follows:

1. Relationships and friendships: Describe the most common cultural values related to establishing relationships or friendships;
2. Learning practices and daily activities: Compare and contrast the most common learning practices and daily activities in your culture with those in Arabic/American culture;
3. Food and cooking: Compare and contrast various cuisines/dishes/or food in your culture with those in Arabic/American culture; and
4. National ceremonies/special days: Write a narrative concerning a national ceremony or a personal life story.

The prompts for the feedback on the counterpart's essay in the student's native language were:

• What new knowledge of the US/Saudi Arabia have you gained?
• After you read your counterpart's essay, what were your thoughts on intercultural awareness of aspects like everyday living, living conditions, interpersonal relations, values, beliefs and attitudes, social conventions, and ritual behavior?

For the pre- and post-exchange surveys, students were asked to reflect on their initial cultural interest, knowledge, attitudes, and cultural awareness of the other and whether these concepts had changed after the research. As stated previously, the participants were asked to write essays and engage in self-reflection. The resulting texts were analyzed using specific codes. Such codes were then gathered and classified into categories, where they were given names in accordance with the five ICC dimensions. The authors did their best to classify such phrases and sentences by identifying related content that precisely matched one of the five ICC dimensions. Texts that referred to two or more categories/assumptions at a time (i.e., if there was a particular phrase or sentence showing critical cultural awareness and skills of interpreting and relating at the same time) were deleted to avoid confusion.

The data analysis consisted of identifying any of the domains and the curricular objectives of Byram's (1997) ICC model in the students' textual materials. The percentage of responses that fell into each category was calculated. The analysis then mapped thematic links, based on the frequencies of appearance of the descriptors of the ICC, across the data set to illustrate which descriptors were the most noticeable in students' communication throughout the semester. How the five *savoirs* manifested themselves in student exchanges contributed to a holistic judgment of students' ICC competencies and their development over time in a telecollaborative context.

Findings

Distribution of ICC Dimensions and Their Associated Objectives

The first research question addresses the existence of ICC dimensions and their associated objectives in this telecollaborative communicative experience in line with Byram's ICC model (2021) as a baseline for the data analysis. To trace the relevant dimensions and objectives of ICC, the findings have shown the existence of the five dimensions in Byram's ICC model, as in Figure 1. The percentages of their existence/occurrences are distributed as follows:

• Knowledge dimension - 53% (160 times out of 306 total instances)
• Attitudes dimension - 24% (71 times)

- Skills of discovery and interaction dimension - 14% (41 times)
- Critical cultural awareness dimension - 7% (29 times)
- Skills of interpreting and relating dimension - 2% (5 times)

Figure 1
Distribution of ICC Dimensions in Students' Exchanges
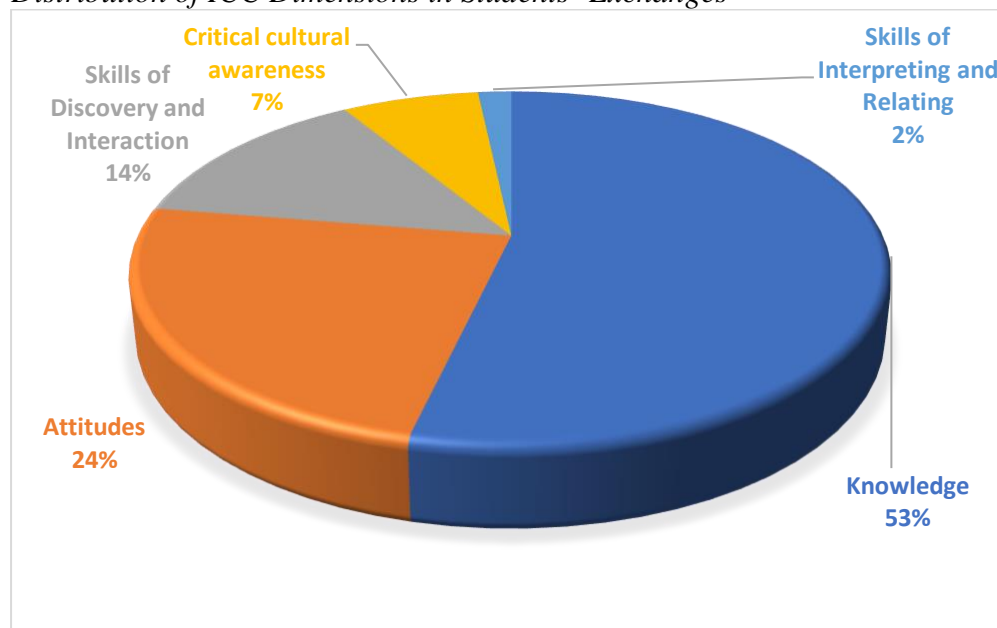
Attitudes Dimension

This part starts with the dimension of attitudes of curiosity and openness and the readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own culture (Byram, 2021, p. 84). Except for objective (d), which refers to adaptation to another culture during a period of residence, all objectives in this domain were exemplified in students' interactions. Objective (a), which refers to engaging with otherness in a relationship of equality, was the most salient objective in students' written products of feedback contributions, as in this example: "But I do feel like I can see that we have similar traditions rooted in the same values, it's just that they change and evolve differently in different cultures" (Activity 1, Participant: OT).

Interest in discovering other perspectives or interpretations of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena in both cultures, as expressed in objective (b), is observed in the following example: "What you wrote about your family's Eid traditions is really beautiful. I don't know a lot about Muslim holiday traditions, but I am learning and this was very interesting to read" (Activity 4, Participant: OT). Among the examples that reflected objective (c), which refers to the willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment, was this one: "There are some parents who are very strict, allowing their children almost no freedom to make decisions and then there are parents who are extremely laid back, allowing their children to do as they please" (Activity 1, Participant: MO). The last objective in this domain, objective (e), which refers to a readiness to engage with the conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction, was clear in the exchanges. Students adopted appropriate writing conventions in their written interaction, taking into consideration the

expectations of their interlocutors. This was exhibited in the two opening sentences of this exchange between two students in the same group: "Salam (A), I'm doing great and I hope you are too! I'm excited for summer!" (Activity 3, Participant: OT) and "You are welcome any time. I also welcome your feedback on the texts I write" (Activity 3, Participant: AB). As intercultural speakers, these students take into consideration what the other may deem as appropriate behavior from foreigners.

Knowledge Dimension

The knowledge dimension refers to knowledge on the part of the learner/intercultural speaker of/about social groups and their products and practices in one's own country and in the interlocutor's country (Byram, 2021, p. 85). In addition to objective (a), "knowledge of historical and contemporary relationships between one's own and one's interlocutor's countries" (Byram, 2021, p, 85), all the curricular objectives introduced by Byram (1997, 2021) were tracked in students' exchanges. Objective (b), "knowledge of the means of achieving contact with interlocutors from another country," was generally emphasized through students' ability to maintain telecollaborative communication throughout the semester without intervention from the researchers after the initial set-up of the Google folders for each group.

Objective (c), "knowledge of types of causes of misunderstanding between interlocutors of different cultural origins," can be traced in the following excerpt written originally in Arabic by an American student to his Saudi colleague:

> *Finally, there is one major difference which is that a lot of Americans go to bars in the evening or at night... it is normal to see such gatherings in these bars after work to share ... chat as a form of social activity.* (Activity 2, Participant: AV)

This exchange reflects the student's awareness of possible (mis)interpretations that the interlocutor may have about their own conventions, customs, and rituals. Objective (d), "the national memory of one's own country and how its events are related to and seen from the perspective of other countries was the second highest objective, after objective (h), in this domain's set of objectives. It is expressed in this example: "On Fridays, there is a prayer called the Friday prayer; only men go to the mosque to perform it" (Activity 2, Participant: IB). These students shared and reflected on knowledge of occasions that represent markers of their national identity, like the American Thanksgiving celebration or the Friday congregational prayer.

Student exchanges reflected knowledge of the national memory of the other and the perspective on national memory from one's own country as expressed in objective (e) and communicated in this exchange from an American student:

> *Although the two cultures share a lot of activities, the frequency of these activities is different. In Amman, I saw people go to the mosque more frequently than those who go to the mosque, church, or synagogue in the US.* (Activity 2, Participant: AV)

Objective (f), "knowledge of the national definitions of geographical space in one's own country and how these are perceived from the perspective of other countries," appeared in occurrences such as this example: "However, one brilliant thing is in the south, food is extremely

different from other provinces around the kingdom" (Activity 3, Participant: IA). Objective (g), which refers to knowledge of the national definitions of geographical space in the interlocutor's country, appeared in feedback responses such as the following: "It's great that there is diversity in ancestral origins because this means diversity in food and culture" (Activity 3, Participant: IB). These students were sharing knowledge about their perceptions of regions and regional identities in their own countries as reflected in the diversity of cuisines and regional habits.

The most frequently exhibited objective in the knowledge domain, occurring in nearly half of instances of exchanges, was objective (h): "knowledge of the processes and institutions of socializations in one's own and in the interlocutor's country." The questions presented to students in each task prompted their initial responses. In them, students showed the highest interest in knowing about "the education systems, religious institutions, and similar locations where individuals acquire a national identity, which are introduced to the dominant culture in their society" (Byram, 2021, p. 86). The following examples illustrate high interest among students to share this type of knowledge and learn more about the other: "…this dish is repeated daily in millions of homes in Saudi Arabia and is called 'Kabsa'" (Activity 3, Participant: AB) and "The first thing we have to mention is that there is no single monolithic American society. The American society is composed of diverse parts and is based on the experiences, traditions, and values of its citizens with their diverse backgrounds" (Activity 1, Participant: ML). The exchanges on family and friendship, learning practices and daily activities, and food traditions and national ceremonies exemplified areas of intercultural communication that aligned language with culture in the foreign-language classroom.

Knowledge of social distinctions and their principal markers in one's own country and in the interlocutor's, as reflected in objective (i), was expressed in such examples as:

> In Saudi Arabia, in primary and secondary schools, females are taught
> only by female teachers and males are only taught by male teachers… But
> in the United States, all students, whether male or female, are taught by
> both male and female teachers. (Activity 2, Participant: DB)

The student, in this case, reflected their knowledge about social distinctions dominant in their own country (Saudi Arabia) and in the interlocutor's country (the United States) in terms of gender rules in educational institutions. Objective (j) is "apply knowledge of institutions and perceptions as they may affect people's daily life in one's own and one's interlocutor's country." Objective (k) deals with knowledge of the process of social interaction in the interlocutor's country, and there were exchanges that rendered it applicable to the telecollaborative environment. For example: "There are different directions and tendencies in American pluralism when it comes to food traditions. Single, shared dishes… It's rare to see a group of people sharing a single big dish" (Activity 3, Participant: AV).

Skills of Interpreting and Relating Dimension

The skills of interpreting and relating dimension represent the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture and to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own culture. Objective (a), the ability to identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document or event, was observed in such exchanges as the following:

Some people meet others online through such sites as 'Tinder'. In these websites, people write about their jobs, hobbies, what they like and what they dislike with a personal photo. This explains some of the important values that the American people are searching for. (Activity 1, Participant: SH)

Objective (b), the ability to identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction, is exemplified in this exchange: "Here, the text is good, but there are some language inaccuracies in singulars and plurals and gender agreement" (Activity 1, Participant: IB). Although this student's feedback does not refer to a mistaken assumption, linguistic inaccuracies in such areas as number and gender agreement in a gendered language like Arabic can cause misunderstandings or miscommunications. The ability to mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena, as expressed in objective (c), can be seen in this example (non-native English retained):

I do not have knowledge in Christianity but the Sunday school or Catholic is almost different from what I mention, in our schools we study some religious material and out of our schools, not all of the people but the young stayed after praying between 6 to the last pray call evening prayer to learn. (Activity 2, Participant: OT)

In this example, the Saudi student was trying to compare the religious education in and outside of schools in their country to mediate between possible perceptions of this type of education.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction Dimension

The skills of discovery and interaction dimension focuses on the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and on the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram, 2021, p. 88). Examples of the curricular objectives in this domain were demonstrated in 14% of the student exchanges, with the exception of objective (f), which refers to situations abroad. Objective (a), the ability to elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents and events, appeared in questions that sought to elicit information about the target culture, such as "What I did not understand is how the church is a school?" (Activity 4, Participant: IB). Students who were interested in this objective are interested in discovering the origins or the sources of certain issues to be able to better interpret them. Objective (b), which refers to identifying references within and across cultures and eliciting their significance and connotations (Byram, 2021), was clear in exchanges such as the following: "It's good to read a description of family and friendship relationships put this way from actual Americans. That is different from the distorted image exported by the media…" (Activity 1, Participant: AB). This student exhibited the intercultural competence of reassessing what they had learned from the media and establishing relationships of similarity with their interlocutor.

Instances of objective (c), which refers to the ability to identify similar and dissimilar processes of interaction and negotiate an appropriate use of them, were the highest frequently exhibited objectives in this domain. In this example, the participant utilizes their knowledge of the

conventions of using the definite article in Arabic and English to reassure their interlocutor about their foreign-language usage (non-native English retained):

> *When you say 'Kabsa with the lamb meat,' it sounds better to say 'Kabsa with lamb meat,' there is no need for the word 'the.' This is tricky sometimes I know because English speakers struggle with knowing when to say 'the' sometimes in Arabic. Great job!* (Activity 3, Participant: OT)

Students' exchanges showed knowledge of the conventions of this type of informal interaction, expressed by Byram as "a combination of conventions from the different cultural systems present in the interactions" (2021, p. 89).

Although objective (d) refers to use in real time of an appropriate combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to interact with interlocutors (Byram, 2021, p. 89), it was exhibited in a number of exchanges in the telecollaborative mode, as presented in this example:

> *Regarding daily activities, when I was in Oman, I was allowed to do most of what I used to do in the US. There were some restrictions ... In the US, men are allowed to be away from home until very late at night to attend parties and to participate in certain activities while women are criticized for doing the same exact things.* (Activity 2, Participant: VG)

Objective (e) focuses on identifying relationships between the two cultures. Although none of the students in the United States or in Saudi Arabia indicated that they had visited their interlocutor's country before, this objective was characterized by examples such as this one: "People in both cultures spend some time every day with their friends either in-person or over the phone. I also think that sports are an important part of people's lives in Arabic and American cultures" (Activity 2, Participant: BM). The student here used their knowledge of Arab countries from different sources to analyze similarities and differences between the two cultures.

Critical Cultural Awareness Dimension

The last dimension, critical cultural awareness, represents the culmination of the other four dimensions. It emphasizes the ability to critically evaluate products, practices, and perspectives in one's own and in others' cultures (Byram, 2021, p. 90). In this dimension, objective (a), identification and interpretation of values in documents and events in both cultures, can be seen in this example:

> *I noted too the similar emphasis and value placed on friendship. I was surprised, however, to hear the story of when (IA) went to visit his older friend and was greeted with a veritable banquet and family reception. This really opened my eyes to just how warm and generous Saudis can be, especially for the sake of friendship.* (Activity 1, Participant: AV)

Objective (b) the evaluation and analysis of documents and events, based on systematic and conscious reasoning, can be seen in this example: "There are so many people in the US with diverse locations and religions. I think this affects their sets of values" (Activity 1, Participant: HG). The student here is aware of their ideological perspective with regard to diversity in the United States

and makes an evaluation based on this conviction. Finally, objective (c), interacting and mediating in intercultural exchanges to negotiate a degree of acceptance, can be seen in this instance: "This essay taught me a lot about school in Saudi Arabia, which honestly is something I had never really considered" (Activity 2, Participant: OT). As an intercultural speaker, the student here is aware of a potential difference between their own and their interlocutor's norms or concepts and can establish a degree of shared evaluation of the school set up in the two cultures.

Participants' Perspectives of ICC Prior and After this Experience

Now we turn to the second research question, which investigates students' interest in ICC and to what extent there is a change in their perspectives throughout this experiment. As explained previously, the analysis of this research question depends on Byram and Morgan's (1994) model combining various theories of intercultural competence as the basis for developing their own assessment tool named the Intercultural Competence Assessment project (INCA, 2009) Such a model assesses the three dimensions of openness, personalized knowledge, and adaptability. Taking into consideration these three elements, the following excerpts show the participants' (prior) initial and (after) follow-up perspectives regarding this experience of telecollaborative communication. The following examples indicate progress in openness:

> **Initial survey:** "I feel that the pieces I read in the news often fail to provide an accurate image of the Arab world, and I hope that, by way of the writing exchange, I will be able to immerse myself within Arabic culture as it occurs daily, from a young woman's perspective."

> **Follow-up survey:** "I loved it! It was so fun to hear about their culture and share something about myself. This definitely pushed me to try harder with my Arabic … this research was definitely interesting; I learned more regarding familial values and was able to analyze the values with which I have been raised in the United States."

In their initial survey, this student reflects the appreciation of the other's culture and awareness of some ambiguity in their knowledge about the Arabic world, since their only source with which to learn about Arabic culture is the media. In the follow-up survey, they acknowledge some differences based on what they learned from their counterpart about Arab family values. We can also detect the attitude of respect for otherness and a readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own culture.

The following examples demonstrate progress in the dimension of knowledge, the characteristic of "not only wanting to know the 'hard facts' about a situation or about a certain culture, but also … wanting to know something about the feelings of the other person."

> **Initial survey:** "I think this exchange will provide me with even more country-specific understanding, this time about Saudi Arabia, and will do so through a new perspective even if a lot of the information may stay the same."

> **Follow-up survey:** "Interacting with a native Arabic speaker from a completely different culture from my own was both comforting and

enlightening. Due to my Middle Eastern heritage, I have familiarity with the culture and seeing the student speak about their culture and food is interesting."

In the initial survey, this student expressed their enthusiasm about acquiring new knowledge of the Saudi community and about participating in a conversation with a Saudi colleague to reflect on various aspects of culturally specific acts of behavior and compare them with American culture. The follow-up survey response also manifests respect for otherness and for the overall learning experience of learning more about unknown stuff within the other culture.

According to the "European Commission INCA Project" (2009), knowledge discovery is defined as "the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to act using that knowledge, those attitudes and those skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (p. 5). Empathy, on the other hand, is defined as "the ability to intuitively understand what other people think and how they feel in concrete situations" (p. 7). Such dimensions can be detected in this student's initial and final survey responses. The student expresses their excitement about learning cultural differences and comparing them with their own experience through the individualized telecollaborative exchange.

The third dimension in this model is adaptability, described as the ability to "adapt one's behavior and one's style of communication" (p. 11). Adaptability includes behavioral flexibility, "the ability to adapt one's own behavior to different requirements and situations," as well as communicative awareness, "the ability … to establish relationships between linguistic expressions and cultural contents" (p. 64). The following examples—translated from Arabic—from a student's initial and final survey responses highlight the student's perception of their own progress in this area. The surveys elicited students' responses regarding what they could do to gain a better understanding of the other's culture before and after the study.

> **Initial survey:** "For a deeper understanding of every culture, one has to read about its history, know about its religion, understand its language to achieve direct communication between peoples without the need for translators, watch movies or shows that try to explain this culture, or media that misrepresents the true culture of a country."

> **Follow-up survey:** "Based on my experience, I did not see any difficulty in my communication with my colleague from the US … I think that it's possible to deal with any person from a different culture or country if there is mutual respect and an understanding of sensitivities and sarcasm that vilifies a culture or a community."

The progress in behavioral flexibility and communicative awareness, as defined by Byram's model, can be seen in these examples. The student dealt with the language barriers between themselves and their counterpart and enjoyed participating in and interpreting intercultural elements in their communication with their American counterpart.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results emphasized students' interest in engaging with their counterparts in voluntary, meaningful interactions that relate to cultural features of the individual learner's own background and that of the interlocutor's. The interactions covered a variety of topics related to cultural knowledge, perspectives, values, practices, behaviors, and products in areas including education, national celebrations and traditions, daily routines, local cuisines, entertainment practices, and gender-related social norms. These areas represent the "small c" type of culture (Brooks, 1997) or individual human daily life in each context. Over the course of the semester, the telecollaborative context gave all participants an opportunity to communicate with a peer from another culture and to share individual thoughts on beliefs, customs, and traditions in a personal way. At the same time, students were able to connect these personal thoughts to a broader sociocultural context that defies overgeneralizations and stereotypes between the two cultures. Students' essays, feedback, and self-reflections reflected an understanding of the relationship between a culture's perspectives, products, and practices, as well as a genuine interest in knowing more about another's culture.

With the increasing importance of promoting cultural learning, awareness of different communicative behaviors, and attitudes of openness and curiosity toward other people, teachers, researchers, and curriculum developers should try to maximize the benefits that telecollaboration tools offer in the language classroom. Implications of the findings of this study indicate that as foreign language learners today can participate in online social activities, they can simultaneously develop intercultural competence, despite some barriers that need to be addressed in that experience. As part of the foreign language classroom practice, teachers have an increased potential to promote intercultural understanding. Telecollaborative projects that develop and assess ICC can thus be an integral part of pedagogical areas including curriculum development, classroom activities, assessment, and language-teacher education programs. Research in those areas that is built on various models and frameworks of intercultural communicative competence will inform best practices in language teaching and learning Learners today participate in an increasingly wide variety of social activities online. Linking such activities to the cultural component of a foreign-language curriculum can help students develop cross-linguistic and cross-cultural competence in a learner-centered approach in which learners take more responsibility for their own learning outside the classroom. Through a fusion of technology and pedagogical activities, this study helped students engage in critical reflections about themselves and their role in the world, which is, in turn, the foundation of Byram's (2008) notions on "intercultural citizenship." Byram writes, "experience of intercultural (democratic) citizenship can take place in many locations and on many occasions, and individuals may reflect and act together with people of other groups accordingly" (2008, p. 187).

Communication breakdown was among the limitations of this study. The telecollaborative exchanges in this research were not part of any class curriculum and were not graded. A small number of students did not finish all four activities of the study, due to reasons such as time constraints or differences in semester schedules between Saudi Arabic and the United States. This agrees with Al Khateeb and Hassan (2021), who assert that asynchronous forums often lack true—real-tie—communication, unless learners can be trained to respond to each other's messages appropriately, a process that takes constant and repeated practice by the participants. The results of the study were, by definition, limited to the timeframe of the research. Yet, ICC is an ongoing learning process and there will always be the difficulty of incorporating and assessing its development throughout one single semester. Although the non-graded nature of the activities allowed students more freedom for participation and for achieving personal language- learning

goals from the study, incorporating this type of collaborative exchange into the curriculum could render more accurate studies. The study showed the need for more specialized approaches in the development of intercultural assessment tools that can be applied to specific domains or competences of ICC. Further research in this area may address such limitations by adding more specific assessment tools that incorporate discussions and interviews with participants, integrating more language skills, or conducting the study over a longer period of time. Finally, although it is beyond the scope of this study, it is also crucial that teachers reflect deeply on their own cross-cultural perceptions, practices, and beliefs, as well as on underlying assumptions that are reflected in their curriculum, teaching materials, and classroom activities.

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