

International Review □ Laurie Miller Nelson, Editor
Karen Murphy, Guest Editor

In this issue of International Review, Karen Murphy, Guest Editor, offers Part I of a two-part topic, “Cultural Differences in Online Learning.”

It is a special pleasure to announce my new position as Professor and Vice President of Project-Based Learning at the new and innovative Northface University in Salt Lake City. As this is written, we are busily engaged in the ground-up curriculum design for the January 2004 start-up.

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Taiwanese Intercultural Phenomena and Issues in a United States–Taiwan Telecommunications Partnership

By Yu-Chih Doris Shih and Lauren Cifuentes

□ We investigated an intercultural online connection between the United States and Taiwan. Taiwanese college-level English-as-a-Foreign-Language students were connected with United States preservice teachers via Web-board and e-mail to learn the English language and American culture. Cultural issues and phenomena of intercultural communication

Table 1 □ Schedule of Guest Editors for International Review, Future Issues

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| 51:4 | Karen Murphy | kmurphy@tamu.edu | Cultural Differences in Online Learning (Part II) | 15 May 2003 |
| 52:1 | Abbas Johari | abbasj@cameron.edu | The Impact of Instructional Technology Culture in Developing Countries | 15 Aug 2003 |
| 52:2 | François Marchessou | francois.marchessou@wanadoo.fr | Business sector cooperation in distance education | 15 Nov 2003 |
| 52:3 | Rowena Santiago | rsantiago@csusb.edu | Faculty Development in Online Learning | 15 Feb 2004 |

were identified both in the Web-board activity and the individualized e-mail exchanges. We conclude that in an intercultural telecommunications partnership, instructors should provide participants with sufficient technical knowledge, teach them how to communicate in the virtual environment, and provide a channel to allow them to share their online intercultural communication outcomes and experiences with each other while addressing intended outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching and learning through telecommunications has evolved in the West and has proved to be effective (Bates, 1995; Cifuentes & Shih, 2001; Murphy, Drabier, & Epps, 1998). Recommendations for successful online teaching are based on American theory and research. For instance, the American Association of Higher Education's Seven Principles of Good Practice transfer as principles to be applied in online learning environments (Sorensen, 2002). They include (a) cooperation, (b) student-faculty contact, (c) active versus passive learning, (d) prompt feedback, (e) time on task, (f) high expectations communicated, and (g) respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. While these principles apply in American learning environments, application in Taiwanese learning environments should not be assumed, because those environments tend to be competitive, authoritative, passive, and ethnically homogenous.

Some scholars have found that Asian students learn differently than students in the West (Hofstede, 1986; Smith & Smith, 1999). Therefore, application of recommended methods based on Western experience does not necessarily meet the needs of Asian learners. Close examination of learning facilitated by the new telecommunication technologies should be carried out prior to fully adopting these new technologies as learning tools in Asian countries such as Taiwan.

Intercultural communication and learning

Intercultural communication models are very

similar to any communication model, but incorporating cultural components. Dodd's communication model (1977) represents people of two different cultures communicating. The more similar the conditions of a person from Culture X are to a person from Culture Y, the easier the interaction. In contrast, if the conditions of the two persons differ enormously, then interaction is more difficult. In Dodd's communication model, peoples' conditions are represented as circles that may include language used, experiences, cognitive ability, and view of the world. The amount of overlap between two peoples' different circles shows how much interaction across cultures might be facilitated through shared conditions.

Chen (1998) explored how students from the United States and from Denmark, France, Germany, Hong Kong, and Turkey behaved interculturally in an e-mail debate, and found that participants improved only slightly in their intercultural sensitivity. The quantitative data showed that the differences between pre- and postmeasures were statistically nonsignificant even though the e-mail messages and the responses to the open-ended questions revealed improvement in participant development of intercultural sensitivity. Chen believed that the results of statistically nonsignificant quantitative measures were due to the differences in participants' cognitive processes and expression styles. These differences affected the participants' perceptions of their own growth in intercultural sensitivity.

Chen (1998) pointed out that English speakers have a linear thinking pattern because of the way the language is formed. In contrast, Asian people, especially Chinese and Koreans, are indirect in their thinking. English speakers converse in a logical order, but Asian people tend to shift from one point to another, focusing only on the important ones and ignoring details. Expression styles are embedded in a communicator's messages. These styles can be either direct or indirect. Western culture is considered to be a low-context culture where people express their intentions and positions directly. On the other hand, the Asian cultures are high-context cultures where communication depends on context clues. In such cultures people tend to de-em-

phasize direct expression in the messages, hide implicit meanings behind words, and use ambiguous language or even silence to maintain harmony with other people (Hall & Hall, 1989).

Hofstede (1982, 1986) found the culture of Taiwan to be different from that of the United States and described these differences in his four-dimensional model: (a) power distance, (b) collectivism versus individualism, (c) uncertainty avoidance, and (d) masculinity versus femininity. *Power distance* is the degree to which the inequality between the less powerful and more powerful people in a society is accepted. Hofstede identified a large power distance between the elderly and youngsters within Taiwan and a small power distance between the elderly and the youngsters within the United States. A *collectivistic* culture is one in which people emphasize human relationships and seek harmony with fellow countrymen. Such a society is tightly connected. On the other hand, an *individualistic* culture emphasizes the independence of the individual. The people of this type of culture look primarily after their own interests. Taiwanese and United States citizens differ in that Taiwan

is a collectivistic culture while the United States is an individualistic culture. On the *uncertainty avoidance* index, Hofstede rated Taiwan as strong, whereas the United States is rated as weak. Strength in uncertainty avoidance means that people in Taiwan generally feel more secure in a structured situation and they behave in a certain set of ways to maintain the status quo. The United States culture is more relaxed and tolerant of unstructured situations. Americans accept risks and are flexible. Therefore, Hofstede rated the United States as weak in uncertainty avoidance. In his fourth dimension, *masculinity versus femininity*, Hofstede (198x) classified Taiwan as a feminine society. In a feminine society, men and women's social roles overlap. The United States is a masculine society where men's roles are identified separately from women's. In the United States men need to be strong and competitive while women need to nurture others and focus on relationships.

A fifth cultural dimension was identified in the late 1980s by a group of researchers who referred to themselves as The Chinese Culture Connection. This dimension, *Confucian dyna-*

Table 1 □ Issues in Intercultural Learning.

| <i>Theorist</i> | <i>Issues</i> | <i>USA</i> | <i>Taiwanese</i> |
|---|---|---|---|
| AAHE Principles of good teaching practice | Cooperation Student-faculty contact Active vs. passive learning Prompt feedback Time on task Communicates high expectations Respects diverse talents and ways of learning | Cooperative Frequent Active Strong Strong Strong | Competitive Rare Passive Weak Strong Strong |
| Dodd | Shared conditions | English, experience, world view | Chinese, experience, world view |
| Chen | Cognitive Process Expression style | Linear Direct | Focus on important ideas Indirect |
| Hall & Hall | Context Language Use | Low context Direct | High context Indirect |
| Hofstede | Power Distance Collectivism versus individualism Uncertainty avoidance Masculinity versus Femininity | Large power distance Collectivism Weak Masculinity | Small power distance Individualism Strong Femininity |
| The Chinese Culture Connection | Confucian Dynamism | Weak | Strong |

mism, was identified to explain the economic growth in some Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). The Confucian values emphasized in these Asian societies include: working with persistence, maintaining mutual obligations between younger and older members of the community, having a sense of shame, needing to “save face,” keeping personal stability, and bonding to the traditions. Cultural models indicate that Taiwan and the United States differ across all identified dimensions (see Table 1).

After having studied distance learners in Hong Kong, Murphy and Yum (1998) suggested that learners of Asian culture should be encouraged to self-assess and self-reflect. They concluded that since distance learning environments are less structured than traditional learning environments, Asian learners may become lost if not given training in self-guidance. Ho (2000), in her review of literature for “Computer-Mediated Communication,” found that Singaporean students who participated in online cross-cultural projects preferred to interact with their foreign partners on a one-on-one basis. These students felt more comfortable when they knew they were communicating with a person, not the public. In light of the cultural differences between Asians and Americans, Young (1999) urged that more investigation be conducted with Taiwanese distance learners. Accordingly, this study explores the cultural issues and phenomena of online intercultural learning and communication.

Methods

Forty Taiwanese college-level students who were studying in an English Department in Taiwan were paired with 40 preservice teachers (PSTs) at a large state university in the United States. The Americans were preparing to teach English, English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL), social studies, or history at the elementary and secondary level. They participated because their instructors included this online connection project as part of their course requirements and activities. In addition, the three Taiwanese

professors whose students were project participants were also involved as research participants.

To carry out the study, United States PSTs corresponded with Taiwanese university-level EFL learners through Web-boards and e-mail for 10 weeks. These PSTs served as tutors of the English language and American culture. The participants in both countries were randomly matched one-on-one prior to the connection. They were also given instruction and orientation on the use of e-mail systems and online learning and teaching through lectures and departmental Websites, and were encouraged to exchange both visual and verbal messages.

A Web-board with four discussion areas was created so that the PSTs and the Taiwanese students could interact with each other as a group. One area was restricted to PSTs; a second area was designed for the Taiwanese students to carry out discussions among themselves, and two areas were created for intercultural discussions. The PSTs and the Taiwanese students were asked to answer four biweekly questions in the first two areas. The two intercultural discussion areas where participants from both nations could enter to interact were named (a) Cultural Interactions and (b) Problems and Solutions. In these two boards, we encouraged, but did not require, both the PSTs and the Taiwanese students to submit cultural and technical questions according to their interests and needs.

The United States PSTs fulfilled their requirement by answering the questions we uploaded every two weeks in their restricted area. The Taiwanese students used their restricted area of the Web-board to submit biweekly reports and final reports on the exchange, as suggested by their coordinators.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using nine sources: (a) printouts of Web-board correspondence, (b) printouts of e-mail correspondence, (c) computer conferencing responses, (d) a PST midterm survey, (e) PST postconnection survey, (f) Taiwanese student postconnection surveys, (g) PST reflective journal entries, (h) Taiwanese student

final reports, and (i) transcripts of interviews with 12 volunteering Taiwanese students and their Taiwanese professors. Each time data were gathered, information was analyzed using qualitative procedures proposed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). The steps included close reading, open coding, writing memos, noting themes and patterns, and focused coding.

Results

Cultural issues and phenomena of intercultural communication were identified in the Web-board activity and in the regular one-on-one e-mail exchanges. We are reporting the two sections separately because of the different issues and phenomena that occurred in the two different environments.

Cultural issues and phenomena in the Web-board activity

In the nonrequired intercultural discussion areas of the Web-board, only two PSTs voluntarily initiated discussions, and asked three questions during the semester. After one month, when the coordinator wrote messages to encourage participation, only one Taiwanese responded to one of the PST's cultural questions in the Cultural Interactions. The single response did not evoke more input from other Taiwanese students. Students appeared to be inactive and not motivated to use the intercultural boards.

In the face-to-face interviews, both Taiwanese professors and students explained that Taiwanese students were reluctant to express their ideas on the board because they felt uncomfortable having their ideas appear in this public space. The students stated that they did not like to write to public spaces, especially because they knew that there were readers whom they did not know. One pointed out that if she had had any questions, she would have already discussed them with her own tutor. Thus she did not submit her questions to the Web-board. Another believed that the Taiwanese students were afraid to appear on the Web-board because it was an open space and they did not want to lose face or express what they considered value-

less opinions in front of their fellow students. Taiwanese students affirmed that they would rather participate in the one-on-one interaction than the large group Web-board interaction. A student explained her absence by sharing that she was shy and felt intimidated by the almost empty board.

When asked whether the project should be redesigned to eliminate the one-on-one connection and switch the focus to the use of the Web-board, participants emphatically expressed that this would be a mistake. One said that a one-on-one connection is better because people would not become lazy and confused in the large space. In addition, a Taiwanese professor preferred the one-on-one connection to the Web-board because one-on-one communication prompted the Taiwanese students to write to a specific audience. She believed that her students tended to forget their intended reader when they composed essays for the Web-board, but that the one-on-one connection helped the Taiwanese students to hold focused readers in their mind.

Cultural issues and phenomena in the e-mail exchanges

Data analysis revealed six intercultural issues and phenomena during the one-on-one exchanges: (a) the need for visual images, (b) bewilderment of Taiwanese students, (c) excessive expressions of gratitude of Taiwanese students, (d) disparate expectations, (e) direct versus indirect writings, and (f) misinterpretation.

The need for visual images. Students in Taiwan realized that the delivery of text-based information in a foreign language in the online setting could cause misunderstandings. However, they did not choose to use visual images to clarify meaning and avoid misunderstanding. Although they were taught how to and were encouraged to share visuals, they rarely did. One Taiwanese student described her frustrating experience with her tutor: "I told my tutor about different type of Chinese food, and she probably misunderstood my description of the food, so she made a conclusion that the food was yuck." She explained that she was describing the traditional food, sticky rice, in this particular discus-

sion without attaching pictures. When they had problems describing objects, they turned to either their fellow students or teachers for help in their text descriptions.

Bewilderment of Taiwanese students. Frequently, Taiwanese students were bewildered about the comments made by their tutors and did not know how to react or respond. They naturally reacted to the tutors' comments as they would in a Taiwanese context. For instance, in Taiwan, people usually respond humbly to compliments. Taiwanese commonly respond to a compliment by insulting themselves. One Taiwanese student offered, "In the messages, sometimes I don't really know how to respond to their comments such as compliments. And I know a person, Jk; he even wrote 'where, where' to respond to his tutor's compliment about his English writing ability." "Where, where" (*na-li, na-li*) is literally translated as an expression of humility in Mandarin, and means "It's not good at all, please don't say so." Later, Jk shared this incident with his classmates. They told him that he had probably confused his tutor, who could not know the meaning of the expression, Where, where.

Excessive expressions of gratitude of Taiwanese students. During the exchanges, students also tended to react strongly on certain matters. Through their messages, Taiwanese students showed their gratitude toward their tutors profusely and almost continuously. Some said that they felt extremely guilty about making the tutors "work" on their essays. Several tutors were able to help their students overcome these feelings of insecurity by assuring them of their willingness to connect and to tutor them. A Taiwanese student reported that, "J told me in my letters several times not to thank her again. She wondered why I kept doing that." The United States tutors asked their professor why their Taiwanese students kept thanking them or apologizing for the connection, and directly stated that it was their own responsibility to complete the connection because it was an assigned activity. The Taiwanese students claimed that they felt that they should apologize or express their gratitude because they sensed im-

patience in the tutors' messages that so bluntly stated a point of view.

Disparate expectations. Excitement and high expectations toward the connection were revealed in the Taiwanese students' first few messages as well as in their responses to the survey. Many expected to receive instant and long messages and acquire knowledge from their tutors every week, but were disappointed when the tutors failed to respond accordingly.

Besides disappointment with the shortness of PST messages, the Taiwanese students felt disgruntled when a tutor did not react as promptly or as thoroughly as expected. For example, when a Taiwanese student realized that her tutor had ignored some of the questions she posed during the connection, she became unhappy because she felt that these questions were important and should have been answered.

Direct versus indirect writings. Students in Taiwan were able to detect the direct attitudes of their tutors as well as recognize that they had a different expressive style in their own messages. A Taiwanese student offered, "I feel that the United States tutors are very direct, so they would tell you anything they feel they have to say." One Taiwanese student provided an example of American directness. Her tutor critiqued her answer to a riddle in a direct way, calling it "irrational." She felt insulted and claimed that she would never receive such a critique from an Asian. A second student was shocked and felt uncomfortable that her tutor told her about his reading disability because she believed a disability is a secret that should not be discussed.

Many students described attempts to be indirect with the United States tutors' messages and said that they believed that the tutors were conveying, behind the written words, implicit meanings that they did not understand and that they, therefore, misinterpreted.

Misinterpretation. Several misinterpretations of the meaning of behaviors of PSTs took place because the students were not used to those behaviors, and analyzed them from the Taiwanese perspective. For instance, one person thought

that her tutor had shown a sign of impatience by using an unfriendly word, *hey*, to start off a message. Misinterpretations could have been clarified through questions and answers between telecommunications partners, but the Taiwanese reserved and nonconfrontational manner impeded such clarification. For those who hesitated to ask the tutors for clarification, their misinterpretations became obstacles in their communication.

Discussion

This study revealed several interesting phenomena in intercultural communication that, we suggest, resulted from insufficient overlap in the United States and Taiwanese participant conditions as described by Dodd (1977). The Taiwanese students disliked conversing with the United States tutors as a large group in a public space because they were afraid to lose face in front of their fellow students and other tutors. They preferred to stay in one-on-one contact with their own tutors. This finding corresponds with Ho's (2000) description of Singaporean student preferences to interact with their foreign partners on a one-on-one basis in their online connections. The Taiwanese professors also preferred the individualized contact of one-on-one e-mail exchange to the Web-board activity because they firmly believed that their students wrote better when targeting an audience. In addition, the finding in this study was consistent with Hofstede's (1986) theory that described Taiwanese culture as a collectivistic, large power-distance culture. According to Hofstede, in such cultures, individual students speak up in class only when called on by the teacher; they address the teacher humbly; and they speak up by themselves only in small groups. Furthermore, Asian learners believe that neither the instructor nor the student should be led to lose face. Therefore, situations that may cause anyone to lose face, such as large group Web-boards, should be avoided.

Few participants used visual images to help convey their ideas in e-mail messages or attachments. As a result, readers misunderstood or read unintended meanings in the messages. Most likely, lack of exchanged visuals was be-

cause of time constraints and technological difficulty. But, Collis and Remmers (1997) strongly recommended the use of visuals to overcome miscommunication associated with text-based languages. We conclude that coordinators of on-line projects should emphasize, and consider requiring, student use of graphic attachments to reduce misunderstandings and conflicts.

The different thinking patterns and expressive styles of the United States tutors and the Taiwanese students led to Taiwanese student bewilderment, excessive expressions of gratitude, and misinterpretation of messages. Taiwanese students did not have sufficient intercultural experiences, were unaware of theories of intercultural knowledge, and were uncertain about how to react to such tutorial behavior as compliments. They were unsure whether to respond according to the Taiwanese traditional behaviors or to seek knowledge about misunderstood behaviors.

The Taiwanese students had different expectations for the connection than did their tutors. Because the Taiwanese students were from a culture of large power distance (Hofstede, 1986), they expected the tutors, who were knowledgeable as "sages," to take active control of the on-line connection and to pass down knowledge to them. When their partners failed to do so or responded slowly in the exchanges, the Taiwanese students were discouraged and frustrated.

Design Implications for Educational Practice

United States and Asian cultures are opposites across several dimensions. Findings in this study indicate that online teaching and learning practices of the United States may not transfer to Taiwanese learning environments. Asian students felt uncomfortable contributing to large group online discussions that are common in on-line environments in the United States, and preferred one-on-one tutorials. In one-on-one tutorials between United States tutors and Taiwanese students, communication was complicated by lack of shared language, experience, and worldview. Requiring students at both ends of a telecommunications exchange to share

graphics that clarify meaning and to study cultural models that explain cultural differences could alleviate misunderstandings.

The Taiwanese students were not instructed in intercultural theories of Hall and Hofstede prior to the connection (Hall & Hall, 1989; Hofstede, 1982, 1986). Their United States counterparts received instructions on Hofstede's (1986) four-dimensional model but they were inexperienced in online intercultural contacts. In order to avoid misunderstandings and discrepancies in expectations, participants should become acquainted with thinking patterns, expression styles, and characteristics of the cultures involved. In addition to facilitating communication in the online connection, such instruction would also serve the goals of the class. Furthermore, strategies that help communicators analyze misunderstandings and avoid intercultural barriers in face-to-face intercultural interactions may be useful to know. Examples are Brislin's (1997) eight concepts for analyzing misunderstandings, Singelis and Pedersen's (1997) three steps for developing intercultural competence, and Neil's (1996) five types of speaker strategies.

In order to achieve successful online intercultural communication and learning, instructors and students need to have positive perceptions of online learning and sufficient technical knowledge before participating in the online context. Instructors should teach learners how to communicate in the virtual environment. One way is to teach students different types of communication strategies and the use of resources for communication; for example, using graphics on Websites to help explain abstract concepts. When intercultural contacts are involved in learning via telecommunications, instructors should provide intercultural information or knowledge to learners. Furthermore, when teachers use Web-boards or other computer conferencing systems, they should provide time for learners to "play" with the tools and get to know their peers. This step might reduce student fears of contributing their thoughts to the public space. Finally, the provision of a channel is necessary to allow learners to share their online learning and intercultural communication experiences with each other. The support group

would help the learners encourage and motivate each other for further online intercultural learning and communication, and also prompt self-assessment and self-reflection, which are exercises for Asian learners (Murphy & Yum, 1998). As Toyoda and Harrison (2002) suggested, discussion on meanings of words and values in different cultures would avoid an intercultural communication gap.

This study investigated learning that took place via asynchronous and non-face-to-face technologies. Participants of this study expressed their desire to meet their counterparts in a face-to-face setting. Another possible area of future research is the exploration of learning via synchronous technologies, such as chats, and technologies that allow face-to-face contacts, such as interactive videoconference and desktop videoconference. Investigations on learning via videoconference systems would switch the research focus from text-based learning (reading and writing) to oral learning (listening and speaking). □

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