

SOCIAL NETWORKING MEDIATED INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE: AFFORDANCES AND CONSTRAINTS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, Internet mediated intercultural competence has received a great attention in the field of applied linguistics and foreign language (FL) education especially with the evolution of web 2.0 technologies and social networking sites that facilitate interaction and communication between different cultural communities and individuals. Research in the field of Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) is extremely varied and researchers have focused their attention on various aspects of OIE such as promoting intercultural communicative competence (Belz, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003; Schenker, 2011; Muller Hartman, 2000), facilitating online relationship building (Ware, 2005; Thorne, 2003, Jin & Erben, 2007) and improving writing skills (Ware, 2005; O'Dowd, 2003), developing pragmatic competence (Kinginger & Belz, 2005). Despite the plethora of research in this area, gaps in the literature still exist. First, literature lacks studies on language learners of less commonly taught languages (e.g. Arabic), (Thorne, 2006) and more importantly most of the studies are based on western contexts mainly in Europe and the USA. Second, few studies have explored the potentials of social networking sites on OIE projects in promoting intercultural learning (Aoki, 2009; Jin, 2015).

In an effort to fill the gaps in the research, this study links English language learners (Saudis) with Arabic language learners (Americans) to investigate to what extent OIE on Facebook between these two groups of learners contributes to their intercultural communicative competence (ICC), specifically, exploring how and what are the components of Byram's model (ICC) manifested in the OIE project. Furthermore, it examined the affordances of Facebook in the OIE project according to students' use, practice and perception. Informed by a sociocultural framework, this study took a constructivist mixed methods approach to analysis of data from learners' online discourse on Facebook, the researcher's journal and observations, pre-survey, semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire. Data analysis and interpretation revealed that when students' participation were mutually compatible, the students were able to build meaningful relationships, used a range of various questioning techniques, and engaged in genuine dialogue, OIE has a great potential for developing students' intercultural competence, as many objectives of Byram's ICC model were manifested. Findings also revealed that the project has strengthened Saudi students'

cultural identity as they found the space to present their culture and country beyond the stereotypical image that dominates the media. As with regard to Facebook affordances, findings showed that the semiotic design and various semiotic resources of Facebook (e.g. multimodal posts, sharing, notification, friending, semi-automated features, etc.) afford students' engagement in intercultural discussion, students' collaboration, and students' interpersonal relationship building. The study also identified some of Facebook's constraints that limited students' participation due to technological, cultural and social factors.

In sum this study illuminates the nature of online intercultural communication between Arabic and English language learners, contributing to the scarce research on this population. It also uncovers the unique affordances as well as constraints of Facebook on an OIE project. Based on this study, several pedagogical implications and suggestions are made for future research in the field of online intercultural exchanges.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Interest in culture and foreign language education emerged, even though it was still in its infancy, when Hymes (1972) proposed the concept of communicative competence as opposed to Chomsky's (1965) linguistic competence. The interest in culture has been enhanced by globalization and internationalization, where interaction and communication among communities and individuals have increased tremendously. Although this evolution in communication provides many possibilities and opens new venues through which to build relationships, it also poses new challenges as misunderstandings may cause negative consequences, especially in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, scholars in the field of foreign language education have argued that teaching culture is not enough to promote understanding; the goal should be to develop intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) where learners can "communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude" (p. 149).

In the light of this interest, educators started looking at the potential of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to provide opportunities to connect language learners in collaborative work with members of other cultures (Warschauer, 1995). Such opportunities include "not only the exchange of information but also the expression of speaker identity and the development of relationships in situations of intercultural contact" (O'Dowd, 2007, p. 4). This kind of activity continues to evolve, starting from e-pals and e-tandem (Apple, 1999; Brammerts, 2003) and growing to a more structurally complex collaboration between two classrooms (Belz, 2002), participating in public discussion forum (Hanna and de Nooy, 2003), and engaging in telecollaboration 2.0 that utilizes social webs like social networking

sites, blogs, and videoconferencing in more multimodal forms than text-based communication (Guth and Helm, 2010).

1.2 Statement of the Problem and the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it investigates the extent to which online intercultural exchanges (OIE) via Facebook between Saudis and Americans could contribute to their language learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) development. Second, the study is intended to explore what affordances of Facebook might offer for intercultural learning in the OIE project.

Despite the plethora of research related to internet-mediated intercultural communication, gaps in the literature remain. As noted by Thorne (2006), research in telecollaboration rarely investigates less commonly taught languages like Chinese, Russian, and Arabic. Studies on Both Chinese and Russian language learners have recently grown in popularity (Jin and Erben, 2007; Klimanova et al. (2013a); however, research on Arabic language learners continues to be scarce. More importantly, most studies are conducted in Western countries—namely, the US and Europe. Very few studies have connected English language learners from the Middle East, such as between Egyptians and Americans (Morkus, 2006, as cited in Belz, 2007), Arabs (Egyptians and Saudis) and Americans (Al-Jamhoo, 2005), or Saudis and Russians (Aljarf, 2004).

The need to promote intercultural communication between Saudi students and American students emerged especially after the 9/11 attacks. Both the US government and American educators realized the importance of culture in language education to promote understanding of other people and their cultures (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007, p. 2). The US government provides funds for foreign language centers in order to increase the number of Americans able to effectively use the foreign language with

other cultures to achieve a better understanding of global cultures and issues. In the context of Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah and President Bush met in 2005 and agreed that the relations between Saudi Arabia and the US needed to be reestablished after the great tension that resulted from the 9/11 crises, where most of the attackers were identified as coming from Saudi Arabia. One point of the leaders' lengthy statement was to increase the number of young Saudi students travelling and studying in the US (Saudi-US Information Services, 2005). As of 2014, the number of Saudi students in the US reached 111,000 (Department of Commerce, 2015). In addition, in 2012, King Abdullah opened the King Abdullah International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Madrid to enable, empower, and encourage dialogue among followers of different religions and cultures around the world. This study is situated within this context of realizing the importance of building bridges of cross-cultural communication to promote understanding and respect for other people and cultures between the Arab and the West, thereby exploring how the OIE between Arabs and Americans would unfold.

Another gap in the literature is that many studies in OIE have utilized email, discussion forums, and blogs to conduct the research. Researchers have recently responded to the call to implement new emerging technologies (Thorne, 2006; Thorne and Payne, 2005). There has been an increase in the use of videoconferencing (O'Dowd, 2007; Kern, 2014) and text chats (Jin and Erben, 2007) as they are found to provide certain affordances that text-based tools lack. However, as noted by Leather and Van Dam (2003), "whereas the new media can provide immensely rich learning environment, their potential for catalyzing fruitful peer interaction has been under explored" (p. 4). Social networking sites (SNS) have received a great amount of attention in foreign language education research in recent years. Studies have found that SNS have a positive impact in extending classroom discussions (Aoki, 2009; Borau et al., 2009; Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Alshahri, 2011; Blattner and Lomicka, 2012),

sociopragmatics development (Blattner and Fiori, 2011; Reinhardt and Ryu, 2013), increased students' engagement (Mills, 2011), peer reviews (Shih, 2011), and many works on identity development (Chen, 2013; Halvorsen, 2009; Chen and Reinhardt, 2014). Regardless of its potential to connect L2 learners with native speakers of the target language to enhance learners' intercultural competence (Sykes and Holden, 2011; MacBride, 2009), SNS is rarely employed in OIE projects (Aoki, 2009; Jin, 2015). These OIE studies along with previous research on SNS have not explicitly attended to the multimodal nature of SNS and its affordances for the given educational context (Álvarez Valencia, 2014), except for Mill's (2011) global simulation project. Through the lenses of multimodal discourse analysis, this study will investigate students' practices and use of Facebook's semiotic resources and features to make meaning to identify the affordances of Facebook's offerings for language learners in OIE projects.

1.3 Research Questions

In this study, I will investigate two main constructs: ICC and Facebook affordances. The first two research questions are aimed at understanding how OIE could be beneficial for language learners in terms of its possibility to develop their intercultural competence.

Q1: How do Saudi and American students participate in the OIE as measured by the frequency and length of their posts/comments?

Q2: To what extent does OIE via Facebook between Arabic and English language learners contribute to the development of intercultural competence? Specifically, what and how are the components of Byram's (1997) ICC model demonstrated in the OIE project?

The next two research questions are intended to explore the affordances of Facebook according to students' use, practices, and perceptions.

Q3: What affordances for intercultural learning might Facebook offer for the OIE project?

Q4: What are students' perceptions toward Facebook affordances?

1.4 Importance of the Study

This study is important for two reasons. First, as previously mentioned, this study aims to investigate how OIE could contribute to Saudis' and Americans' ICC. Although there is extensive research on OIE, and more specifically on its impact on language learners' ICC, most of these studies are based on Western contexts (i.e., the US and Europe). An increasing number of studies have been based on Asian countries as well. However, the field lacks studies linking Saudi students who are learning English with native speakers of English who are learning Arabic, a less commonly taught language. This study aims to fill this gap by connecting Arabic language learners (Americans) with English language learners (Saudis) and investigating how their participation in OIE could contribute to their ICC based on Byram's (1997) model.

This study will hopefully help students' gain more knowledge about their own and others' cultures, thereby raising their cultural awareness about others' cultures. Moreover, the analysis of online discourse will provide information for Arab and American foreign language educators about the nature of Saudi–American interactions and what particular issues might arise for this context. This information would be significantly important in helping language educators design and plan future OIE projects.

The second importance of the study lies in its goal to analyze Facebook affordances in OIE projects. As previously stated, existing literature on OIE included only a few studies utilizing Facebook. Moreover, most studies investigating SNS potentials in foreign language education have focused on students' attitudes and perspectives while overlooking the rich

multimodal nature of Facebook. This study aims to investigate Facebook affordances in an OIE project by analyzing the semiotic and multimodal resources that students draw on to create meaning during their interaction with their peers. It is hoped that this detailed analysis will help language educators determine how to utilize Facebook group pages effectively in OIE projects by designing telecollaborative tasks based on the affordances and constraints of Facebook. It will also facilitate increasing students' awareness of the educational use of Facebook based on empirical data.

1.5 Framework of the Study

This study is situated within Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (SCT) According to SCT; social interactions are the basis for cognitive development. Learning takes place first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the human brain (intrapyschological). In the context of foreign language education, interactions with peers, native speakers, and teachers are critical for language development. Mediation is another important construct in SCT and has implications in this dissertation. SCT scholars argue that all human practices and activities are mediated by tools. These tools not only mediate human activity, but also transform it and sometimes alter it (Warschauer, 2007). This dissertation aims to investigate two conceptual constructs that are relevant to SCT: Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and affordances. ICC is a complex concept that has been studied across various disciplines. This study relies on Byram's (1997) model that combined five domains: attitude, knowledge, skills of interaction and discovery, skills of interpreting and relating, and final critical cultural awareness. This model is one of most comprehensive and used in the literature especially in online mediated intercultural competence projects, telecollaboration. Since all human practices and interactions are mediated by tool as argued by SCT, then it is necessary to investigate how online environment mediated interaction by exploring its specific affordances. Affordance is originally introduced by Gibson (1979) who used it in his

ecological theory of human perception. He defined it as " what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes either for good or ill" (p. 127). This concept is a rich source in understanding how various features of digital tools interact with other elements of a given learning context, including, learners, teachers, the task goals, and the physical environment to affords achieving the educational goals. This study examines the affordances of Facebook for intercultural learning in OIE project.

1.6 The Context of Teaching Foreign Language in the US and Saudi Arabia

This study investigates two groups of learners; Saudi English language learners and American Arabic language learners; therefore, it is imperative to provide a background review of both contexts with regard to foreign language teaching. I will first present the context of Arabic language teaching in the US followed by English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. First I provide a brief introduction about the status of the foreign language teaching, and then I examine the challenges faced in both contexts, and finally I discuss how culture is approached.

Arabic language teaching in the United States

Teaching Arabic in the United States started 50 years ago in some elite universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth. The focus of teaching Arabic was to build learners' reading knowledge and skills so they could access Arabic literature. The grammar translation method was used to achieve this goal (Ryding, 2006). Arabic remained one of the least commonly taught languages until the tragic 9/11 attacks, after which enrollment in Arabic language programs increased rapidly. Indeed, the number of college students studying Arabic from 1998 to 2002 almost doubled, jumping from 5,505 to 10,584 (Welles, 2004). According to the Modern Language Association (2010), Arabic is by far the fastest growing language in

the United States, growing 126.5% between 2002 and 2006. By 2009, Arabic enrollment had grown another 46.3%. As such, Arabic has leapfrogged many other foreign languages to rank as the eighth most studied language, with approximately 35,683 course enrollments nationwide.

The rapid interest in learning Arabic is a reflection of the current political situation (Wink, 2006) in which people want to have direct contact with people from the Arab world, which differs from the past where Arabic learners' goal was to access Arabic literature and culture. In his study of students' motivation for learning Arabic, Wink (2006) found that their motivation varies. However, the most cited reasons were better job employment, including political, military, and humanitarian positions (29%); cultural understanding (21%); and enjoyment/curiosity (18%). Other motivations included religious, travel, family, and linguistic factors. Those who listed religious reasons tended to be non-native speakers of English. Travel was reported by native speakers of English, while communication and family reasons were mostly evident among heritage language learners.

Challenges of teaching Arabic in the United States

The sudden increase in enrollment in Arabic classrooms as well as the pragmatic shift in goals and motivation for learning Arabic did not occur without any impediments and challenges (AlBatal & Belnap, 2006) that negatively impacted students' achievement of a high proficiency level. The first challenge was the limited number of qualified teachers with sound pedagogical training. In his study about the status of Arabic teaching in the United States, Abboud (1968) identified five types of Arabic teachers: (a) those who specialized in

linguistics but have little experience and interest in language teaching; (b) native speakers of Arabic with a graduate degree in related fields (e.g., Middle Eastern studies, political science); (c) orientalists who have deep knowledge of the Middle East and have attained advanced proficiency in Arabic; (d) informants whose field of study is not related to Arabic or even Middle Eastern studies and whose knowledge of Arabic is functional but limited in terms of how it works; and (e) teaching assistants, who are considered to be qualified teachers of their major of study, which includes training in linguistics as well as valuable pedagogical lessons and professional development. Although Abboud's (1968) study was conducted almost five decades ago, its results are still relevant to today's context. AlBatal (2011) found that only 18% of Arabic teachers hold degrees in applied linguistics or teaching Arabic as a foreign language. AlBatal and Belnap (2006) stated that, although many higher institutions have opened up Arabic language programs and now offer new courses to meet the high demand, they have not ensured quality instruction.

Another challenge has manifested in the diglossic context of Arabic language. The context of Arabic language is unique as it is rich in both varieties and registers. Diglossia refers to the situation in which two varieties of the language are used in a single language community. The high language represents the prestigious variety, which is called Classical Arabic (CA) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It is the language of literature, written, and official documents. The low language is the vernacular variety used in ordinary daily conversation. The situation gets even more complicated knowing that the low variety of Arabic differs from one region to another, resulting in more than 20 Arabic dialects.

According to Palmer (2007), “each regional variety of spoken Arabic represents a unique culture and people” (p. 113), which poses critical questions for Arabic language teachers as well as learners: Which language should they teach/learn? Do they need to learn two languages in one? If so, which regional variety should they focus on?

In this regards, AlBatal (1992) suggested five approaches to Arabic diglossia:

1) The classical Arabic Approach which is the oldest approach where the focus is on the morphological and syntactic analysis of the text.

2) The MSA approach that is to teach a standard Arabic dialect. The focus of this approach is similar to CA where emphasis is placed on grammar and reading with an increased interest on teaching oral MSA.

3) The colloquial that is to teach a selected Arabic dialect focusing on the spoken component of that dialect.

4) Middle Language Approach where teacher teaches an educated spoken Arabic, which is a variety that exists between MSA and various regional dialects.

5) The stimulus approach where students are taught MSA and a selected Arabic dialect at the same time.

Albatal and Belnap (2006) are in favor of the stimulus approach as they believe that learners need both varieties to be a proficient Arabic language speaker. They argue that even though MSA is viewed by the majority as more legitimate, “it is not the language of conversation” (p. 396). They also suggest that the focus to be on Egyptian and Levantine dialects as according to NMELRC survey, most students expressed interest in learning these two dialects.

A related challenge that resulted from the above mentioned challenges is the lack of curriculum and material resources that meet the learners’ needs. AlBatal and Belnap (2006) state that field lack of materials that focus on spoken varieties, testing instruments, online and distance learning material that support smaller programs, as well as heritage learners who are able to move forward faster than other type of students.

Status of teaching culture in the Arabic language classroom.

Theoretically speaking, in the last few decades, introducing the target culture and raising students' cultural awareness have been recognized and emphasized in foreign language education in the United States (Bayyurt, 2006; Byram, 2002; Castero et al., 2004). Kramersch (1995) called for teaching language as a culture as this would promote a better understanding of the language as well as the significant role of culture in understanding the language. Similarly, Schulz (2006) emphasized that language learners need to gain insights into "how language reflects culture, how culture reflects language and language use, and the language learning process and strategies useful for language learning" (p. 254).

The interest in integrating culture in language teaching is reflected in the national standards of foreign language education. Arabic teaching is no exception (Schulz, 2006). The national standards recognize the importance of culture and have pointed out that "knowledge of the cultural context in which languages are spoken is essential to achieving true mastery of a foreign language" (p. 31). Thus, culture is recognized to be as important as language.

In the context of Arabic language teaching, a task force of 11 committee members developed standards for learning Arabic as a foreign language to enable teachers and administrators in grades K through 16 to give their students an effective working understanding of the Arabic language and Arab culture (National Standards, 2006). The national standards consist of five main goals: communications, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. The two main standards of cultures are that (1) "students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and the perspectives

of the various cultures of the Arab world” (p. 128) and (2) “students demonstrate an understanding of the relationships between the products and the perspectives of the various cultures of the Arab world” (p. 130). Thus, students have to demonstrate an understanding of three components of cultures—practices, perspectives and products, and the relationship between them—to interact effectively as well as develop a cultural appreciation of the traditions and values of the Arab culture.

In addition to considering culture as a separate main goal, the issue of culture was raised and discussed in other goals. For instance, the second standard of connections stated that “students [should] acquire information and recognize viewpoints that are only available through the Arabic language and culture” (National Standards, 2006, p. 134). Students will be able to relate and make connections between the information they are learning from different fields to their learning of the Arabic language and culture in their Arabic class. Meanwhile, the second standards of comparison stated that “students [should] demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparison between the culture of the Arab world and their own” (p. 135). This standard emphasizes efforts to increase students’ awareness by comparing the differences and similarities between the products, practices, and perspectives of the Arabic language and culture and their own culture.

In practice, however, culture has been neglected and has occupied a minor place in teachers’ lesson plans as they consider culture to be “a special treat, a lesson sweetener or an appetizer before the main course” (Luk, 2012, p. 8). Castro et al. (2004) found that only 20% of teachers spend class time teaching culture while 80% of class time focuses on language

teaching. Several researchers have argued that the culture standard does not reflect today's teaching and it is more of a promise than a reality (Byrnes, 2006; Kramsch, 2005; Swaffer & Arens, 2005). Jernigna and Moore (1996) questioned the hierarchical position of the standards that placed communication as a primary standard and culture as secondary one, which led to a focus on communication and a neglect of culture standards. In their study, they listed "five main observations regarding culture teaching in foreign languages:

1. Much of what was taught as culture came from unplanned, casual comments especially on products and practices.
2. Films helped students glean information on practices and products.
3. There was little evidence of instruction on perspectives.
4. Cultural concepts were not evaluated.
5. Different instructors handled culture differently, that is, non-native instructors were more structured in how they taught culture than native speaker instructors; and information seemed to pass through instructor's own cultural paradigm."

Other research has shown that teachers are generally aware of the importance of culture teaching (Byram & Risager, 1999; Castro et al. 2004; Tamimi; 2015). However, other challenges impede culture teaching, including a lack of time, curriculum that emphasizes a focus on language skills, a lack of materials, and a lack of teachers' preparation (Castro et al., 2004). To conclude, teaching culture in the United States is recognized in the literature and by the teachers. However, theory has not reached its place in practice.

Context of teaching English in Saudi Arabia.

English is the only foreign language that was introduced as a required subject in intermediate and secondary school (i.e., seventh to twelfth grades) since the late 1950s (Alshammary, 1984). Two main factors led to the introduction of English as a foreign language. First, the

discovery of oil and the expansion of this industry amplified the importance of English as the government needed to staff ARAMCO, the largest oil company, with Saudi citizens who could communicate with non-native speakers, who made up the majority of employees. The second factor related to religious purposes. Millions of Muslims around the world come to visit Makkah to participate in *umrah* and *hajj*; they do not necessarily speak Arabic. English served as the lingua franca to enable Saudi people to serve non-Arabic-speaking Muslim visitors (Alalm, 1986). Although English was a required subject in the past, it was not highly valued by the students, and they only worried about passing their examinations; they did not see its relevance to their immediate needs (Alseghayer, 2005; Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2013). Yet nowadays, due to global, political, and social demands, the status of English has changed. English is believed to be “the language of science, technology, and business and commerce” (Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2013, p. 113). Saudis highly value English as a very practical employment skill as employers are seeking applicants with good English proficiency who can communicate with non-native speakers. Moreover, the Saudi commitment to the World Trade Organization in 2005 further crystallized the significance of English in Saudi Arabia as it increased Saudis’ contact with other nations who speak languages other than Arabic (Alfahadi, 2012). Therefore, by 2010, the Ministry of Education introduced English to higher levels in elementary school (fourth through sixth grades). However, they only met twice a week for 45 minutes, whereas starting in seventh grade they met for four times per week for 45 minutes each time.

The English curriculum reflects the changing attitude toward English and has undergone multiple changes and development. In the early stages, the English curriculum was adapted from other Arab countries, mainly Egypt. However, the curriculum quickly fell short of meeting the needs and interests of Saudi education and Saudi learners. In 1980, a new curriculum was introduced. Called “Saudi Arabia School English,” it was believed to better

reflect the needs of the Saudi context (Al Seghayer, 2005). English textbooks subsequently underwent several modifications and developments until 2003, when the new “Say it in English” curriculum was introduced. In the previous textbooks, the content contained discussions of mainly local and Islamic culture rather than the culture of the target language—that is, English (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). “Say it in English,” on the other hand, introduces students to more global cultures that include the local culture, target culture, and culture of other nations (Alfahadi, 2012). In addition, English teaching was introduced in the sixth grade in 2003, and in 2010 it was introduced in the fourth grade.

The Ministry of Education established seven principles regarding the teaching of English as a subject in Saudi schools:

- 1) English is the language mostly widely used in travel around the world and it is the most broadly used in mass media.
- 2) Since Saudi Arabia has established diplomatic relations with the western world, English must become the most important foreign language taught in all government schools. Therefore, a number of Saudi students are expected to hold positions that require them to deal with English-speaking people; in this case they need good instruction in English so that they can understand the other part whatever materials are required in their professional development.
- 3) English is acknowledged as the leading language of science, technology, education and politics, as well as business and commerce.
- 4) References, scientific researches and technological terms are written in English, so English should be taught to our students in order to for them to comprehend what they read.
- 5) Understanding the culture and thinking of other people require us to understand the language which reflects their thoughts and ideas.
- 6) Developing language ability in various ways that can add to strength of Arabic language and help in deriving enjoyment from it and in sensing the aesthetic aspects of its style and ideas.
- 7) Teaching the students at least another living language beside their own native one in order to allow them to enrich themselves with science, cultural affairs, arts and useful creative things and working on the conveyance of our science and intellectual achievements to their societies, thus contributing to the spread of Islam and the service of humanity.

It can be noted from these principles that English in Saudi Arabia has functional goals, where learning English will help the nation advance in science, technology, and economics.

Challenges of teaching English in Saudi Arabia.

Despite the continuous effort of the Ministry of Education to develop English language teaching, students' level in English when they graduate from secondary school is low, inadequate, and unsatisfactory. Researchers in the field have identified several challenges or constraints that impede students from achieving the desired outcome in English learning (e.g., Aljohani, 2009; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Alsaghayer, 2014).

One of the main constraints is students' perceptions and beliefs related to English. Due to certain social and cultural factors, Saudi students hold certain beliefs that negatively impact their learning experiences. Students, especially younger ones, are unaware of the importance of English as they do not recognize its relevance to their daily life needs, especially as English is infrequently used in society as Arabic is the main language that can be used everywhere, even in hospitals that employ a large number of non-native speakers of English (Alsaghayer, 2014; Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2013). Therefore, students lack the intrinsic motivation to learn the language. As noted by Maherzi (2011), Saudi students often ask why they should learn English. Another factor that would demotivate students is the misconception held by many people in Saudi society toward English—namely, that learning English affects not only learning Arabic, but also Saudi cultures and values (Elyas & Picard, 2011). These fears and misconceptions contribute to students' beliefs and diminish their effort to learn other languages.

Moreover, the majority of Saudi English teachers are not quite qualified as they are not well prepared. Alseghayer (2011) noted that English language teachers are graduates of English departments from various colleges and universities, where they take various courses in language skills, linguistics and applied linguistics, literature, and translation as well as general education and elective courses. No more than 10% of all courses represent teaching methods courses. In addition, previous teaching experience is not required to obtain an

English teacher position (AlFahadi, 2014). Alhaisoni & Rahman (2013) stated that having credentials makes one eligible for a job, but this does not equate to being a good teacher. Due to their lack of preparation, English teachers often rely predominantly on traditional teaching methods like audio lingual methods (ALM) and the grammar translation method (GTM) (Alhawsawi, 2013; Fareh, 2010). Hence, the class is teacher-centered rather than learner-centered, and the teacher is considered the source of knowledge (Alseghayer, 2013) while students are passive and spend most of their time listening to the teacher. Moreover, some researchers (e.g., Shah, Hussain, & Nasef, 2008) argued that learning a language for 45 minutes a lesson, 4 days a week, is not enough considering that students only have the chance to practice the language in the classroom. In addition, class sizes ranging from 40 to 50 students make it impossible for all students to have equal opportunities to practice the language.

These challenges, including negative attitudes and beliefs, unqualified teachers, limited teaching methods, and a lack of exposure to the target language all work to hinder Saudi students' achievement of the desired goal despite the fact that they take English classes for more than six years.

Status of teaching culture in Saudi Arabia.

The Ministry of Higher Education stated eight objectives for English language teaching. The first objective is to enable student to acquire basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Second is to develop student's awareness of the importance of English as a means of international communication. Third is to develop student's positive attitudes towards learning English. Fourth is to enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in various life situations. Fifth is to enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in different professions. Sixth is to develop student's awareness about the cultural, economic, religious and social issues of his society

and prepare him to participate in their solutions. Seventh is to develop the linguistic competence that enables students, in the future, to present and explain Islamic concept and issues, and to participate in spreading Islam. Eight is to enable student linguistically to benefit from English speaking nations that would enhance the concepts of international co-operation that would develop understanding and respect of cultural differences between nations. Ninth is to provide student with the linguistic basis that would enable him to participate in transferring other nations' scientific and technological advances that can enhance the progress of his nation (as cited in (Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2013)

Through various objectives, the Ministry of Education puts some emphasis on teaching culture and enhancing students' skills to communicate with people from other cultures. Similarly important is the need for strengthening students' own cultural and Islamic identity and how to use the language to teach and present Islam to outsiders.

Moreover, the English departments in various Saudi universities recognize cultural components and the importance of developing intercultural understanding. For instance, two objectives of the Colleges of Language and Translation at Princess Noura University (PNU) are “2—achieving cultural communication and dialogue with the world through language teaching, cultural exchange, and participation in international seminars and conferences” and “4—exchanging experiences and information and establishing partnerships with regional and international educational and cultural institutions” (PNU Site, 2016). Likewise, the English department at King Saud University (KSU) emphasizes the need to develop intercultural understanding: “The department also emphasizes scholarly research and community outreach and service, and promotes intercultural understanding and exchange” (KSU Site, 2016). One of the department's objectives states “8—promoting critical understanding of Western thought and the cultures of the English-speaking world, and opening avenues for fruitful intercultural dialogue with English-speaking nations and peoples” (KSU Site, 2016)

Moreover, the mission of the English department at Imam Mohammed University (IMU) states that

the College of Languages and Translation aspire to develop students' linguistic abilities, equip them with scientific expertise, and develop literary and cultural concepts that are relevant to English language that pave the way to build communication bridges with English speaking people that allows for learning other cultures and costumes. (IMU Site, 2016, translated)

However, in his analysis of the Saudi context regarding integrating culture, Alasmari (2008) argued that, although the place of foreign culture is signified by policymakers, this significance needs to be documented in curriculum policy. Saudi EFL teachers have generally held a positive attitude toward integrating culture into language teaching (Alasmari, 2008; Alfahadi, 2012; AlQahtani, 2003; Alsamani, 2014; Osman 2015). However, a disparity exists between teachers' conceptual awareness and real practice in the classroom. Alsamani (2014) conducted a study comparing cultural awareness of level two and level four students and concluded that, hypothetically, a difference should exist between them, with level four students demonstrating more understanding. However, the findings revealed no differences between the two levels, indicating that culture teaching is not part of teachers' practice. AlQahtani (2003) noted that, despite the positive attitude that Saudi teachers have regarding culture teaching, they are reluctant to engage students in cultural activities as they are concerned that exposing students to the target culture will negatively affect their cultural and Islamic identity. Similarly, Alasmari (2008) found that, in addition to the sensitive issues of presenting foreign culture, teachers' limited involvement with culture is due to the lack of support for the place of foreign culture, instructors' background, and a lack of sufficient cultural knowledge. Interestingly, studies have demonstrated that Saudi students aspire to develop their cultural awareness autonomously (Alasmari, 2008; Alsamani, 2014). For

instance, participants in Alasmari's (2008) study, who were pre-service teachers, reported that they benefited from online communication to seek interaction with native speakers from the target culture, which sometimes led to cultural discussions. Although this promising finding reflects students' motivation, they still lack instructional and pedagogical guidance.

This section provides an overview of the context of Arabic teaching in the United States and English teaching in Saudi Arabia, including the challenges faced and how culture is perceived and approached. It is apparent that the context of foreign language teaching in the United States and Saudi Arabia revealed some differences and similarities. Culture teaching in both contexts is recognized in the national standards and/or objectives, although it is emphasized more in the American context. Teachers in both contexts are aware of the importance of culture. Although their practices do not reflect their awareness, the reason behind the lack of culture teaching in both contexts seems to be different. Saudi teachers show some sensitivity toward issues related to cultural teaching and a fear of negatively affecting students' culture and values; this challenge does not exist in the American context.

This review helps in understanding the context of the current study that involves Saudi students learning English and American students learning Arabic. The American students are likely have not been introduced to the Arabic Gulf dialect neither their culture, thus, it is expected that they would show a limited knowledge about Saudi Arabia consequently show more interest in learning about it. On the other hand, teaching foreign language namely English in Saudi's context manifests an interest in strengthening students' own language and identity. There is also an emphasis in using the English language to present and teach Islam to the outside world. Therefore, Saudi students are likely to bring this kind of discourse to their online participation.

1.7 Definition of terms

- **Affordances:** refers to "what is available to the person to do something with. It is action in potential and it emerges as we interact with the physical and social world" (Van Lier, 2004, p. 91). Affordances refer to potentialities as well as constraints. Researchers have identified three types of affordances for online learning environment (Kirschner et al., 2004; Wang, 2008; 2009)
 - **Pedagogical affordances:** refers to the characteristics of technology-enhanced learning environment that supports learning activity for the target context and audience.
 - **Social affordances:** refers to the features of the environment that promote social interaction among its users.
 - **Technological affordances:** refers to the usability of the environment for learning and task accomplishment.
- **Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC):** "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situation based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, attitude" (Deardroff, 2006, p.149).
- **Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE):** refers "to the activity of engaging language learners in interaction and collaborative project work with partners from other culture through the use of online communication such as email, videoconferencing and discussion forum. The aim of such online interaction can be to develop students' communicative ability in the target language, to increase intercultural sensitivity and to encourage learner independence" (O'Dowd, 2007, p.4).
- **Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA):** is an approach to analyze discourse focusing on how meaning is made through the use of multiple codes of communication as opposed to just language.

- **Online discourse (OD):** in this study, it refers to students' interaction that takes place on the six Facebook group pages.
- **Social networking sites (SNS):** are (1) web based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Ellison and boyd, 2007, p.152).
- **Semiotic resources:** refers to the actions, materials and artifacts that people, the sign makers, use for communicative purposes that reflect their interest (Van Leeuwen, 2004).

1.8 Outline of Dissertation

This dissertation includes five chapters:

Chapter 1 is the chapter where I introduce this study, its purpose, the research questions and the importance of the research. I also present briefly the theoretical framework as well as a discussion of the context of teaching Arabic and English as foreign language in the US and Saudi Arabia. I concluded with definitions of the main terms that need to be clarified.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review that comprises the theoretical underpinning and the main theoretical constructs that guide this study, ICC and Affordances. I also discuss the empirical studies on telecollaboration and SNS in foreign language education.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology that I use for this dissertation, describes the context, the participants, task design, data collection tools and finally data analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 is divided into two sections; the first section presents findings for the first two questions which are related to ICC. The second section is devoted to findings on Facebook affordances as well as constraints based on students' practice, use and perceptions.

Chapter 5 provides summaries of the findings based on the four research questions, and then discusses the findings in the context of the relevant literature. It also presents this study's contributions, limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature that guides this research. It presents theoretical accounts as well as empirical studies that provide an understanding of the pedagogical use of online intercultural exchange. This study seeks to understand how online intercultural exchanges between Arabic and English language learners could promote their intercultural communicative competence as well as how the affordances of social networking sites—namely, Facebook—along with the affordances of the telecollaborative tasks enhance the intercultural learning experience

To carry out this research investigating the identified inquiries, a review of Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT, the theoretical underpinning of this study is presented. Then the two conceptual constructs this study examines; Intercultural (Competence) communicative (ICC), and affordance are discussed thoroughly. Finally, the researcher provides a review of empirical studies on telecollaboration as well as social networking sites and language education.

2.1 Sociocultural Theory and Language Learning

Different perspectives have emerged in the field of second language learning in terms of how language is acquired and learned; these perspectives range from behaviorists, who argue that language is acquired through mimicry and memorization, to the innatist perspective and monitor models of Krashen, the cognitivist or interactionist perspective, and the sociocultural perspective (Lightbown & Spada, 2006) as well as variations of socially based theories and approaches, like the socio-cognitive approach, suited learning, and community of practice (Block, 2007). Each approach incorporates its own language teaching practice.

This research is informed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (SCT), which views language as a social practice and encourages learners to be active participants in constructing the learning process. SCT was first proposed to provide an explanation of children's language development, but has since been applied in other fields, including second language learning and teaching (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). According to SCT, social interaction and participation in social activities are essential for cognitive development. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) explained that learning is embedded within social contexts and occurs as individuals, objects, and events in the environment interact with each other.

One of the main constructs of SCT is mediation—that is, all of humans' higher mental functions are mediated by physical and symbolic tools to act properly and regulate relationships. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) defined this as “a process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts and activities to regulate their material world or their own and each other's social and mental activity” (p. 59). For example, people might use several ways to solve a problem (e.g., remembering which groceries to buy), such as by trying to repeat what they need or writing the items down on a list. This mental human activity is not a passive process as viewed by the behaviorist framework; rather, it is active participation. By using available tools (symbolic or physical), individuals shape their world according to their purpose (Lantolf & Apple, 1994).

William and Burden (2009) suggested that mediators can also be people. They stated that interacting with other individuals with different levels of knowledge and skills plays a role in enhancing a person's learning experience. Therefore, learners are encouraged to engage with mediators such as more competent individuals, which theoretically would lead to more effective learning. This leads to another important SCT concept in the current research, which is the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Although ZPD is commonly applied in research, it is one of the least understood concepts and is sometimes misused or defined in contradictory ways. Lantolf (2009), one of the main SCT scholars in the field of second language acquisition, defines ZPD as the difference between what an individual can do independently versus with the help of mediation. Thus, ZPD is a region in which the learner is still incapable of achieving certain skills or abilities but can achieve them when offered relevant assistance; it reveals the transition stage of a learner's development from inter-psychological functions (during social interactions) to intra-psychological functions (human consciousness) (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008), where the individual would have the ability to regulate and appropriate the new knowledge or skills and consequently gain the freedom to create (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). It is clear that ZPD provides a way to capture "the dynamic interactions humans have with their environment and how this brings about development" (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008, p. 14).

The importance of ZPD to this dissertation resides in its emphasis on collaboration and social interaction, which are the essence of telecollaboration projects, where the teacher/researcher connects a learner with an expert (a native speaker) who provides assistance through collaborative dialogue based on a given task to achieve linguistic and cultural gains. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) emphasized that cognition cannot take place in a closed system; rather, it can only occur during the constructive process of the zone in which there is a possibility of production change. They maintained, "successful collaboration in the ZPD is dependent upon both the quality of the mediation and learner reciprocity" (p. 40). This study attempts to evaluate the quality of learners' interactions with the environment (i.e., Facebook) and with other more competent peers, during which each participant learns the other's culture, in order to determine how such interaction could enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence.

2.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence

This dissertation attempts to explore how we could enhance language learners' ICC using the affordances of SNS sites. Therefore in the section below, I will discuss ICC definitions and the most relative ICC models namely Kramersch (1993), Byram (1997) and Fantini (1997).

2.2.1 Overview and definitions of intercultural communicative competence

Within the communicative competence framework, a native speaker is viewed as a model for linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. However, despite the fact that this goal is unattainable, it is also undesirable when it comes to cultural competence (Byram, 1997, Kramersch, 1998), not only because it leaves learners' own culture in a periphery position (Alptekin, 2002) but because it implies an abandoning of one's values and beliefs in favor of those of native speakers (Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001). Another argument against the native speaker as model is that in a globalized world, interaction is more common between non-native speakers than between native and non-native speakers. In such a situation it is more important to exhibit an understanding of different cultures than it is to sound like a native speaker (Aguilar, 2008). Therefore, researchers (e.g. Byram, 1997, Kramersch, 1998) propose an intercultural speaker model who is equipped with "(an) understanding of the relationship between their own language and language varieties and their own culture and cultures of different social groups in their society and, on the other hand, the language varieties and cultures of others between (inter) which find themselves acting as mediator" (Fleming, M. Alred, J & Byram, M. 2003 p.61).

To become an intercultural speaker, teachers need to develop learners' intercultural competence (IC). Unfortunately, like any other social practice or construct, IC is hard to define, as it is a combination of two dynamic, complex words: culture and competence (Spitzberg and Chagon, 2009). Deardroff (2006) states that even though the term has been extensively used in academe, there is still no consensus on what ICC means and what the

desired outcomes are. Part of the difficulty is that ICC has been studied and investigated from different perspectives across disciplines: anthropology, communication, psychology, cultural studies, and education, particularly foreign language education (Byram, 1997). As Witte and Hardern (2012) state, “[the words] ‘intercultural’ and ‘competence’ can’t be defined in a universally valid manner; both notions are highly dependent on the context they are used in, and the subject they are applied in” (p.5).

Byram (2000 as cited in Kramsch, 2011) defined ICC as the ability “to see the relationship between different cultures, and to mediate that is to interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It involves ability to “critically or analytically understand that one’s own and other cultures’ perspective is culturally determined rather than natural” (p.10). In 2006, Deardroff sought to achieve agreement on the definition of ICC when he asked scholars in the field to provide their perspectives. He found that the majority agreed upon the following definition of ICC: “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude” (p.149).

Developing ICC differs from current practice of culture teaching, which involves providing factual knowledge about the target culture. As stated by Bennett *et al* (2003), it “demands a mix of culture specific approaches that stress the apprehension of a particular subjective culture combined with culture general approaches that address the larger issues of ethnocentrism cultural self-awareness and general adaptation strategies” (p 245).

2.2.2 Models of Intercultural Competence.

The field of ICC has developed various models that address the complexity of such construct as will be reviewed below.

2.2.2.1 Kramsch's sphere of interculturality (third culture).

Kramsch (1993) introduces the concept of *sphere of interculturality*. According to her, interculturality requires a reestablishment of the relations between language and its social constructs. To understand the target culture, learners need to observe the target culture in relation to their native culture. Kramsch (1993) emphasizes the essential role of dialogue and reflection on both one's own and the target culture in the development of intercultural competence. She maintains that teachers need to provide strategies and logic to help students understand cross-cultural aspects as well as to raise their awareness of cultural factors, e.g. age, social class, and gender. In 2010, Kramsch argued that ICC goes beyond "tolerance towards and empathy with others" (p.356); it is about understanding others in their cultural context, and it goes beyond the sole meaning of words and actions to hold "multiple changing and conflicting discourse worlds" (p.356).

Figure 1: Kramsch's Model of Interculturality

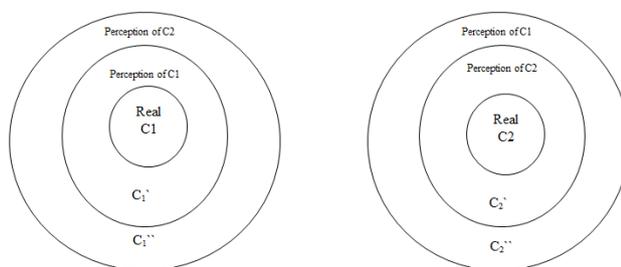


Figure 1 shows Kramsch's (1993) model of interculturality. It includes what she calls third space or third culture which involves developing a third perspective that includes comprehensive understanding of both C_1 (native culture), and C_2 (target culture) instead of adopting the target culture altogether. Consequently, enabling learners "to take both an insider and outsider view on C_1 and C_2 " (p.210). Her model, presented in three layers of circles, is based on cultural reality and culture perception or imagination: the innermost circle represents learners' actual membership in their own culture C_1 , the next circle $C_1`$ refers to

learners' perception of their own culture, and the outermost circle C_1'' indicates his imagination of the target culture—usually positive. Similarly, C_2 symbolizes the target culture; C_2' represents the target culture speakers' view of themselves, and finally C_2'' represents the view of the target culture toward the other culture. What learners need is to change their frame of reference and step beyond these perceptions in understanding others' practices. By doing so, they create their own third culture, which varies across learners.

2.2.2.2 Byram's intercultural communicative competence.

Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is probably the most influential framework in SLA research. It encompasses five main components or *savoir*: [See Appendix A for full description of each component's objectives]

Table 1: Byram's Model of Intercultural Competence

	Skills Interpret and relate <i>savoir comprendre</i>	
Knowledge Of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal <i>(savoir)</i>	Education Political education Critical cultural awareness <i>(savoir s'engager)</i>	Attitude Relativizing self valuing other <i>(savoir être)</i>
	Skills Discover and/ or interact <i>(savoir apprendre)</i>	

- a) *Attitude (savoir être)* is the ability to value one's culture and that of others and develop a sense of "openness, curiosity and readiness to suspend disbelief about others' culture and a belief about one's own" (p.91).
- b) *Knowledge (savoir)* means knowledge about the social rules, interaction conventions and their practices in both one's own culture and others' cultures.
- c) *Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)* refer to the ability to interpret and relate events, practices and values from others' culture to his own culture
- d) *Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre)* refer to skills that "allow individuals to acquire knowledge of culture and culture practices including the

ability to use existing knowledge, attitudes and skills in cross-cultural interaction” (p.98).

- e) *Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager)* is the ability to make evaluations based on the perspectives, practices and values of one's own culture and others' culture.

The first two components (attitude, knowledge) are preconditions for intercultural communication, while the next two are important skills to maintain successful interaction; the last one is an educational outcome that teachers need to help students develop.

In 2012, Byram stated that some scholars (e.g. Spitzberg and Chagon, 2009) have overlooked the centrality of the last component of his model, *critical cultural awareness*, which according to his model is the ultimate goal of intercultural competence development. Moreover, he highlights the fact that many intercultural competence models ignore the language component, and if they do acknowledge the language component, they do not clearly state the relationship between linguistic competence and cultural competence, which is also true of his own model. He maintains that it is the goal of educators to raise students' critical awareness of the cultural and linguistic relationship through “social analysis – the language use or linguistic practices, and self-analysis that involves negotiation of linguistic and cultural identities of the individuals” (p.11). Awareness of linguistic and cultural learning is not only useful but also educational and contributes to learners' empowerment and self-development. Being critical is necessary not only for language education, but important for citizenship education: two fields that need to complement each other.

Throughout his work on ICC (1997, 2001, 2003 & 2012), Byram includes a heavy discussion of social and cultural identity. He contrasts the identities of bicultural and intercultural people. Bicultural people are often suggested in the literature as never feeling quite at ease and experiencing a level of incompatibility as they seem to have values conflicting with their own imposed on them. The intercultural speaker, on the other hand, is able to “to

see how different cultures relate to each other in terms of similarities and differences, and in terms of origin, and to act as mediator between them” (Byram, M. et al, 2003, P.55).

It is important to note that it is only Byram (1997) who attempted to distinguish between intercultural competence (IC) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). According to him, IC is when one operates on all the components of the model in an intercultural exchange using the native language. ICC is when interaction involves foreign language. However, this distinction is criticized as being problematic since it oversimplifies the phenomenon to a language-based distinction that “downplays the internal diversity among members of the same speech community” (Belz, 2007, p. 138).

2.2.2.3 Fantini’s model of intercultural competence.

Fantini (1997, 2000) views ICC through three main domains or abilities: the ability to establish relations, to communicate with minimal loss, and to achieve a level of compliance from others (p. 4). Moreover, successful intercultural individuals are “often described with a variety of traits” (p. 27) including openness, respect, empathy, curiosity, motivation, and tolerance. However, he wonders how such traits could be developed in those who lack such traits. Fantini (2000) identifies four dimensions of ICC—awareness, attitude, skills and knowledge (A+ASK)—with awareness placed in the center indicating its essential role in maintaining successful intercultural exchange. It can be developed through reflection and introspection, which involves comparison between one’s LC1 and the LC2.

Language proficiency is another important aspect in Fantini’s ICC. Struggling with the language not only places constraints on the individual in understanding the host culture, but also prevents one from engaging in intercultural conversation (Fantini, 2005). Even though Fantini (2000) identifies four developmental levels, starting with educational traveler, to sojourner, to professional, and finally intercultural/multicultural specialists, he emphasizes

that ICC development is a lengthy life-long learning process that has no end point, since “individuals experience moments of regression or stagnation” (Fantini, 2005, p. 29).

Unlike Byram (1997), Fantini did not provide comprehensive objectives for ICC dimensions (A+ASK); however, he proposed an assessment tool (AIC), which is designed in YOGA format (Your Objectives Guidelines and Assessment), which could help educators ascertain ICC development before, during, and after the process. It proved to provide “valid, reliable indicators that are normative, formative and summative” (Fantini, 2012, p. 466). It is important to note that while these tools tend to be comprehensive in assessing ICC objectives and outcomes, additional qualitative assessments are needed beyond what individuals think of themselves as being or being able to do (Fantini, 2005).

2.2.3 Discussion of ICC Models

There are many more models of ICC than those reviewed above, but I have selected the most influential in the field of foreign language education and the most pertinent to this research. As reviewed above, most of these models operate within four components or dimensions: affective (attitude), cognitive (knowledge), behavioral (skills), and awareness.

The language component in these models receives different levels of importance. Even though Fantini (1997), Byram (1997), and Kramersch (1993) developed models that are based on the premise that intercultural competence is an important dimension in foreign language education and provide an explanation for how to integrate it in a FL classroom, it is only in Fantini’s (1997) model that language has been referred to explicitly and is considered crucial in intercultural engagement. All models that discuss the attitude component (Byram, 1997, Deardroff, 2006), or personal traits, as it is called by Fantini (1997)— including respect, openness, curiosity, and tolerance among others— considers it as a precondition or prerequisite component for successful intercultural communication. Byram

(1997) has provided a description of what attitude entails and outlined its objectives but never discussed how it can be developed. Fantini (2005) questions if it can be improved at all.

ICC assessment is also another area that shows divergence among models. Byram (1997) provides a set of objectives for each component, and has suggested using a portfolio, an “autobiography of intercultural experience” (Byram, 2005, p.14) as an element in the assessment. Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993) were not positive toward direct assessments based on individual self-reports. On the other hand, Fantini (1997) seems in favor of direct assessment using self-report instruments.

It is important that teachers/educators familiarize themselves with all these models as each complements the other. Kramsch (1993) is among the first scholars who brought culture and the intercultural dimension of language into the scholarly discussion. However, her work is more about offering a metaphorically deep explanation of what interculturality entails rather than to provide a model or a process of how to develop one’s intercultural competence. Byram’s (1997) model is the most cited and influential in intercultural research. However, its detailed objectives could be cumbersome for EFL teachers to follow. Fantini’s (1997, 2000) work is teacher-friendly and, instead of giving detailed objectives, he provides a handful of activities that teachers can implement in classrooms. However, his view that assessment should consist solely of self-reporting has received criticism. This dissertation employs primarily Byram’s ICC model as it considered the most comprehensive one in the literature, however, the researcher is going to refer to other models that are relative to the data under the study.

2.3 Affordances

Affordance is an important construct in ecological perspective of learning; a concept first originated by the psychologist Gibson (1979) who stated that “ affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes either for good or ill”

(p. 127). Affordances are not properties of artifacts; rather, they are relationships between the property and the actor or user. In the realm of language learning, Van Lier (2004) defined it as “the pre-signs [...] that get sign making going” (p. 93). Perception is considered the first stage in benefiting from available affordances, the learner needs to perceive the affordances in order to pick up on them and take valuable actions (Van Lier, 2004).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools are believed to provide an “immensely rich learning environment” (Van Lier, 2004, p. 20) that is full of affordances that could enrich the learning experience. However, they have yet to be explored. Chun, Kern and Smith (2016) argue that digital tools are not neutral, and it is essential to consider the specific affordances and constraints of each tool. They maintain “ignoring the specific affordances and constraints of computer assisted language learning (CALL) tool ... can severely limit the effectiveness of technology as an educational tool.

Researchers have developed different taxonomies or models of CMC features or affordances to help teachers how they could effectively integrate the tool into her curriculum that matches the learning goals. For instance, Smith, Alvarez-Torres and Zhao (2003) developed a taxonomy of four essential technological features of CMC that differentiate one tool from another: 1) temporality which refers to the two different modes synchronous and asynchronous, 2) anonymity which refers to the degree in which students' identity can be concealed, 3) modality which refers to the different modes (text, video, image) the online environment supports, and 4) spatiality refers to “varying capacities [of CMC] for supporting the manipulation of spatial distances for communication” (p.708). Kirschner et al (2004) and Wang (2008) proposed a framework that includes three types of affordances: pedagogical or educational, social and technological affordances. Pedagogical affordances refer to the features of the learning environment that facilitate specific learning behavior .e.g. collaborative work, in a given educational context. Social affordances concern with aspects of

the online environment that could facilitate social interaction. Technological affordances refer to the usability and utility of the online environment. They include features identified in Smith's et al (2003) study as well as others like navigation, synthesis, and access-control.

Gibson's definition of affordances also implied the concept of constraint "or ill". Thus, to obtain comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of a given CMC tool, educators need to consider the constraints that the tool may impose. Just like affordances, constraints are not properties of the environment but a perception of a potential for action that depends on learners' social and cultural background, skills and knowledge of using the CMC tool (Murphy & Coffin, 2003).

In studying affordances, researchers need to adopt a total context view of affordances (Van Lier, 2004; Kennewell, 2001) that is they need to attend to the complex interaction between all factors in the learning context including features of the digital tool features, learners experience and cultural background, the task design...etc. Lamy and Hample (2007) emphasize the important of user's perception as well in understanding the affordances of CMC tools, they state"

User's perceptions are more pertinent than the object itself. It is not just the material affordances of CMC that play a role in enhancing or limiting communication but also how people see them and the different practices that results from the different perspectives (p.45).

To analyze the affordances of Facebook in the context of OIE, I designed the following framework that presents an overview on how I approach exploring the affordances of Facebook for intercultural learning.

Figure 1: Analysis of Facebook Affordances in OIE Project

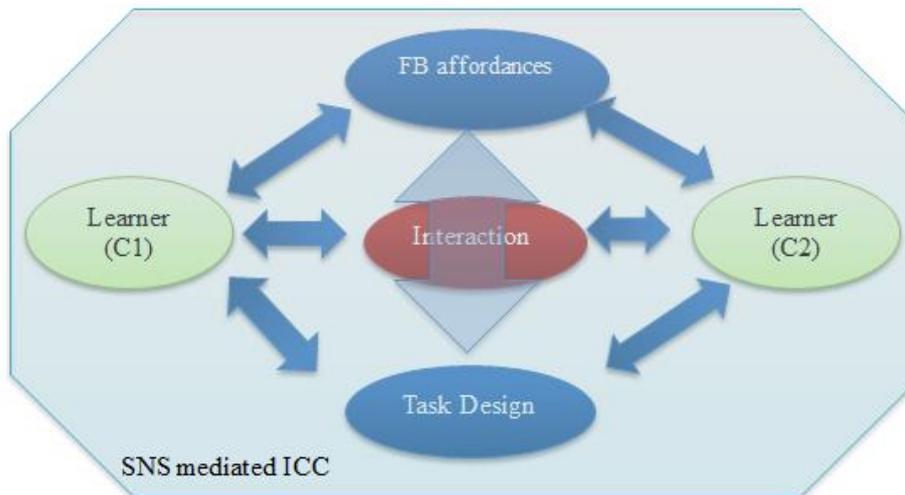


Figure 1 shows the complex interactions between various factors that may influence examining how Facebook could mediate intercultural learning. This includes task design, the underpinning theoretical background of the study, and learners' previous experiences, cultural backgrounds and expectations.

2.4 Review of Empirical Studies

Telecollaboration.

In the last few decades, it is noticeable that technologies, especially computer mediated communication (CMC) tools, have impacted the field because they are “full of promising avenues for language instruction” (Thorne, 2008, p. 419). One of these avenues is telecollaboration where learners from places dispersed geographically are linked with the goal to develop language skills and intercultural communicative competence (Guth and Helm, 2010, O’Dowd, 2007).

The increased work on telecollaboration diversifies its scope. Thorne (2006) identifies four models for using technologies for intercultural exchange. The first and most well known

in North America is telecollaboration that requires intensive coordination between two institutions to link classes in which each is learning the language of the other; 2) Tandem learning is often practiced in Europe, pairing up individuals who are interested in learning the other's language; 3) a new approach is to link local experts, for example immigrants or heritage speakers with FL learners; and 4) a final approach is to have students participate in some of the target language's online communities. Regardless of the variety of names given to these approaches, O'Dowd (2007) suggests that terminologies do not really matter as researchers use them interchangeably. The essence of all these models is that they involve online intercultural exchanges.

Learners in such exchanges are engaged in authentic tasks where they not only trade information but also are involved in the expression of identity and cultural values with the goal to "develop de-centered perspectives that invite them to go beyond the meaning of words into culturally situated logic that inform them" (Ware, 2005, p.65).

The focus of telecollaboration research begins with exploring the development of cultural awareness (Furstenberg et al, 2001) and intercultural communicative competence (Belz, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003; Schenker, 2011; Muller Hartman, 2000). However, research on telecollaboration expanded significantly to report inclusive conclusions. Some researchers commented that telecollaboration fosters cross cultural understanding and contests cultural stereotypes (Garcia & Crapott, 2007; Bauer et al, 2006; Furstenberg, 2003); it constructs online relationships (Ware, 2005; Thorn, 2003, Liaw & Master, 2010; Jin & Erben, 2007 & Jin, 2011); and improves writing skills (Ware, 2005; O'Dowd, 2003), morphological development (Dussia, 2006), pragmatic competence (Kinginger & Belz, 2005), and opportunities for receiving feedback from peers (Vinagre, M. & Muños, 2011; Vinagre & Lera, 2008). On the other hand, other studies also reported many impediments that hinder successful exchange. (Belz, 2003, 2002: Ware, 2005, Thorne, 2003). However the main

important goals are: developing intercultural competence, and linguistic competence, which will be discussed below.

2.4.1 Telecollaboration and intercultural competence.

The rationale that drives researchers' interest to integrate telecollaboration in FL classrooms is a reflection of scholars' interest in the field to incorporate cultural and intercultural competence in teaching FL (Belz, 2007). In this globalized multilingual world, being a native-like speaker is not the ultimate goal; instead learners need to set their goal to be "intercultural speakers" where they can speak effectively and appropriately (Kramsch, 1993, Byram, 1997). Byram's (1997) ICC model has been the influential guiding framework of telecollaboration research that aims at enhancing ICC (O'Dowd, 2003, Belz, 2002, Schenker, 2011 et al), particularly in task design and assessing learners' ICC.

Cultura, one of the earliest projects, attempts to implement online collaboration that links two groups of students, who are from different countries in which each study the other's language. It started in 1997 by linking French and English learners (Furstenberg et al, 2001), and since then, it has been adapted by different institutions to involve different languages: Russian and English, Spanish (Mexico) and English (Bauer, et al, 2006), and English and Spanish (Spain) (Garcia and Crapott, 2007). This project is premised on the notion of the cultural comparison principle where learners read and discuss in class the other group's responses to different types of questionnaires—word association, reaction to situation, and sentence completion—then write their perspective in an online forum that normally involves an extended dialogue between the two groups where each group explains to the other differences in their understanding (Furstenberg et al, 2001). Researchers have reported many benefits including the challenging of cultural stereotypes and common myths (Furstenberg et al, 2001; Garcia and Crapott, 2007), increasing the sense of national identities and cultural

heterogeneity (Bauer et al, 2006), and bringing to the forefront a number of social and cultural issues that expand one's intercultural competence (Furstenberg et al, 2001).

In the first studies, even still, email is one of the most used tools in such project aside from the *Cultura* project. O'Dowd (2003) provides an in-depth analysis of a one year email telecollaborative exchange between Spanish and English learners. He mainly investigated the characteristic email exchanges that lead to (or fail to lead to) intercultural competence development. Taking into account Byram's (1997) ICC, he designed several tasks where students needed to interact with people of the target language and culture, exchange opinions and ideas about their own and the other culture with the goal to "become aware of the different interpretations of cultural products or practices which members of another culture may have" (p 123). Data showed that email exchange has great potentials to develop "successful intercultural rich relationship with [students'] partners" (p.138). Schenker (2012) conducted a similar study to O'Dowd (2003), but she specifically examined how Byram's (1997) ICC objectives could be achieved through six weeks of emails in an intercultural exchange between American and German students. She had her students interact via email with native speakers by discussing different set of cultural questions that she believed would enrich the discussion. Content analysis of students' emails revealed that most of Byram's ICC objectives and sub-objectives could be traced, and consequently, there is a potential to assess students' ICC. Schenker (2012) also found that that the email exchange increase students' self-knowledge about the target culture.

Responding to the call of implementing new emerging technologies as each new tool has a set of affordances and constraints (Thorne, 2006; Thorne & Payn, 2005), Jin and Erben (2007) investigated the viability of instant messaging (IM), O'Dowd (2007) explored the use of video conferencing in corporations with email, and Canto et al (2013) used video conferencing and Second Life. Jin and Erben (2007) use a series of tasks that suggested by

O'Dowd and Ware (2006), and have their students to complete these tasks via IM. They reported many benefits of IM including increasing students' intercultural sensitivity, and increasing interest toward the target culture. Jin & Erben (2007) further identified four characteristics of IM as related to developing learners' ICC: tasks are important, as learners seem to engage in discussion inspired by the task requirement, IM facilitates the establishment of friendship among partners, IM chat involves a negotiation of language and cultural meaning, and finally, reciprocal learning where partners feel responsible to provide information to each other either about language or culture.

In another telecollaborative project between German and English learners, O'Dowd (2006) incorporated video conferencing with email to have his students conduct an ethnographic interview with the native speakers. He concludes that the combination of the synchronous and asynchronous tools offers learners opportunities to develop certain components of ICC. While email provides well-explained information that enhances learners' knowledge and understanding, video conferencing has improved skills in discovery and interaction due to the immediacy of the medium. O'Dowd (2006), however, noted that the immediate response through synchronous communication has the potential to cause misunderstandings and moments of tension.

As reviewed above, telecollaboration is being implemented in different contexts, languages and different technological tools, e.g. email, discussion forums, chat, and videoconferencing. Researchers, mostly inspired by Byram's (1997) work, designed different tasks and activities to get their students engaged in cultural interaction. The research reports many positive promising results with regard to ICC development. However, at the same time, many challenges have risen that prevent such fruitful engagement.

2.4.2 Tensions in online intercultural exchange.

Due to the complex nature of telecollaboration that involves sociocultural, institutional, and psychological factors, it is almost impossible to avoid missed or failed communication (Belz, 2003). Many studies, including those that reported successful communication (e.g. O'Dowd, 2003), looked at aspects that may lead to unsuccessful communication. For instance, O'Dowd (2003) notes that having an unreceptive audience reinforced stereotypes, negative attitudes, and shut down potentials of engaging in intercultural dialogue.

Belz (2002, 2003), who has done extensive work on telecollaboration, highlighted different issues that would lead to failed communication. Belz had her students work on three phases; first, the American students design a website where they wrote an autobiography to introduce themselves to their partners. Once the partnerships are set, students were required to discuss three parallel texts that explore different cultural phenomena in the hope of an intercultural rich exchange emergence. The last phase is to design a webpage collaboratively based on a topic that interests them. Even though Belz (2002) found such telecollaborative procedures have led to successful intercultural communication, some groups—with low functionality—were not able to do so. Belz (2002, 2003, 2005) has explored different aspects of tension. In 2002, Belz collected data from different resources including institutional and societal statistics, informational interviews, policy documents, and academic publications to illuminate the diverse social aspects that are involved in any telecollaboration project. She found that these social aspects operate at different levels: A) the level of context, including language valuation, technology access and use, and B) the level of the institutional setting, e.g. course accreditation and misalignment of academic calendars. In similar study, Ware (2005) added two other factors: differences in expectations and norms, and individual differences in motivation and use of time. Kramsch and Thorne (2003) also found that operating in different communicative genres would lead to miscommunication. Their study

revealed a misalignment in communicative purposes between the two groups of students: French students engaged in more factual and impersonal communication, while Americans were looking for more interpersonal communication and relationship building. These social dimensions and individual differences, inherent between the two countries may negatively affect student involvement in the discussion.

Besides these social-cultural issues, research also revealed that word choice, pronoun usage, and questioning techniques could be the source of a lack of intercultural competence development. Belz (2002) for example, found that a large number of negative evaluations in conjunction with negative attitudinal appraisals by the German students negatively impacted the partner exchange. Furthermore, she notes the type of questions that the Germans posed were ones that only invited a single presupposed answer and thus did not give Eric, the American student, a discussion space, whereas Eric's questions indicated a curiosity and openness to learn (Belz, 2005). In his collaborative study between American and Arab, Aljamhour (2005) found that misunderstanding occurs due to what he calls "writing in English but thinking in Arabic". Arabic students (Egyptians and Saudis) were writing incompressible post because they were writing in Arabic style which led to misunderstandings.

Thorne (2003) states that the "culture-of-use" of certain technological tools is another dimension that might amplify the tension. He argues that technologies are not neutral but influenced by previous experience with Internet use. In one of his case studies, Thorne (2003) found that email is not a good tool for peer communication for today's students, as these students have shifted their interaction to instant messaging, which represents more of the youth culture of communication.

2.4.3 Telecollaboration and language development.

The rationale of Telecollaboration with respect to linguistic development is based on the notion that interacting with native speakers increases the opportunities of receiving authentic input, which theoretically will lead the students to notice linguistic structures, and consequently enhance language learning (O'Dowd, 2007). More importantly, the social dimensions that are inherent in Telecollaboration projects allow learners to have the opportunity to interact with age-peer native speakers. This, in turn, will broaden the range of available discourse options in comparison to traditional classrooms (Belz, 2007).

Belz and Kinginger (2002) and Thorne (2005) highlight the great potential of telecollaboration in promoting students' pragmatic competence. Belz and Kinginger (2002) provide an account of two case studies that show the potential of telecollaborative exchange in the development of the pragmatic competence of learners' use of formal and informal second person pronouns (T/V) in French (*tu* vs *vous*) and German (*du* vs *sie*), which is one of the complex linguistic features that are important to "express peer solidarity" (p.192). Belz and Kinginger (2002) claim that through social interaction with native speakers peers that includes psychological and social critical incidents along with peer assistant in language use, the discourse options that learners will be exposed to are broadened and enhanced. Analysis of the two students' email and chat showed that there is a change in their usage of the pronoun *T* in a way that is more appropriate.

Belz and Vyatkina (2005) went beyond observing qualitative developmental analysis to intervening in a pedagogical activity throughout three weeks with an intervention in the first week that started with enhanced instruction, then went to explicit instruction, and finally to fine-tuned instruction. This intervention aims at raising students' awareness of the use of four German modal particles (MPs): *ja*, *den*, *doch*, and *mal* using Telekorp; a corpus that is compiled out of students' own telecollaborative exchanges. The analysis revealed that

students' accuracy and frequency of using MP increased tremendously. Besides, students' reflection displayed an increase meta-pragmatic awareness of the MP meaning and function.

Another strand of research has explored the viability of telecollaboration as a space for peer feedback (Vinagre and Era, 2008; O'Dowd & Ware, 2008; Vinagre and Munoz, 2011). In a German and Spanish telecollaboration, Vinagre and Munoz (2011) duplicating Vinagre and Era's (2008) study, had their students correct each other's' mistakes, and provided them with guidelines. Students were required to write emails half in their native language and the other half in the target language. The results were promising as students provided different strategies to address their partners' errors and were willing to provide correction. More importantly is that the students seemed to attend to their error, as the percentage of recycling errors was relatively high. However, it should be noted that students are not qualified to provide metalinguistic feedback, and they sometime offered inaccurate suggestions.

Recent studies have looked at how telecollaboration would enhance the language skills of speaking (Canto et al, 2013) and writing (Jin, 2013). Focusing on scaffolding and the importance of inter-subjectivity among partners, Jin (2013) found that intercultural exchanges between Chinese learners and Chinese native speakers developed the quantity of the students' writing, while the quality didn't improve as rapidly as the quantity. This discrepancy is attributed to the fact that students were not asked to focus on the form. Canto et al (2013) explored the potential of using video conferencing and Second Life to improve the oral skills of the students. The three groups (control group, Second Life, videoconferencing) had the same instructions except that in the third meeting the experimental groups (videoconferencing and Second Life) performed their interaction with native speakers, and the control group performed in the traditional way with their classmates. Comparing the post-test results of the two experimental groups with a control group, the experimental groups

performed significantly better, especially the low achieving students.

2.4.4 Discussion of telecollaboration studies.

Online intercultural exchanges with native speakers (telecollaboration) have opened up a new possibility to enhancing students' intercultural competence and cultural awareness. The fact that students are interacting with expert users has also been proven to develop learners' pragmatic competence and language development. Despite all these promising benefits, telecollaboration is not any easy project to carry out in a classroom. Many studies have reported tensions and miscommunication that leads to reinforcing stereotypes about the other cultural group.

Therefore, scholars (e.g., Lawrence, 2013; Ware, 2013; Thorne, 2008) have put an emphasis on the paramount role of teachers. They need to “act as a critical mediating resource and sounding board to facilitate consciousness raising and modeling cultural stance” (Thorne, 2008, p 430). The tensions that might arise during the exchange should not be seen negatively, but as a point of departure (Belz, 2003; Schneider and Emde, 2006) where the teachers can raise students' awareness to the causes of miscommunication, and hopefully find a chance to promote intercultural competence about the difference between the two cultures. Moreover, the teacher should be aware of the importance of task design (O'Dowd and Ware, 2006) as that plays a significant role in engaging students in a deep cultural discussion.

Social Networking Sites in Foreign Language education.

Social Networking Sites (SNSs hereafter) are one of the Web 2.0 emergent technologies. They basically incorporate many features of CMC as they are participatory, authentic, and immediate and engage the community (Antenos-Conforti, 2009) with hyperlinking, search-ability, and multimedia (Ducate & Arnold, 2011), but “they amplify the

power of these features because they are placed in a social context” (Ellison & boyd, 2013,156). These dynamic characteristics along with people’s attitudes toward technologies are together credited with the rise of SNSs like Facebook, twitter, Google plus, MySpace, and LinkedIn, to name but few.

2.4.5 Social Network Sites Defined.

According to Ellison and boyd (2013), SNSs constitute a genre of social media that are essentially situated within the CMC scholarly framework. SNSs aim at a) enhancing communication by overcoming barriers, b) facilitating the presentation of self, and c) cultivating connection with people of common interest. Since their beginning in 1997, SNSs keep changing and evolving; thus scholars find it quite challenging to provide a unified definition. Ellison and boyd (2007) introduced the most cited definition:

“SNS as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”(p 211)

However, in their most recent article (2013), Ellison and boyd argue that during the previous five years, SNSs underwent a considerable change that necessitates providing a revised definition of SNS:

“SNS is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.” (p.152)

SNSs, like most CMC services, require participants to create a profile that often

includes a screen name and picture, along with some demographical information (McBrick, 2009; Ellison & boyd, 2007). Even though Ellison and boyd (2013) argue that “as a social networking sites matured as genre, profiles simultaneously lost their centrality and also became the product of aggregated media, personal updates, ad system generated content based on user activity” (154), they still emphasize that the profile is the core element of an SNS. The profile incorporates many features that make it more dynamic and interactive, for example, commenting on status updates or uploaded pictures on Facebook, replying to or re-tweeting a tweet on Twitter, getting updated report on groups one joins, or the content that the “system provides such as a subset of one’s fixed network and activity on third party sites.”(p.155)

Connected to the profile are friends’ lists or followers’ lists. Once one creates a profile, the SNS usually suggests, asks, or recommends a user to add friends that would ultimately create one’s network on the site to which they are usually publically visible unless they choose to change the privacy setting. Trying to imitate the kind of relationship one has in the offline context where weak and strong connections exist, SNS designers have developed a sophisticated fine grained privacy setting that allows a person to put people in different categories where the user can choose which content to display or hide to certain groups of people.

Another feature discussed by Ellison and boyd (2007) is view and traverse, which basically mean “the ability to traverse one’s own connections and those of others.” They used to be considered one of SNS’ defining features. However, this feature has lost its significance as “SNSs have become mainstream...content is surfaced through stream and each piece of content is embedded with numerous links to other content nuggets.” (Ellison and boy, 2013, p.157).

SNS technologies have many affordances that enable users to sustain relationships and keep themselves updated by creating a profile, updating status, sharing links and photos, and chatting and messaging that can enhance one's social ties both online and offline (Jones & Bronack, 2008). Knobel and Lankshear (2008) state that all the symbolic actions associated with such sites like status updates, Hashtag, tweet, re-tweet, comment, reply, like, and poke facilitate interactions and affiliations among members.

2.4.6 Theoretical and methodological frameworks of using SNS.

The majority of work on social network mediated language learning is based on socially informed paradigms. These include sociocultural theory (Thorne and Lantolf, 2006), situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1996), Multiliteracies (Kern, 1992, New London Group, 1996), language socialization (Duff, 2000; Watson-Gegeo and Nelson, 2003).

Vygotsky's (1997) sociocultural theory plays an important role in understanding the nature of SNS within language learning pedagogy. It suggests that individual's social interaction with other people and cultural artifacts that are within one's environment play an essential part in the cognitive development of learning and especially learning of language (Thorne, Lantlof, 2006). Many of the studies herein examined were guided by this principle as they aimed at having their students get involved in interactions that go beyond the confines of the classroom.

Drawing on Vygotskian sociocultural theory, Lave and Wenger (1996) proposed the situated learning theory in communities of practice (CoP) that is also influential in SNS research (Sykes and Holden, 2011; Mills, 2011). CoP argues that "learning, thinking, knowing are relations among people engaged in activity with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (Lave, 1991, p.65). Situated learning theory abandons the notion that learning is solely constructed in the mind; it is rather fundamentally constructed through social actions as a process within a sustained community of practice (Lave and

Wenger, 1996). Mills' (2011) adapted situated learning theory into his simulation project where he examined the viability of Facebook to create a domain of interest, mutual engagement within the community, and a shared repertoire of resources and practices, which are the essential components that constitute a community of practice. Building community or sense of community among students has been highlighted as one of the goals of most SNS mediated language learning.

Another instructional framework that has informed SNS work is the Multiliteracies framework (Kern, 1992, New London Group, 1996). Multiliteracies acknowledge the change in society in term of communication, information sharing, and linguistic and cultural diversity. In essence multiliteracies means the abilities and skills that students have to reflect critically on available design in which they will be able to transform into new other design through interaction with other various design and designers (Thorne, Reinhardt, 2011). According to the New London Group, multiliteracies pedagogy includes four main components; situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. Studies by Blattner and Fiori (2011), and Reinhardt and Zander (2011) have been grounded in multiliteracies, besides socialization and sociocultural theory.

Methodologically, as noted by Kern, Ware, and Warschauer (2008) research that based on “socially attuned” approaches is not merely interested in “quantifying language development but also understanding how learners interpret and construct meaning online across culturally situated contexts” (p.283). Hence, data are not drawn from a single experimental framework, but instead from a mixture of qualitative, ethnographical and discourse analysis (Ware et al, 2008; Reinhardt, 2012) and sometimes a combination of qualitative data with experimental quantitative analysis (e.g. Shih, 201; Suthiwartnarueput and Wasamasomsithi, 2011) which reflects the current direction of SLA research that incorporates different methodological frameworks (Chapelle, 2009; Reinhardt, 2012).

2.4.7 Social network sites in L2 pedagogy.

Considering its popularity, widespread diffusion, the intense involvement of youth in SNSs where they lose track of time (Egbert, 2006), as well as the various technological and networking affordances available, L2 educators have been intrigued to explore the potential of Social Networking Sites in language learning and teaching by creating pedagogically sound activities that might enhance language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2008). However, since social networking is considered an emergent technology, the majority of work is still in its first research phase (Blyth, 2008 and Levy, 2007), focused mostly on description and evaluation (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; McBrick, 2009; Zourou, 2012; Sykes & Holden, 2011), and much of the empirical research has been focused on opinion, attitude, and learners' SNS practices (Mitchell, 2012; Stevenson & Liu, 2010). There has been a notable increase in the number of pilot studies or investigations that report many benefits: sociopragmatics development (Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Reinhardt & Riu, 2013) extended interaction beyond the classroom (Aoki, 2009; Boraue et al, 2009; Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Alshehri, 2011; Blattner & Lomicka, 2012), meta-language awareness (Reinhardt, J & Zander, 2011), increased student engagement (Mills, 2011), improving writing and grammar (Suthiwartnarueput and Wasamasomsithi, 2012), peer review (Shih, 2011), critical language learning (Halvorsen, 2009), social presence (Lomicka & Lord, 2012), and literacy and identity development (Chen, 2013, Halvorsen, 2009).

2.4.8 .1. Interactional competence development.

Many studies have investigated the viability of SNS in the language classroom as an extended space for various class activities (Mills, 2011; Omer et al, 2012; Manan et al, 2012; Alshehri, 2011; Boraue et al, 2009; Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Lomicka and Lord, 2012) to increase a sense of community among students and have them use the language outside the academic context as Chin (2012) says to “heat up every day English communication” (p. 16).

It has been acknowledged that the classroom context falls short in teaching everyday communication as it does for academic language (Thorne, 2003). L2 educators hypothesize that SNS would be a suitable place to get students to engage in everyday conversation. For instance, Menan et al (2012) claims that Facebook's popularity among young adults, their familiarity with its features, the group privacy options, and the notification services that keep them updated make Facebook a "powerful pedagogical tool" (p.7) that leads students to highly accept its use as an extended space for discussion.

One of the earlier studies that implements Facebook to enhance a community of practice among students is Mills (2011) who adapted situated learning framework theory (Lave & Wenger, 1996) to ascertain the nature of French language learners' participation and collaboration in a simulation project that took place on Facebook where each learner needed to create a profile enacting a particular French character/persona. Mills found that students were able to create a joint enterprise not only because the project started with a pre-established set of common interests and goals, but also through the narrative in their memoirs where the students created a sense of community among the class members. The project also increased students' engagement and participation, which in turn played a role in individual L2 identity formation.

Omer et al (2012), Manan et al (2012), and Alshehri (2012) have conducted studies where they investigate the possibility of using Facebook as online discussion space. While they implemented differently with different set of tasks, all have reported promising results. Omer et al (2012) have divided the class into groups of 4-5 with mixed levels to facilitate discussion on information-task activities. The study lasted for 3 weeks, and students were required to post at least six entries. Results showed that Facebook has promoted interaction among the students, as the descriptive statistical analysis of the online entries demonstrated that learners contributed substantially to the group discussion and were motivated to be active

participants regardless of their low proficiency level and the technical problems they faced. Menan et al (2012) use Facebook to blend the face-to-face classroom with online instruction. They created a Facebook group page in which students were required to join. They designed a series of tasks that have class and online requirements. For three weeks, students engaged in class discussion in a given topic and later were asked to respond to the task requirement on Facebook. The researchers found that Facebook solves many problems especially by making possible for class activities to be completed within the time allotted. The teacher report that she was able to cover the course content and to provide prompts as well as comprehensive feedback that in turn encourage students' participation.

Alshehri (2011) uses Facebook mobile application to examine students' participation and interaction through the lens of the connectivism framework (Simons, 2004). Connectivism is a digital learning theory that argues, "through the use of networked technologies, learning can be distributed outside the learners within personal learning community and across social networking" (Simons, 2005, webpage). Alshehri (2011) had his students as part of their out of class activity, use the Facebook application in their mobile to participate in a class group page by posting a discussion question or sharing videos or photos that have significant meaning. They also needed to write some descriptions with any uploaded media. Analysis of Facebook content showed that students' participation was rich in contextual discussion using language associated with the informal register that reflects the nature of the out of class activity. They were also able to distinguish between what is critical to their language learning by using English with valid and valuable discussions, while they were using Arabic when the topic was trivial or not related to what they were required to do. Moreover, students were engaged in Facebook by using their own context to create authentic resources for their mobile language learning experience.

The accessibility of videos and image related to the task in Facebook promoted better understanding of the topic (Omar et al, 2012; Alshehri, 2012). Moreover, the online dictionaries and Google translations provided students with assistance with regard to choosing appropriate vocabulary and, to some degree, sentence structures (Omar et al, 2012).

The inherently conversational feature of Twitter makes it a good place to enhance interaction among participants. Boraue et al (2009) used Twitter with Chinese EFL learners who enrolled in a distance learning class. He asked students to create an account and follow each other to promote their communicative competence. Results drawn from students' tweets and questionnaires showed that twitter can be a valid site to train students in three components of communicative competence—sociolinguistic, strategic, and cultural competence. Students enjoyed Twitter and some asked to keep the project going even after the class was over because they wanted to keep using the language on a daily basis. Similarly Antenos-Conforti (2009) describes the potential of Twitter in providing a context for FL learners to use the language outside the classroom as they asked the students to update their status (output) and read other tweets (input). It also allowed learners to connect with native speakers without asking for permission in case users set their profile open to the public. Results showed that students took two different positions: one group didn't like including Twitter as an educational tool, the other was more enthusiastic and enjoyed the opportunity, especially communicating with native speakers. The researchers also found that most of the status updates resembled textbook content, which they think shows that Twitter provided opportunities to practice what they learned outside the classroom. They also conclude that Twitter helped to create a virtual extension of the physical classroom, fostering a strong sense of community. Extending the research of Antenos-Conforti (2009), Lomicka and Lord (2012) examined the role of Twitter in building a community but focusing specifically on the indicator of social presence and its role in community building. They had their students tweet

weekly with their classmates as well as with native speakers. Results revealed that through interactions among students and between students and native speakers, a sense of community was established in a fun and interactive way. With regard to social presence, the authors argue that due to the type of activity and the nature of Twitter, the effective and interactive indicators were the highest, not so much for the cohesive indicators. Unlike Antenos-Conforti's (2009) study, all the students appreciated the opportunity given to them to use the daily language by interacting with each other and with native speakers.

SNS practices and uses are considered a social practice that can be a source for language learning if teachers raise the awareness of students in this regard. Reinhardt and Zander (2011) conducted a study with ESL students to raise their awareness of their use of Facebook. Based on the multiliteracies framework, they designed a series of experiential and critical awareness activities that aimed to have students recognize their social networking use as a literacy practice that may enhance their language development. They first distributed questionnaires to explore students' reasons for studying English, followed by interviews to further discuss students' use of social networking. Then, they implemented social networking gaming (SNG) where learners had to discuss a variety of SNGs. Results of the study showed that students were split into two different opinions about the activity: those whose prior experience was in a teacher-centered learning environment and were studying English to pass the TOEFL test were resistant to engaging in the activity while the other group found it enjoyable and interesting, using their digital literacy to learning English. Such activities are useful for any language teachers planning to integrate SNS in their classroom as this would leverage students practice and understanding of SNS as a way to cultivate language learning.

2.4.9 SNS and sociopragmatics competence.

One of the attractive features of SNS is that it provides exposure to authentic language use and a native speaker community, where learners can interact (McBrick, 2009; Blattner

and Fiori, 2011). A different path for using such features is to expose students to text and threads written by native speakers, and direct their attention to the sociopragmatic features of the language in which learners can learn how to use language appropriately especially when it is culturally and contextually contingent.

One of the earlier empirical studies on this area is Blattner and Fiori's (2011) who built their study on the multiliteracies framework and the concept of peripheral participation in order to examine the potential of SNS to enhance intermediate Spanish learners' sociopragmatics awareness and multiliteracies skills. Peripheral participation, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), claims that newcomers participate partially in a community and with low-risk tasks until they eventually "fully participate in the sociocultural practices of a community"(p. 30). In light of this principle, Blattner and Fiori (2011) designed an awareness-raising task wherein they had their students join a class Facebook group and share links of three Facebook group pages that somewhat related to the themes of their textbook content. Students were asked to observe the language used in those Facebook group pages that they had selected, and to keep notes on the language they noticed for further analysis as a way of engaging the students in sociopragmatics. Results showed that SNS provides students with opportunities to be exposed to language use and a variety of pragmatic behaviors within a cultural context. Students demonstrated understanding of Spanish sociopragmatics, especially with leave & take and greeting. Moreover, the contextual clues surrounding the language use on Facebook promoted development of vocabulary and colloquial expressions that can hardly be found in a dictionary or textbook.

In a similar vein, Reinhardt and Ryu (2013) explored the role of Facebook through the lens of a bridging activity framework in improving beginning Korean learners' sociopragmatic awareness especially with regard to future markers and everyday use of honorific endings. Bridging activities involved "bringing learners' everyday digital

communicative practice into the L2 classroom. Such activities facilitate the experiential and analytical awareness of digitally-mediated student selected or created texts and literacy practices” (Reinhardt and Thorne, 2011, p. 270). The design of these activities involved observation and collection, creation and participation, and guided exploration and analysis. Considering that the proficiency level of the students was low, the researchers made some modifications to the activities from the bridging activity model. The teacher decided to select the Facebook text appropriate to the students beginning level instead of having the students find text that would be beyond their understanding. Then, she had them first identify familiar sociopragmatics features, and then guided them to analyze unfamiliar features. They latter role–played invented Korean characters, interacted with each other in character, and responded to prompts posted by the teacher. Results were similarly promising. Students were able to notice intentional misuse of honorifics, flouting of pragmatic norms, and recognize contextual use constraints especially with regard to the addressee's status.

2.4.10 .4. SNS and cultural/intercultural competence development.

Since the rise of Internet technologies in language education, computer-mediated intercultural competence has become one of the fascinating trends in L2 research. Teachers were able to connect native speakers with language learners where each can help the other with the language they are learning. One of the recognized challenges of such a project is to find a partner class and cooperative teacher who is willing to have her/his class work with a distance class (O’Dowd, Rotter, 2009). Sykes and Holden (2011) and McBride (2009) highlight the opportunities to connect L2 learners with native speakers of the target language to enhance intercultural learning through social networking sites. Even though there are no studies that directly investigated to what extent interacting with native speakers through SNS would promote cultural learning, there are several studies that have included native speakers to participate with their students to provide authentic input, and audience (Antenose-Conforti,

2009; Blattner, G & Lomicka, 2012; Stevenson & Liu, 2010; Lomick and Lord, 2011).

Many studies—some mentioned above—have attempted to delve into the possibility of enhancing cultural learning through connecting language learners with native speakers. For instance, Antenose-Confortie (2009) and Lomicka and Lord (2011) had their students tweet on a weekly basis as a class requirement. While these two studies have different purposes, both have included native speakers with whom their students can interact. Despite the fact that the native speaker participation was minimal, the students in both studies appreciated the opportunity to interact with native speakers and reported that this has helped them to learn about the target culture in meaningful ways. Halverson (2011), who investigated the potential for the SNS, MySpace as a site to enhance critical language pedagogy in which autonomy, empowerment and identity formation are considered key elements for successful language learning, found that teachers can encourage their students to interact with native speakers to boost their language and cultural learning. Through his observation he noticed that some students communicated with native speakers even though it was not a requirement. Although Mills' (2011) study did not have native speakers interact with the students, the global assimilation project where students invented French identities allowed students to engage in cultural discussion about France and share links and picture of cultural products and perspectives. Alshehri (2012), whose his participants are all Saudis but came from different tribal-cultural background, have found that sharing authentic videos and images that reflect students' cultural practices have increased cultural understanding among the students.

Moreover, studies that investigate students' practices and uses of SNS (Mitchell, 2011; Stevenson and Liu, 2010), noted that some students are using Facebook to learn about the target culture and present their own culture (Mitchell, 2011). Likewise, Stevenson and Liu (2010) found that students appreciate interacting with native speakers in educational social

networking, which in turn help them understand the target culture.

Some studies explore specifically the potential of promoting cross- intercultural communication around cross/inter- culture communication. Grounded in sociocultural theory that views learners as active participants in the learning process, Blattner & Lomicka (2012) hypothesize that despite all the reported descriptive benefits about SNS use in education and language learning which claim to serve as a springboard for real world activities, students are not necessarily aware of them. They need guidance, overt instruction, and a well-designed activity. Therefore, the researchers conducted this study where they created a group page where the French learners were interacting with English learners in France. Students are required to respond twice a month to a thematic topic posted by the instructor. This rather minimal requirement is based on the researchers' argument that they are trying to boost students' autonomy, as they provide the students with opportunities to interact with peers and native speakers partners in a more controlled way. Students are assumed to use these resources to find, organize, and analyze their own learning. Analysis of the pre-survey revealed that even though most of the participants had a Facebook account prior to the study, none was aware of Facebook's educational use. The post survey along with the quantitative analysis of the Facebook discussion board showed an increased use of Facebook features for educational purposes. Students posted meaningful entries as they had real audiences with whom they interacted. Students responded positively to the integration of Facebook as it facilitates interaction with classmates as well as with the instructor. It also provided opportunities to have language and culture exchanges with their French partners.

Social networking is also used in telecollaboration (Aoki and Kimura, 2009; Jin, 2015). Aoki and Kimura (2009) conducted two case studies were conducted to investigate the validity of Facebook for intercultural exchange. Although the researchers didn't provide

enough analysis of the results, they argue that Facebook is a valid tool if the tasks are designed carefully and the teacher mentors student progress and is flexible with task requirements. Even though the students were novice computer/technology users, in the post survey that investigated students' perception, students reported that they learned from other people and cultures, and they had opportunities to improve their writing.

2.4.11 Discussion of SNS studies

Studies on SNS have shown tremendous benefits by incorporating SNS in foreign language classroom. SNS have been proven to be a powerful tool for extending classroom discussion that increase students' participation, and hence enhance a sense of community among the students. Pedagogically sound activities facilitated by the use of SNS that triggers students' attention to sociopragmatics features that were hardly explored in traditional classroom. Moreover, they offer "new incentive and opportunities" that facilitate interaction with native speakers, not primarily engage in rich discussion but provide authentic and informal readings that scarce in textbooks.

Despite all these promising results, research also has shown some shortcomings. The language used by the students in SNS discussion usually focuses on getting the meaning across and is not geared toward accurate language use. Even though teachers have mentioned that they are more interested in getting students to interact with each other's, students seems a bit concerned about their accuracy (Mills, 2011; Blattner and Fiori; 2009).

2.5 Research Gaps

As the review indicates, social networking sites have been broadly used in foreign language education to serve multiple language goals. However, interestingly, Facebook has been rarely implemented in telecollaboration studies, and none of these studies have directly aimed the exploration of the key characteristics of Facebook in developing intercultural competence. Klimanova et al.'s (2013a) study focused on identity issues of L2 language

learners in telecollaborative projects, but not much on how Facebook facilitates intercultural competence development. Aoki et al. (2009) conducted two case studies to investigate the validity of Facebook for intercultural exchange. Although researchers have argued that Facebook is a valid tool if the tasks are designed carefully and the teacher mentors students' progress and is flexible with task requirements, they have not provided sufficient analysis of the results. This study attempts to explore the affordances of social networking sites, particularly in intercultural exchange and how they facilitate or hinder language learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Previous studies have conducted telecollaboration projects by linking mainly English language learners with Spanish, French, and German learners, while only a few have investigated Chinese and Russian language learners. This dissertation connects language learners of Arabic—a less commonly taught language—with language learners of English whose native language is Arabic. Hence, based on the reviewed literature, this study aims to answer the following questions:

Q1: How do Saudi and American students participate in the OIE as measured by the frequency and length of their posts/comments?

Q2: To what extent does OIE via Facebook between Arabic and English language learners contribute to the development of intercultural competence? Specifically, what and how are the components of Byram's (1997) ICC model demonstrated in the OIE project?

Q3: What affordances for intercultural learning might Facebook offer for the OIE project?

Q4: What are students' perceptions toward Facebook affordances?

This chapter reviewed the literature relative to this dissertation in order to understand the theoretical accounts underpinning this dissertation, the sociocultural theory. Sociocultural

theory proposes that cognitive development is enhanced by active participation in social interaction. This chapter then explored two main concepts in the current study, the various models of ICC with special emphasis on Byram's model, and affordances. The chapter also provided a comprehensive review of the empirical studies on telecollaboration and social networking sites, highlighting the potentials and downsides of their implementation in foreign language education. The chapter then concluded by highlighting how this dissertation attempts to fill in the gap in the literature. Finally, the research questions that guide this work were stated.

The following sections will outline the methodology of the study and then answer the research questions followed by an analysis and discussion of the findings. Finally, I will summarize the results, pointing out the limitations and suggesting future areas of investigation and pedagogical implications.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this research. As stated earlier, this dissertation has two main purposes. First, it aims to explore how online intercultural exchange with native speakers on Facebook can enhance the intercultural competence of language learners. Secondly, the study investigates the affordances (as well as the constraints) of social networking—namely, Facebook—on Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) project.

The following provides a detailed description of the research design, context, participants, task design and procedures, data collection tools, and the data analysis.

3.1 Research Design and Methodology

The paradigm of this research, in essence, reflects the constructivist perspective and employed a concurrent mixed method approach, with priority given to the qualitative approach [QUAL-quant research design]. I adopted the convergent parallel design, in which the “researcher uses concurrent timing to implement the quantitative and qualitative strand during the same phase of the research process” (Ceswell & Clark, 2011, p. 7). I analyzed each data set independently and then mixed them during the discussion and interpretation. Using this approach allowed me to triangulate data from the multi-method qualitative data collection with a quantitative one that “fortifies and enriches the study’s conclusion” (Hesse-Biber, 2011, p. 3). The two data sets were used to complement each other, thereby enabling me to provide “a fuller understanding of the research problem and to clarify a given research result” (Greene & Caracelli, 1997).

3.2 Context

This study examines the impact of ten weeks of Facebook online intercultural exchange (OIE) on language learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) development. For this purpose, 14 Saudi students learning English at a large Saudi University in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, were linked to 12 American students' learning Arabic at a large southeast public university in the U.S.

The project took place on seven closed Facebook groups and started officially on October 1, 2014 and lasted for ten weeks. However, the design of tasks and the plan of the study started in early 2014 as follows:

- Approval was obtained from both institutions in March of 2014.
- Designing the tasks of the projects and getting IRB approval in June and July 2014.
- Student recruitment began in September 2014.
- The project started on October 1st, 2014.

3.2.1 Participants

All 14 Saudi participants came from the Languages and Translations College and were majoring in English Language Translation. The level system in the department is the following: Levels 1 and 2 are beginners, Levels 3 and 4 are low intermediate; Levels 5 and 6 are high intermediate; and Levels 7 and 8 are advanced students. All participants for the study came from Levels 5, 6, and 7, that is, their levels ranged from the high intermediate to advances. Their ages range between 19 - 25. Even though Saudi students have been specializing in English language and Translation for about 2 to 4 years, the majority have been studying English since they were 12 years old where English is introduced as second language.

The American students came from different majors across the university including Middle Eastern studies, Anthropologies, Political Studies, Journalism, Economic, Psychology, Linguistics, and Speech Therapy. They study Arabic as a minor or as a language requirement; none was majoring in Arabic language. Their ages are similar to the Saudi students, ranging between 18-20, and only one student reported she was older than 25. As for their years of studying Arabic, half of the participants (50%) reported they had had less than one year, 29% had 1 to 2 years spent learning Arabic, and only 3 students stated that they had had 2-4 years. Taking into account the ethnic diversity in the American context, it was hard to have all the participants be native speakers. Four students reported that they had been in America since they were kids and they considered themselves to be fluent English speakers.

Due to gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, the Saudis who participated in this study were all female. Therefore, to avoid any gender issue, the decision was made to have all the American participants be female as well. It was stated clearly in the project announcement sent to the American student that "only female students could participate". That decision was also made clear during the researcher's class visits to talk to about the project and recruit the students as participants.

3.2.2 Communication Tools

The selected tool for communication is Facebook, mainly Facebook group page. Facebook, in terms of educational research, seems to have great potential for education due to its unique built-in functions, especially given people's attitude toward social media. Indeed, social media has become an integral part of their lives. One of the main features of Facebook being utilized in education contexts is the group, which has been investigated for usability as a management system. In the language-learning context, it has often been used as an extended space for classroom discussion.

Facebook groups are used to connect family, co-workers, and people with similar interests. Facebook groups allow for equal communication among group members, allowing them to share links, videos, and posts as well as answer questions. Group members have the ability to turn notifications on/off for conversations that they want/do not want to get updates on. Facebook groups have three privacy options: open, closed, and secret .In this project, I created seven closed group pages. Six groups had four participants and one had six participants. Each group page was titled Online Intercultural Exchange plus a different group icon and number.

There are multiple reasons for choosing Facebook in particular in this study. First, I have conducted a similar pilot study on Oct. 2012 and noticed a unique use of Facebook affordances by the participants that made me interested in investigating those features thoroughly and reveal its potential in in intercultural project. Moreover, students reported positive attitude towards its use even though some Saudi participants are not active Facebook users. Instead, the projects increased their interest in exploring the potential of Facebook group pages especially finding groups that may augment their intercultural learning.

Second, Facebook seem a good place to organize international partnership projects because it provides participants with all necessary technical tools available to them. For example, sending and receiving messages, sharing videos and web links, ask questions (by writing new post), and answering (by commenting), and many others, all in one virtual place.

Moreover, it was chosen for methodological or practical reasons. It allowed me to observe participants online activities and make notes on daily basis and attend to any misunderstanding either technical or related to the task requirement. This facilitates storing and accessing students' interactions without asking the participants to send me their interaction.

3.2.3 Task Design and Procedures

The researcher adapted a series of authentic tasks that is based on Byram’s model of intercultural competence (O’Dowd and Ware, 2009; Jin 2007; Belz, 2003; and Furstenberg et al., 2001). In addition, tasks were designed based on Facebook features. Some of the adopted tasks were actually modified to utilize Facebook features. For example, “creating collaboratively a website with your partner” was modified to “create a Facebook page” to reflect an easily understood intercultural topic. In those tasks, participants not only exchanged information, but also were involved in their expression of identity and cultural values. The focus of these tasks as noted in the following table was culturally oriented and indeed served as the springboard for the learners’ interactions.

Table 3.1: Task Design and Procedures

Timeline	Activities	Description	Procedures
1 st week	Introduce students to the project	Consent form sent via email	
	Pre-survey		A link to the survey was sent to all the participants. (via Qualtrics.com)
2 nd week	Self-introduction	Students presented themselves and their home cultures to their (future) partner. Students were encouraged to use various visual and textual formats.	Each participant posted her entry (essay) on her assigned Facebook group page.
3 rd + 4 th week	Comparing class questionnaires (Word-associations)	Both classes completed words/reaction to situation questionnaires. Their responses were collected and posted by the researcher on each FB group page. Students were asked to look thoroughly at the different responses, compare the answers from the two groups. Findings by both groups were discussed online only.	Students were given a list of words/and situations via email. They were asked to send their answers to the researcher who then organized them and posted them as a picture on each FB group page for discussion.

5 th + 6 th week	Engaging in cultural discussions	<p>Part-1: Students were provided with a general (cultural) question to discuss with their partners?</p>	<p>The researcher provided each group with three different questions, and each group had to select one question to discuss within their group.</p>
		<p>Part-2: Students were given a link to a popular FB page with FB article that discuss issues in C1 and C2. Students were asked to discuss these issues with their partners.</p>	<p>The researcher shared an article from popular Fb page in each group which discusses an issue of C1 and C2. Participants had to read the article and discuss it with their partners.</p>
7 th week	A chat discussion on given topic	This activity was a pre-activity for the next activity.	This activity served as a pre-activity for the next task. Each Saudi participant was linked with an American partner to engage in a chat using Facebook chat (participants were given the choice to use another tool if they found it more convenient). Even though the chat was meant to be informal, students were encouraged to discuss their “Creating Bilingual Page Project.”
8 th + 9 th weeks	Collaborating on product creation (Creating a bilingual Facebook page with one’s partner)	Participants were paired to create a bilingual Facebook group page. Using multimodal resources that Facebook offers, students had to choose a topic for their page, where they then would write at least two posts: a) a post about an issue discussed during the project along with images or	Participants were provided an instructional guide on PPT that explains how to construct this FB page. The researcher monitored and provided feedback as necessary.

		<p>videos, and b) their personal reflection about their experiences and what they liked and disliked about the project.</p> <p>After they completed their page, participants then invited their friends and colleagues to view and comment on their page</p>	
10 th week	A post-project questionnaire		<p>A link to the questionnaire was sent to all participants. (Qualtrics.com)</p>
	An open-ended interview		<p>The interviews with American students were held face-to-face, and held through Skype with Saudi students. The interviews included general questions and questions based on their participation and discussion. They were asked to report on their experience in the project. All interviews were recorded and later fully transcribed for analysis by the researcher.</p>

Table 3-1 lays out the tasks design and the procedures of implementation this project.

The first phase: during the first weeks of the fall semester, the researcher started student recruitment. For the Saudi group, Saudi teachers I know at the University, a university where I work, were asked to introduce the project to their students. They presented a detailed description of the project to their students, who were asked to email the researcher if they were interested in participating. I received many emails, but I only selected students from Level 5 and higher; the first students to send an email were the first to be accepted. For

the American participants, I contacted the Dean of the Middle Eastern Studies Department first, who advised me to contact the Arabic instructors and visit their classes to introduce the project.

Once all the participants signed the consent form, the pre-survey (Appendix A) was sent them to gather information about 1) students' background information, 2) project expectations, 3) language learning experience, and 4) technology use and experience. The first two sets of questions were sent to all group participants from each institution.

Second Phase: from the second week to the ninth week, students engaged in a series of tasks that were created based on Byram's model of intercultural competence. The first task aimed at getting students to know each other. Students were asked to write a post about themselves, their daily and school life, and share a picture of themselves, if accessible. The following four tasks fell under the two categories of information exchange and comparison and analysis (O'Dowd and Ware, 2009). In information exchange, students engaged in interaction that served to get them more information about each other (chat task) rather than engaging in a cultural discussion. Comparison and analysis was more demanding and required the students to carefully read the text and engage in dialogue with their partners to reflect a deep intercultural analysis that involved the expression of identity and cultural values. The final task was a collaborative task that required learners to work together and produce a final product jointly.

Third phase: The students received a post-project questionnaire (see Appendix B) that investigated students' perceptions of their Facebook affordances. A semi-structured interview was conducted with seven American students face to face and eleven Saudi students via Skype.

3.3 Study Procedures and Data Collection

A variety of qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to gain answers to the research questions.

3.3.1 Participant online discourse

The major data collection was students' online intercultural exchange on Facebook, which lasted ten weeks. It included five major tasks, along with their self-initiated discussion. The online discourse included participants' posts, comments, shared pictures, videos, and links. It also included online practices beyond the Facebook group page, such as friend requests, private chats, likes, and comments on each other's walls. Moreover, a key construct that the present study attempts to explore is "affordances," an ecological concept understood as the potential for meaningful action (van Lier, 2004). Facebook environment is full of semiotic resources (e.g. like, share, mention/tag...etc.) that stimulate the emergence of learning activities. Thus, one area of the online data included documenting the multimodal and linguistics resources that the participants draw on to make meaning.

3.3.2 Researcher Observation and Journal:

The second qualitative data collection was the observation of students' practices and behavior online. The researcher started observing students at the beginning of the project. I divided my journal into seven sections based on the number of FB groups in the study, and each section was divided by week.

A key construct that the present study attempted to explore was "affordances," an ecological concept understood as the potential for having meaningful action (van Lier, 2004). Facebook is an online medium full of semiotic resources that assists in the emergence of learning activities. To evaluate the affordances of any given digital tools, "one needs to have a clear and compelling record of actual process data. That is to say, capturing a record of what learners are actually doing while engaged with Language learning resources" (Chun,

Kern and Smith, 2016, p76). Therefore, beside screenshots of the FB group pages, I recorded all activities that students were taking, including the date and time they wrote the post, writing comments, liking, friending ...etc. I also conducted preliminary interpretation of the data. Through personal notes, I was able to conduct a deep interview with the students by asking each student key questions based on that student's online participation.

3.3.3 Pre-survey: (See Appendix A)

The pre-survey was distributed to participants before the project started. It included open-ended questions to gather information about participants' language learning level and background, intercultural experiences, uses of social networking sites in language learning, and expectations of the project.

3.3.4 Questionnaire (See Appendix B)

A post- project questionnaire was administered to the participants in Week 10 to explore students' perception of Facebook's affordances. The questionnaire items were adopted and modified from Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, and Liue (2012). It was based on the generic model proposed by Wang (2008) that included three sets of information and communication technologies affordances namely, pedagogical affordances, which refers to how a particular learning behavior or objectives could be achieved or enacted within a given environment (Kirschner et al, 2004, Wang et al, 2012); social affordances and their concern with the features, both the actual and the perceived ones, of the platform that could promote social interactions (Kirschner et al, 2004); and technical or technological affordances referring to the usability of the educational environment. The 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire included 24 items. Items 1–10 were pedagogical affordances, Items 11–19 were social affordances, and Items 20–24 were technological affordances. Qualtrics software was used to create the questionnaire, and it produced descriptive statistics immediately after the

students' responses were gathered and provided the researcher with the overall percentages of students' perception of Facebook.

Since the questionnaire was modified from the original to fit the goal and the context of the study, a further step was taken ensure its validity. I first sought my advisor's feedback. Based on his suggestions, I reformulated some of the statements. Secondly, to check for clarity of the statements and accessibility to Qualtrics, the online software used for this study, I asked some of the Saudi students who participated in the pilot study to fill out the questionnaire. I was particularly interested in making sure the Saudi students understand the language since I did not use a translated version of questionnaire for them.

3.3.5 In-depth semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants at the end of the project to gather information on their perspectives of and experiences with the project (Hennink et al., 2011) as well as to provide a retrospective analysis of their discussions and interactions. During this interview, the researcher “relied on a certain set of questions and try to guide the conversation remain more closely on these questions, ... [moreover] it allows individual respondents some latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or important to them” (Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2011, p. 102) to capture their voices and stories (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 110). Since some of the questions are based on students' online discourse, I asked the students to skim through their Facebook group page. I also printed each group page and brought it with me for each interview so I could show them the episode I am interested in learning more about. The interviews were conducted face to face with the American participants and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. With the Saudi participants, interviews were conducted in Arabic via Skype and recorded using Audacity computer software. All recorded interviews were fully transcribed for analysis.

3.3.6 Participants' final reflections

In addition to the previous data sources, the participants were asked to write final reflection essay to describe their experience, what they liked most and least, and their suggestions for future similar projects.

3.4 Data Analysis

Due to the nature of the research questions, several methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis were undertaken.

3.4.1 Content analysis

Content analysis was the main approach used to analyze the qualitative data because it is one of the more widely used approaches for understanding the effect of telecollaboration on learner intercultural learning. All qualitative data, including the students' online discourses on Facebook, interview transcriptions, researcher journal, and the students' final reflections were imported into Nvivo, computer software used for qualitative data analysis. The Facebook data were captured using Ncapture, a tool in that software that transfers all Facebook group pages as a dataset or PDF file. All other data were transferred to PDF files to be read by the Nvivo software.

For coding, a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive analysis was used to interpret the raw data. This methodological approach incorporates data driven codes (emerging themes) Boyatzis (1998), with theory driven ones (Byram's model). The data was first coded based on the categories of Byram's model of intercultural competence (theory driven), which served as evidence of the students' demonstration of ICC. However, I simultaneously looked for emerging themes and new pattern. This approach fits nicely within

the sociocultural framework guiding the whole research. However, Byram’s model was designed for intercultural communication in face-to-face interactions and, more specifically, in study abroad contexts, but not for online telecollaborative projects. Kern (2014) also stressed the differences between face-to-face interactions and communication via the Internet: “Communication technologies transform spatial and temporal relations; therefore, language educators need be aware of the differences and reconsider the understandings and beliefs that have traditionally underlines our perspective.” (P, 342) Moreover, Boyatzis (1998) indicated that “theory-driven codes are developed out of context of the types of material to be coded; therefore, the specifics of the operational code (i.e., Byram's objectives) may be inappropriate to the material to be coded” (p. 35).

The following tables show the objectives of each component in Byram's model:

Attitudes: Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own	
<i>Objectives</i>	
a	Willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality;
b	Interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one’s own and in the other cultures and cultural practices;
c	Willingness to question the value and presupposition in cultural practices and products in one’s own environment;
d	Readiness to experience the different stages of adaption to and interaction with another culture during a period of residence;
e	Readiness to engage with conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction.

Knowledge: 1) of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, 2) and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction	
a)	Historical and contemporary relationships between one’s own and one’s interlocutor’s countries;
b)	The means of achieving contact with interlocutors from another country;
c)	The type of cause and process of misunderstanding between interlocutors of different cultural origins;
d)	The national memory of one’s own country and how its events are related to and seen from the perspectives of one’s interlocutor’s country;

e)	The national memory of one's interlocutor's country and the perspectives on it from one's own;
f)	The national definitions of geographical space in one's own country and how there are perceived from the perspective of other countries;
g)	The national definition of geographical space in one's interlocutor's country and the perspective on them from one's own;
h)	The processes and institutions of socialization in one's own and one's interlocutor's country;
i)	Social distinctions and their principal markers, in one's own country and one's interlocutor's;
j)	Institutions, and perceptions of them, which impinge on daily life within one's own and one's interlocutor's country and which conduct and influence relationships between them;
k)	The processes of social interaction in one's interlocutor's country.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitude and skills under the constraints of real time communication and interaction.

a)	Elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents or events and develop an explanatory system susceptible of application to other phenomena
b)	Identify significant references within and across cultures and elicit their significance and connotation
c)	Identify similar and dissimilar processes of interaction, verbal, and nonverbal, and negotiate an appropriate use of them in specific circumstances
d)	Use in real time an appropriate combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to interact with interlocutors from a different country, taking into consideration the degree of one's existing familiarity with the country and culture and the extent of differences between one's own and the other.
e)	Identify and make use of public and private institutions, which facilitate contact with other countries and cultures.
f)	Use in real time knowledge, skills and attitudes for mediation between interlocutors of one's own and foreign culture.
g)	Identify and make use of public and private institutions, which facilitate contact with other countries and cultures.

Skills of Interpreting and Relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own.

a)	Identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document or event and explain their origins
b)	Identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present
c)	Mediate between conflicting interpretation of phenomena
Critical Cultural Awareness: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures:	
a)	Identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in document and events in one's own and others cultures
b)	Make an evaluative analysis of the documents and events which refers to an explicit perspectives and criteria

c)	Interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges in accordance with explicit criteria, negotiate when necessary a degree of acceptance of those exchanges by drawing upon one's knowledge, skills and attitude
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3.4.2 Multimodal discourse analysis

The second qualitative data analysis used for this study was multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2008). MDA seeks to understand communication by considering all the semiotic resources that people draw on to construct meaning, based on four theoretical notions (Jewitt, 2009). First, it views language as one of a number of semiotic resources that people use to communicate meaning. Second, other types of semiotic resources along with language can contribute to meaning, that is, analyzing language alone only reveals a partial view of what is being communicated. Third, people make a selection from various resources/mode to convey their meaning. Finally, the meaning produced using multimodal resources are also socially, culturally, and historically suited and shaped. This study drew on two concepts of MDA when analyzing the affordances of Facebook in the intercultural exchange context-- semiotic resources and inter-semiotic relationships.

Semiotic resources are an important concept in MDA, and align with the ecological concept of affordances. These "semiotic resources are the actions, material, and artifacts we use for communicative purpose... semiotic resources have meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses." (Van Leeuwen, 2008, 28). This perspective suggests that signs are a product of sign-making (Jewitt, 2009), that is, they emphasize a user's agency as one will express meaning through the personal selection of those different resources that are available to them in each particular context.

The inter-semiotic relationship is central in MDA, as it investigates the relationship across and between various modes/resources that are composed in a given context. The theoretical stance taken is that each different semiotic resource in a multi-modal ensemble carries specific meaning by itself and creates a new meaning when combined. These two concepts have informed the analysis of Facebook affordances in the current intercultural exchanges project.

3.4.3 Quantitative analysis

Quantitative analysis is the third method of analysis carried out in this study. It was used for analyzing the pre- survey project. It also was used for the analysis of the online questionnaire and the students' online discourse. The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire largely presented the descriptive statistics for the overall percentages of the students' perception of Facebook affordances.

To provide a holistic view of the students' participation and engagement in the online project, the students' online discourse was analyzed quantitatively. First, I counted the frequency of posts/comments and words produced by each student across all the groups. Overall, students wrote comments more often than they initiated a new post, and when they did initiate a new post, it mostly related to a previous post. Therefore, a comment and a post in this project were treated as the same entity. Second, the frequency and type of questions being asked by each group to display the students' skills of discovery and interaction were counted. Finally, the students' use of Facebook features including, like, mentions, emoticons, sharing, and editing to augment the multimodal analysis of Facebook affordances as perceived by these students was counted. I also conducted the frequency for each categorization twice on two different days.

The following table offers a synthesis of these data sources and the data analyses for each research question.

Table 3.2 Summary of Data Collection and Analysis

Theoretical Construct	Research Questions	Data Collection	Data Analysis
Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)	(1) A) How do Saudi and American students participate in the OIE as measured by their posts' frequency and their length?	Students' Online Discourse	<i>Quantitative</i> Count the frequency of students' post/ comments and their written words
	B) To what extent does OIE via Facebook between Arabic and English language learners contribute to the development of intercultural competence? Specifically, what and how are the components of Byram's (1997) ICC model demonstrated in the OIE project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' online discourse • Interview • Researcher's observation • Students' final reflection 	<i>Qualitative</i> Content analysis of students' online interactions with their partners was conducted to search for incidents that reflected Byram's (1997) ICC model. The interview was coded to identify elements the participants were shown to attend to intercultural learning. <i>Quantitative</i> Count the frequency and type of students' questions during their interactions.
Affordance	(2) A) What affordances for intercultural learning might Facebook offer in an OIE project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' online discourse • Interview • Researcher's Observations 	<i>Qualitative:</i> Multimodal discourse analysis: The multimodal data were transcribed and analyzed to identify elements that indicated the participants are taking meaningful actions using the semiotic resources offered by the Facebook environment to identify affordances offered by Facebook in such a project. <i>Quantitative:</i> Count students' use of Facebook features.
	b) What are students'	Questionnaire	<i>Quantitative</i>

	perceptions of Facebook affordances in the online intercultural exchange (OIE) project?		Descriptive statistical analysis of students' response
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This chapter explained the research design and the methodology for this dissertation. The plan and the design of the OIE project is discussed as well as detailed information about the data collection and analysis procedures. The next chapter presents the findings of the current study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Previous chapters have introduced this research study. First, a comprehensive review of the literature related to intercultural communicative competence and social networking sites in foreign language education was provided. Then the methodology used to conduct this study was discussed. This chapter relates the findings of the study and analyzed the collected data.

The first question scrutinizes the potential of online intercultural exchanges (OIE) via Facebook between English and Arabic learners in developing their' intercultural (communicative) competence (ICC). I divided this question into two sub-questions:

- A. How do Saudi and American students participate in the OIE as measured by the frequency of their posts' frequency and length?
- B. To what extent does OIE via Facebook between Arabic and English language learners contribute to the development of intercultural competence?
Specifically, what and how are the components of Byram's (1997) ICC model demonstrated in the OIE project?

The second question investigates the Facebook affordances in OIE project. It has two sub-questions:

- A. What affordances for intercultural learning might Facebook offer in an OIE project?
- B. What are students' perceptions of Facebook affordances in the online intercultural exchange (OIE) project?

4.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence

This section will provide findings of the first two questions related to the potential of OIE in developing ICC. It will first provide background information about the participants (4.1.1). Then I will present the quantitative (4.1.2) and qualitative (4.1.3) analysis of students' online participation.

4.1.1 Background information of the participants

Before I delve into the analysis of the findings of the first question, it is important to present background information about the students regarding their previous cultural and language experience, and their expectations for the project as such information will help in understanding the students and factors that would impact their participation.

Table 4.1.1: Saudi Students' Cross Cultural Experience

Name	Previous Cross-Cultural Experience	Name	Previous Cross-Cultural Experience
Sana	Yes	Maram	Yes
Nouf	No	Deem	No
Banan	No	Amal	Yes
Walaa	Yes	Shaden	Yes
Alanod	Yes	Nadeeh	No
Aseel	Yes	Arwa	No
Haneen	Yes	Jenan	No

Table 4.1.1 shows Saudi students' previous cross-cultural encounter (all names are pseudonyms). More than half of the participants stated that they have previous cultural encounters with native speakers of English. These experiences are varied and include the following: online cross-cultural communications; through chatting with a native speaker in some ESL websites, using social media sites, traveling/living abroad, classroom activities that involve discussing cultural issues with a native speaking teacher, and having language partners.

Table 4.1.2 displays reasons for studying English by Saudi students. The most popular reasons for Saudi student to learn English are 1) liking the language (86 %), 2) better job opportunities (43%).

Table 4.1.2: Reasons for studying English

#	Reasons	%
1	Liking the language.	86%
2	Better job opportunities.	43%
3	Enjoyment.	29%
4	Fulfilling a foreign language requirement.	29%
5	Liking the culture of that language.	29%
6	Continuing something I started.	14%
7	Family use.	7%
8	Other	0

Three reasons were rated equally (29%) 1) liking the culture of the TL, 2) fulfilling a foreign language requirement, 3) enjoyment. The least rated reasons are 1) continuing something they started (14%), the language my family uses (7%).

Table 4.1.3: Type of activities to use the target language outside the classroom

#	Type of activities	%
1	Watching movies or TV in target language.	100%
2	Using social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blog... etc.) to find people speaking the target language.	100%
3	Using the Internet to find target language websites.	71%
4	Reading target language books, magazine or stories.	64%
5	Talking in target language with friends/ relatives.	57%
6	Having a native speaker partner.	29%
7	Participating in clubs.	7%

Table 4.1.3 shows kind of activities that Saudi students engage in to practice the language. The Saudi students seem to be very active, all participants reported that they engage in the following activities 1) using social networking sites to find people speaking the TL, and 2) watching movies or TV in the TL. Using the Internet to find English websites rated the second with percentage of 71%, followed by reading target language books (64%), and talking in TL with friends/relatives (57%). Finally, the least cited activities are having a native speaker partner (29%) and participating in clubs.

Table 4.1.4: Expectations about the Project

#	Expectations	%
1	Improving language skills.	57%
2	Making friends from other culture.	21%
3	Learning about American culture.	14%
4	Other (please specify)	7%

Table 4.1.4 reveals participants' expectation about the projects. More than half of the Saudi students (57%) reported that they expect language improvement. Three participants expect to make friends and only two are looking forward to learning about the American culture.

Americans' Profile

Table 4.1.5 American students' cross cultural experience

Name	Previous Cross-Cultural Experience	Name	Previous Cross-Cultural Experience
Laura	Yes	Lana	Yes
Randi	No	Anna	No
Elizabeth	Yes	Jessica	No
Linda	No	Maria	Yes
Jennifer	No	Kathleen	Yes
Sarah	No	Janet	Yes

Table 4.1.5 shows American's participant previous cross-cultural experience with native speakers of Arabic. Different from the Saudi participants, the Americans' cross- culture experiences with native speakers of Arabic are limited. Half of the participants said that they don't have cross-cultural encounters. Those who reported that they do have, describe it as brief or it does not go beyond classroom interaction with a teacher and classmates who have Arabic heritage. Only three participants have lived/study abroad for a short time in Morocco or Jordan.

Table 4.1.6. American's Students Reasons for Studying Arabic

#	Reasons	%
1	Liking the language.	71%
2	Better job opportunities.	64%
3	Enjoyment	43%
4	Liking the culture of the language.	36%
5	Fulfilling a foreign language requirement	21%
6	Continuing something I started	21%
7	Other	21%
8	Family use.	7%

Table 4.1.6 shows the reasons Americans' participants to study Arabic. The top four reasons for studying Arabic for the American participants are; 1) Liking the language (71 %), 2) better job opportunity (64%), 3) enjoyment (43%), 4) Liking the Arabic culture (36%). The least favorite reasons are academically categorized; 1) continuing something they started (21%), 2) to fulfill foreign language requirement, and only one participant stated that it is the language her family uses. The other listed reasons are to study abroad, to study a language that is very different from English as recommend by her major department, and one mentioned that she might consider minoring in Arabic.

Table 4.1.7 Type of Activities American Participants Engage in to Use the TL

#	Type of Activities	%
1	Talking in target language with friends/ relatives.	36%
2	Having a native speaker partner.	36%
3	Using the Internet to find target language websites.	36%
4	Reading target language books, magazine or stories.	29%
5	Watching movies or TV in target language.	29%
6	Participating in clubs.	29%
7	Other, please specify	29%
8	Using social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Blog...etc.) to find people speaking the target language.	7%

Table 4.1.7 reveals the different type of activities that American participants engage in to practice Arabic. The most common activities are very different and then those of

the Saudi students and they seem less active than their counterparts. Having native speaking partners, talking in the target language with friends/relatives, and using the internet are rated the highest activities (36%), followed by participating in clubs watching movies and TV, and reading book in the TL (all 29% each). The other listed reasons are using social networking sites to find people speaking the TL, joining Arabic language circles, and listening to music. Two participants reported that they are not involved in any kind of activities.

Table 4.1.8: Expectations about the project

Expectations	%
1 Learning about other cultures.	36%
2 Improving my language skills.	21%
3 Making friends from the target culture.	21%
4 Other (please specify)	21%

Table 4.1.8. Displays Americans' expectation about the project. Unlike the Saudi students who rated learning about the other culture the last expectation, the majority of American students expected to learn about the other culture (36%), and the three other expectations received equal percentage (21%); improving language skills, making friends from the target language, and the last one which is other and included all of the above expectations.

It can be noted that the two cultural groups have different previous experiences with regards to cross-cultural and language learning. Saudi students are more active in engaging in activities to practice English and to have cross-cultural encounters with English speakers. This is understandable as the value of learning English is higher than the learning of Arabic in the United States. Additionally, Internet lacks resources in Arabic that target language learners. Unlike the American students, it is interesting that Saudi students didn't expect cultural learning as an outcome of participating in this project regardless of its name "Online Intercultural Exchange".

4.1.2 Quantitative Assessments

Quantitative analysis in online intercultural projects is used to determine the degree of students' participation and can illuminate which pairs/groups are more successful and which are less successful (Belz, 2003; Ware, 2003; Klimanova, 2013). My goal is to provide a visual representation of the data that would make the picture clear with regard to groups' participation and the level of their engagement before I analyze the qualitative data.

In this section, I discuss the students' online discourse on the six Facebook closed groups, highlighting the quantitative factors. Seven groups were originally created for this project. However, one of the groups did not participate as anticipated; the participants only completed the first task and stopped practically all engagement afterwards. Therefore, I decided to exclude it, as it does not add much to the discussion. I pay particular attention first to the frequency of posts/comments and then to the number of words written by each individual. The discussion includes a comparison of students' participation within and across groups. I adapted Belz's (2002) categorization (high functionality and low functionality) to describe group participation.

4.1.2.1 Frequency of posts/comments

Table 4.1.9: Frequency of posts/comments written by Saudi and American participants

Group	Names	# of posts/ Comments by individuals	# of posts by Saudis and American groups
1	Sana	23	32
	Nouf	9	
	Laura	21	34
	Randi	13	
	Total		66
2	Banan	22	28
	Walaa	6	
	Elizabeth	26	32
	Linda	6	
	Total		60
4	Aseel	19	37
	Alanod	18	
	Jennifer	18	30
	Sarah	12	
	Total		67
5	Haneen	14	32
	Maram	18	
	Lana	10	15
	Anna	5	
	Total		47
6	Deem	13	23
	Amal	10	
	Maria	7	10
	Jessica	3	
	Total		33
7	Shaden	19	40
	Nadeah	6	
	Arwa	4	
	Jenana	11	
	Kathleen	20	27
	Janet	7	
	Total		67
Total			340
Average		13	56

Table 4.2.9 displays the frequency of posts/comments written in each group and by each individual. The first two columns lists group number, followed by the participants'

names in each group; American participants are highlighted in gray. The last two columns indicate the number of posts/comments by each individual and the total number of posts written by each cultural group (i.e., Saudis versus Americans). The table reveals a divergence in participation patterns across groups as well as within groups. Saudi students participated more in groups 3, 4, 5, and 6 whereas American students wrote more posts/comments in groups 1 and 2. However, a deeper look at Table 4.2.1 shows that only in groups 3 and 4 was the participation truly lopsided as the Saudi students wrote twice as many posts as their American counterparts. The differences in group 7 is understandable as more Saudi participants were included (four Saudis compared to two Americans). In groups 1, 2, and 3, the differences between the two cultural groups are relatively low. An analysis of within-group participation revealed an interesting finding: In groups 1, 2, and 6, two students (one Saudi and one American) dominated the participation (group one: Sana and Laura, group two: Banan and Elizabeth, group six: Shaden and Kathleen). Interestingly, the number of posts/comments by these students in their respective groups seems to be balanced as well. Group 3 seems to be the most balanced group, where everyone contributed almost equally to the discussion. The analysis of posting frequency indicates that more than half of the students posted at or higher than the average number posts (i.e., 13 posts). The average number of posts across all groups is 57, which makes the participation in groups 1, 2, 4, and 6 above average while groups 4 and 5 are below average. Thus, those groups whose participation is above the average are initially considered high functionality, while those below the average showed low functionality.

4.1.2.2 Frequency of written words

Table 4.1.10 presents the frequency and percentage of words written by the participants within and across groups. The first two columns show the group number and members' names in each group. The first three columns show the number of written words—

namely, the number of words written by each student and the total number of words written by each group. The last two columns also provide the percentage of words written by each student, first within the group and then across groups. I complemented the quantitative assessment of posts with words number measurement to allow for a precise comparison concerning how much each student contributed to the overall group participation and to give an indication of which groups have high versus low functionality (Belz, 2002).

Table 4.2.10 shows that, although it seems that the number of words produced by students corresponds to the number of their posts, this is not always the case. For instance, Alanod and Jennifer in group 3 wrote the same number of posts (18), but Jennifer produced nearly twice as many words as Alanod. In some cases, participants wrote fewer posts but they compensated for this by writing longer posts. For example, in group 4, Anna wrote only five posts while Lana wrote ten posts, yet Anna produced more words (472) than Lana (369). The total number of written words by each group matches to the total number of their posts. Group 3 produced the highest number of words (7514), followed by groups 1 and 6 (5523 and 5501, respectively) and then group 2 (3745). Groups 4 and 5 produced the fewest words (2119 and 1694, respectively).

Table 4.2.10: Frequency and percentage of words written by the participants within and across groups

Group	Names	# of words	% Percentage of words within group	% Percentage of words across groups
1	(Sana)	2236	40.5	8.6
	(Nouf)	773	14.0	2.9
	Laura	1901	34.4	7.3
	Randi	613	11.1	2.4
	Total	5523		21.1
2	Banan	1602	42.8	6.1
	Walaa	256	6.8	0.98
	Elizabeth	1308	34.9	5.0
	Linda	579	15.5	2.2
	Total	3745		14.3

4	Aseel	2056	27.4	7.9
	Alanod	1716	22.8	6.6
	Jennifer	2543	33.8	9.7
	Sarah	1196	15.9	4.6
	Total	7514		28.8
5	Haneen	662	31.2	2.5
	Maram	616	29.1	2.4
	Lana	369	17.4	1.4
	Anna	472	22.3	1.8
	Total	2119		8.1
6	Deem	678	40	2.6
	Amal	369	21.9	1.4
	Maria	460	27.2	1.8
	Jessica	187	11.0	0.72
	Total	1694		6.5
7	Shaden	1978	35.9	7.6
	Nadeah	459	8.3	1.8
	Arwa	229	4.2	0.9
	Jenana	479	8.7	1.8
	Kathleen	1802	32.8	6.9
	Janet	561	10.2	2.1
	Total	5501		21.0
Total		26096		
Average		4349		16.6

The mean of number of written by individual students is 1006

Speaking of group functionality, the average percentage of words across groups is 16.6. Groups 1 (21.1%), 3 (28.8%), and 6 (21.0%) are above the average. Group 2, which was above average in number of posts, is below average for number of written words.

To conclude, the quantitative analysis of students' online discourse provides a good picture of how students in each group participated. However, the picture is still partial. The following will analyze students' online discourse qualitatively to discuss how interculturality was demonstrated.

4.1.3 Qualitative Analysis of ICC Across Groups

This section answers the second sub-question of the first research question that explores how interculturality is manifested in this project across groups by focusing on Byram's model components. To answer this question, I analyzed data mainly from the online discourse students produced in Facebook groups and triangulated the data with the researchers' journal and students' post-project interview data, especially in terms of questions involving a retrospective analysis of their interaction with their partners.

In his model, Byram (1997) asserted that—for the model to be comprehensive and coherent—the specified objectives of each component sometimes overlap. One could hardly distinguish a specific instance to which a component is related. For example, one of the attitude's objectives is “interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in the other cultures and cultural practices,” which could be displayed by students asking questions about other cultural practices. Participants' questions also can be an evidence of the skill of discovery component as it demonstrates this objective “elicit from an interlocutor the concepts and values of documents or events and develop an explanatory system susceptible of application to other phenomena.” Moreover, the model is designed for face-to-face communication; thus, some objectives are not applicable for online intercultural exchange. Finally, Byram claimed that not all objectives are observable; some objectives are abstract and related to the competence rather than the performance. Taking these three points into consideration, I analyzed each component focusing on its most salient objectives that are observable and applicable in the online context. The discussion is organized according to Byram's model of attitude, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness. I combined skills of interpreting and relating with critical cultural awareness as their objectives are quite interrelated, as will be explained later.

It is important to note that this study does not intend to measure tangible and countable evidence to test whether the cross-cultural telecollaboration increases students' ICC or not; instead, the study focuses on how such online intercultural exchanges provide language learners with opportunities that could improve their intercultural communicative competence by exploring the objectives of Byram's model on their online discourse triangulated with post-project interview data.

4.1.3.1 Attitude

The attitude component is a precondition attribute for successful deep intercultural communication. According to Byram (1997), "attitudes should not be simply positive, since even positive prejudice can hinder mutual understanding" (p. 34). He maintained that intercultural speakers should be curious and open-minded when it comes to cultural aspects that differ from their own and avoid being judgmental. They need to hold a belief based on their own frame of references to understand other cultures through a different cultural framework. They need to show interest in discovering new perspectives of other cultural practices.

The students in this study were self-selected; their participation was voluntary and was not related to any course requirements. It was hypothesized that students learning a language would be interested in interacting with their native-speaking counterparts. Hence, they would demonstrate a curious and open attitude toward people from the other culture. However, this was simply not the case. High and low functionality groups displayed attitude objectives, but with divergent patterns that affected overall participation.

Willingness to engage in meaningful relationships

A noticeable finding with regard to the attitude objective is how students demonstrate an attitude of interest in engaging in interaction and maintain meaningful relationships during the first contact, where they had to introduce themselves to their partners. Previous literature

has emphasized the important of establishing a relationship among group members for a successful intercultural communication to occur (O'Dowd, 2003; Belz, 2007). Therefore, starting telecollaborative projects with a "getting to know each other: task is highly recommended in the literature (O'Dowd, 2014). Participants in both the low and high functionality groups approached this task in different ways semantically and syntactically, regardless of the fact that they received the same worksheet guidelines. Many participants, especially the active ones in groups 1, 2, 3, and 6, were able to establish friendly relationships with their partners from the beginning of the project through their self-introduction essays. In addition to being long and detailed, their essays incorporated interactive and linguistic strategies, including self-disclosure, humor, code switching, alignment, showing support, interest and concern, personal questions, emotions and the use of emoticons. They also shared personal pictures of themselves or of something that had special meaning to them. Interestingly, the Saudi students shared picture of themselves as children as they do not share their pictures online due to social and cultural constraints. These strategies created a sense of solidarity, trust, and friendship that paved the way for deeper intercultural discussions.

The following example is Sana's self-introduction in group 1. A notable feature of her essay is the self-disclosure strategy manifested by the number of personal pronouns used, reflecting her willingness to share personal information with her partners. At the beginning, Sana included factual information about her age, name, and major as well as details about her family, especially her twin (4 lines, including the Arabic translation of their names).

Extract 1: Sana’s self introduction essay (group 1)*

I am Sana , a student inUniversity. I ’m 20 years old, who study English literature and translation, although I was planning to specialize in linguistics. I didn’t plan to study English as my major but my family has always supported it, because it offers a lot of opportunities in my country. I wanted to study philosophy, but it’s not available here because it’s prohibited. Therefore, no schools or colleges teach this major.	1 2 3 4	Factual information
I have one brother and two sisters, and from the picture above you can see that I have a twin. Her name is Hana. and its not just that my name and her are close in form, but also in meaning. So my name means (.....) We are identical as you see, but through time and age there are some similarities and differences.	5 6 7 8	Family (her twin)
I suppose I ’m <u>not very social person</u> , that’s why I spend a lot of time with my family, and as an Eastern person we appreciate connections with relatives too much. I <u>don’t really have friends</u> so usually spend my free time in college in the library with my sister.	: 12 13 14	Personality
However, as a young girl I attended a religious school, there I memorize the Holy Quran until middle school. Despite, my religious education I didn’t become a religious person. I am <u>a very open mind</u> women. I <u>enjoy music</u> very much from a young age and I <u>appreciate</u> Art as well. My favorite artists are, Vincent Van Gogh, William Adolph, Botticelli, Rene Magritte, and etc.	15 16 17 18 19	Educational background Interests
I read a lot of books since I was fifteen years old, I like to read poetry, philosophy, history, religions, and some politics. I also, <u>like</u> mythologies, it inspires me in so many ways. As for music, I <u>like</u> many genres, the classics, blues, jazz, pop, opera and etc. I grow up listening to Fairouz, Umm Kalthoum, and Abdul halim Hafiz. put from about nearly a year I discovered an Iranian singer her name is Googoosh, and she became one of my <u>top favorite</u> musicians. She’s a dancer, a singer, and an actress. She <u>is so talented</u> . I suppose I <u>love</u> to hear old music, and watch old movies, because I <u>love</u> antiques and the smell of the past good days.	20 21 22 23 24 25 26	Closing (show excitement for the project)
<i>I am <u>very excited</u> to know you all and learn from each other. P.S if you want to see a picture of me as an adult, talk to me in private messages.</i>	27	

***Bold**: first pronouns– underlined: appraisal utterances – *italics*: second person pronoun and addressvitiy

She also included some cultural aspects (e.g., line 4) when she stated why she chooses to study English instead of philosophy: “I wanted to study philosophy, but it’s not available here because it’s prohibited. Therefore, no schools or colleges teach this major.” This reason clearly provided her partner with cultural knowledge about the status of philosophy in Saudi Arabia. In line 13, she also described a characteristic of eastern cultures in that people love connections and gatherings; she explained how this related to her daily life. She then described her personality: “I’m not a very social person, that’s why I spend a lot of time with my family.” She declared that she comes from a religious school, where she had to memorize the holy Quran. In order not to have the impression that she is a conservative person because of her educational background, she emphasized the fact she is open minded and intensified this with the word “very.” She then (lines 17–24) expressed in detail her interests in music,

books, and antiques. Her closing is noteworthy as she concluded by showing her excitement about the project and getting to know her counterparts. She also posted her picture with her twin from when they were kids, writing, “if you want to see a picture of me as an adult, talk to me in private messages”; due to cultural and social constraints, she did not post her picture as an adult. Her willingness to share her picture with her partner regardless of the fact that Saudi women tend not to post their pictures online is a sign of trust and confidence in her partner, which is an important aspect of relationship building. Sana also used the second-person pronoun *you* three times as a way to address her partners explicitly and get them involved in her own introduction.

Her post was followed by a comment from her American partner, Laura. Laura appreciated Sana’s story, as evident by her use of two positive appraisals: “great” and “interesting.” In line 3, she positively judged Sana as being great for continuing to read philosophy. She also supported her in form of wishing: “I hope one day you will be able to.” A sign of her engagement with Sana is that she asked two clarification questions related to her post, thereby demonstrating her interest in Sana’s personal life. Her use of personal pronouns (e.g., *I* and *you*) is also interesting as it could be considered a plausible way of establishing social alignment and personal engagement with the other.

Extract 2: Comments on Sana’s introduction (group 1)*

<p>Laura: <i>Your</i> story was <u>really great</u> and <u>interesting</u>. X as for music, <i>have you heard of the singer shadia monsour?</i> She does rap and I really like her music <u>it's great</u> that <i>you</i> still read about the subject <u>you're interested in</u> even if <i>you</i> can't study it at school right now. I hope one day <i>you</i> will be able to study philosophy. X I was confused on where you live because I don't know the university. Is it in Saudi Arabia?</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5 6</p>	<p>Positive appraisal Personal Q1 Show support+ positive appraisal Personal Q2</p>
<p>October 7 at 12:07 pm Sana: <u>Thanks Alisa</u>, <u>looking for yours</u> as well. I didn't hear of Shadia. I thought <i>you</i> mean Shadia the Egyptian actress who I like very much. Anyway, Ill listen to her music and see. As for where I live, I live in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh October 7 at 12:18pm Like.1</p>	<p>7 8 9 10</p>	<p>Thanking/ Commenting /answering Qs.</p>

***Bold:** 1st person pronoun – underlined: appraisal utterance—*utilized:*2nd person pronoun, and addressivity
X: emoticons

Sana’s reply started with an appreciative “Thank you” and a demonstrated interest in reading Laura’s self-introduction: “Looking for yours as well.” She then answered the two questions her partners posed. In answering Laura’s question regarding music, Sana expressed a willingness to listen to the musician that her friend suggested. Laura did not respond other than to click the “like” button.

Humor is another feature used by the students to reduce the social distance and create a friendly environment. The following example is taken from the comments posted under Alanod’s essay about herself. In her introduction, Alanod wrote that she has eight family members, including her dad and mom, which is considered a good size. Jennifer previously in her introduction mentioned how she is blessed to have a big family, with five members. Jennifer started her comment by highlighting the difference between what a “big family means” in the United States compared to Saudi Arabia, which indicates her interest in learning about the other culture.

Extract 3: Comments on Alanod’s self-introduction (group 3)

Jennifer: I wrote Asuraty Kabeera [big family] in my essay because in America, my family is considered very big. Most of my friends only have one brother or sister, and I have three. It <u>is very interesting to see that <i>your</i> families</u> are so much larger! October 6, 2014 at 6:28pm · Like · 1	1 2 3 4	-Point to the differences. -Showing interest learning about the other.
Alanod: Actually most of families here in my country <u>love big families(X)</u> . anyway I <i>think</i> it's <u>gift</u> from God because when I am angry from my second sister I already go to the third sister (X)(the same with my brothers) October 7, 2014 at 5:52am · Like · 1	5 6 7 8	-Commenting/ using humor
Aseel: LOL It's not about that only If <i>you</i> lose <i>your</i> headphones <i>you</i> can find 4-5 other headphones <i>you</i> can use(XX) or even an USB cable for your iPhone., And pretend it's <i>yours</i> October 8, 2014 at 5:56pm · Like · 2	9 10 11 12 13	-Commenting/ using humor

***Bold**: 1st person pronoun – underlined: appraisal utterance—*utilized*:2nd person pronoun, and addressivity
X: emoticons

Alanod replied and stated that Saudi people prefer having big families, but instead of explaining this preference from a cultural and social framework, she opted to explain her own perspective. Interestingly, she and Aseel, the other Saudi student in the group, used humor to express their preference for a big family: “when I am angry with my second sister, I already

go to the third sister (the same with my brothers)” and “If you lose your headphones you can find 4-5 other headphones you can use or even a USB cable for your iPhone and pretend it’s yours.” Jennifer “liked” both replies, but she did not post further comment. Although this short interaction could turn into a rich point of discussion concerning family size in both cultures, it turned into a more subjective perspective using humor and was a nice fit, especially during the first week of the project. Fantini (2006) considers sense of humor as one of the attributes that successful+66666 intercultural speaker.

The following extract exemplified a very different way of commenting. Banan and Elizabeth engaged in a very lengthy interaction, discussing a variety of questions related to personal interests and daily life practices.

Extract 4: Comments on Banan’s self-introduction (group 2)*

Elizabeth: That is <u>so cool!</u> <i>What are some of your favorite movies?</i> X I also have that addiction! <i>What is your favorite food?</i> I love to cook and try <u>new</u> things.X	1
	2
Banan: Hi Elizabeth X, <u>nice</u> to meet <i>you</i> gurl X. Well i have so many <u>favorite movies</u> oh god i cant count them X. But recently , the fault in our stars " i cried river " at the end . Divergent, chef, captain america, frozen .. Etc. . Ok i am a food lover as well , i love anything that have sweets.cheesecake , cookies, desserts. Here is a picture of "Nutella cheesecake with pistachio (picture inserted) .	3
	4
	5
	6
	7
<i>What about you ? What kind of movies do you like?</i> X	8
Elizabeth: Those are <u>good</u> movies! I haven't seen the fault in our stars or chef yet but they both look <u>good!!</u> I love lord of the rings and the hobbit movie series', pride and prejudice, phantom of the opera, and anything disney (among many other genres)!! That cheesecake looks <u>so tasty!</u> <i>Do you have an instagram?</i> Most of the food that I make or eat I will post there. X	9
	10
	11
	12
If not I will be posting images of food and sweets to make everyone hungry ^.^	13
Banan: Well i think you and i have things in common X . I 'v watches the whole serious of the hobbit too , it was fascinating. And for pride and prejudice , i watched it like 10 times i guess . I know i am <u>kinda of crazy</u> X . Of course gurl i have an Instagram that i share all of my food in you know it right X.	14
	15
	16
Its @.... and i will be <u>glad</u> to follow <i>you</i> and see <i>your</i> food too . I am ready to be hungryXX	17
Elizabeth: I think we will be getting along just fine! X Not to worry, I am totally crazed and love to laugh so this will be awesome! Mine is kind of a silly nickname for my instagram username but nothing else would work, sooooo it is:	18
	19
	20
Banan Wow, me too i love that kind of people . Life is about laughing and enjoying X. I follow <i>you</i> and <i>you're</i> <u>amazing and beautiful</u> XX .	21
	22
Elizabeth: you're such a <u>sweetheart!</u> I like you already XD	23
Banan Thats <u>very kind</u> of you , i like you too X	24
Elizabeth: Not a problem chica X	25
Banan: Hahaha <i>you</i> are <u>good</u> at arabic girl. Mashaallah	26
Elizabeth: I might slip up with Spanish now and againX hahaha but shukran X	27
Banan: Hahahah ok i was just kidding X. <i>But seriously what do you think about arabic, is it harder than Spanish?</i>	28
	29
.	30
.(5X)	.
.	.
Elizabeth: No, <i>you're</i> not <u>weird!</u> X!It's <u>good</u> to have grasp of many languages because the world is so interconnected.	45
	46
Banan: <u>Thank you</u> X . <i>You</i> are <u>absolutely right</u>	47

***Bold:** 1st person pronoun, *underlined:* appraisal utterances, *italics,*2nd person pronoun, addressvitiy, X: emoticons, **Yellow highlighted:** self-alignment, **Red highlighted:** code-switching

Elizabeth started the comments by positively appraising Banan, then asked her two personal questions while simultaneously displaying self-alignment with her with regard to watching movies: "I also have that addiction." Banan replied to her first by expressing happiness to meet her and then answering her questions. She too displayed self-alignment with Elizabeth: "I am food lover as well." She then asked Elizabeth similar questions. The exchanges between these two partners are also filled with positive utterances (appreciating, complementing, supporting, thanking...etc). All these linguistic and interactive features helped them not only get to know each other, but also maintain friendly relations.

Similar communication between Banan and Elizabeth continued throughout the project, not only on the FB group page but also on other social networking apps like Whatsapp and Instagram, which could be considered good evidence of successful intercultural discussion. However, their great interest in social interaction at the personal level hindered them from engaging in task-oriented topics to take them to a deep intercultural discussion. Banan and Elizabeth employed avoidance strategies to express disagreement and sidestep confrontation. This explains the quantitative analysis of the frequency of posts and written words. The number of their posts is considered high, but the number of words written placed them in the low functionality group as most of their interactions did not go deeply into explaining and reflecting on cultural topics.

Self-introduction essays in groups 4 and 5 that were characterized as low functionality, were short and shared only basic information, which does not lead to follow-up commenting. Being brief and conservative about introducing yourself not only shows less interest in participating, but also hinders the possibility of establishing a friendship. Although some members of these groups did write relatively long introductions, the follow-up questions were not answered, which might serve as a blocking mechanism for continuing

meaningful interactions. This is shown in the following example:

Extract 5: Maram’s essay (group 4)*

Maram:		
Will my name is Maram. I am 20 years old. I live in Riyadh, Saudi	1	Factual information
Arabia. I go to imam Islamic university. I 'm <u>good</u> at sketching and film	2	Interests
editing. I 'm a <u>big fan</u> of movies and series. I watch probably about nine series	3	
at the moment lol. I also enjoy music and sports especially jogging, it's my	4	
<u>favorite sport</u> . I like meeting new people and making new friends. One of my	5	Personality
goals is to travel around the world and see how the other half lives. I like to	6	
think of myself as <u>an open minded</u> person who understands different principles	7	
and views. One of the things i <u>very much enjoy</u> is tumblr. I know this may	8	Interest
seem <u>wired</u> but if you want to know anything about me, <i>you</i> should check out	9	
my tumblr blog.	10	Closing
I guess this is all you need to know about me .	11	“Block” coming Qs
Here is My tumblr blog	12	Personal Tumbler
Comments:		
Lana: <u>Very interesting!!!</u> <u>nice</u> to meet <i>you Maram!</i> <i>What kind of music</i>	13	Positive appraisals
<i>do you listen to?</i>	14	Personal Q
Maram : I listen to all music but lately been listening to a lot of arctic monkeys,	15	Dry reply
one republic and lana del rey	16	

***Bold**: 1st person pronoun – underlined: appraisal utterances—*utilized*:2nd person pronoun, and addressivity X: emoticons

Maram started off with factual information about herself, including her name, age, where she lives, and her university. She then listed her hobbies and interests, but without many details. She described herself as being open-minded, which is an important trait in this project. At the end, she shared her personal site on Tumbler, where she posted her skills in sketching and film editing. Her closing could be seen as reluctance to engage in personal interactions. First she directs her partners to her Tumbler site if they want to know more about her and then said, “I guess this is all you need to know about me”—a statement that could shut down further questions. Regarding the use of personal pronouns, Maram employed a good number of first-person pronouns, exposing herself to her partner but without much elaboration. The second-person pronoun was used not to get her partners involved in her essay but to distance and direct them to other sources. Regardless of Maram’s communication style, Lana’s comment indicated an interest in getting to know Maram as she positively appreciated her skill as a picture editor with intensification (i.e., “very”), followed by a personal question about music. However, Maram replied with a dry answer that included no appreciation, thanking, or even demonstrated interest to get to know her American partner.

Offering language help

The chosen language for discussion in this project is mainly English because the goal is not about language development, but rather enhancing intercultural learning. However, the Saudi participants benefited a great deal from their exposure to English as they reported in the post-project questionnaire and interview. As a way of showing courtesy toward their American partners, they started offering language help. This behavior could be a demonstration of their willingness to develop a reciprocal relationship with their partner and reflects an attitude of interest.

Extracts 6 to 9 Saudi students offering language help

6	<p>(group2) Banan: For non arabic speakers who learn arabic Elizabeth and Linda , i found some helpful resources for learning arabic , one of them in twitter , accounts that support everyday words (@wespeakarabic and @goarabic) . And there is an app that i use for chatting with foreigners and help me a lot with practicing, it called (hellotalk) its an awesome app , i recommend you to download it for practicing and asking others help if u want to .</p>	1 2 3 4 5
7	<p>(group 1) Laura: Nouf (Enshallah) I hope to visit the Middle East. I want to visit Lebanon and Syria but right now is not a good time. I hope things will be better there soon. Sana I meant (fusha) sorry I didn't transliterate it well. Yes I speak German and I love the language too! <i>If you want to know any words let me know</i> . At the moment I rely on studying and practicing in my (Shami) because I believe it is easier to talk in dialect. Sana Yes indeed, (Shami) is easier and lovelier too. <i>If you want to practice it I'm very good at it, if you want any help</i></p>	6 7 8 9 10 11 12
8	<p>(group 6) Kathleen :<i>I can help you with the linguistics part of your studies!</i> Who are your favorite English writers? Shaden: Thank you so much for your offer. Did you read any Arabic book ? In this semester I don't have any classes in linguistics, because I took them in the summer course . I like to read Charles dickens' novel and in this semester we studying his novel " Great Expectations " Kathleen: My Arabic isn't good enough yet to read just Arabic books, I don't think I would understand those books. But I do have a few books that are written both in Arabic and in English, so I learn new vocab with them. I have the Quran in Arabic and English, and I have two idiom books that I like to look at. They have stuff in them like "ya ana ya inta," and "mish mushmis mish mushmush." Shaden: Oh good you have a Quran. The first idiom (ya ana ya inta) , but the second I don't know it . What's mean ? X I like reading Arabic books more than English and in our house my father has library full of Arabic books . It's my favorite place Chelsea: I think it is an Egyptian phrase, it means, "no rain no apricots"...do they say this in Arabic? If not, then I won't ever say it hahaha Shaden: I don't know if it's Egyptian phrase or not because I asked Egyptian lady about it and she doesn't know it but she said if we want to say impossible for something; they say " at apricot" . . . If you are interested in that's we could exchange idioms and phrases.</p>	12 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 . . . 39

9	(group 3) Aseel : Hi guys I hope you're all doing well I would share with you this <u>helpful</u>	40
	account in twitter @wespeakarabic  It teaches you some of daily words & phrases of Arab	41
	slang language. It gives you the phonetic of the word & phrase + the meaning of them in	42
	English. Also lately (urban dictionary) website adds some of Arabic words. It gives you a word	43
	then gives a definition of it and put it in a sentence or dialogue in arabic. So that's <u>help you</u> to	44
	know when & where use it. If you have any questions about this website and want a translation	45
	about anything in Arabic we are ready to help X	46
	Jennifer: <u>Thank you</u> for sharing these! I forgot to mention how instructive social media can be. I use it to help me in math class a lot X	47 48

The preceding extracts are examples taken from different groups in which participants showed interest in helping their partners with the language they are learning. In examples 7 and 10, students shared external resources to help with Arabic, especially dialect, while in 8 Sana expressed her interest in helping Laura, her American partner, with the Shami dialect, which Sana is good at even though it is not her regional dialect. In Example 9, both Kathleen and Shaden offered each other language help. Shaden stated that English linguistics are difficult for her, and Kathleen, whose major is linguistics, replied by noting her readiness to assist her in linguistics. When Kathleen expressed her interest in Arabic idioms and shared some Egyptian idioms that she knew, Shaden indicated skepticism about these idioms, as she had never heard of them. Instead of relying on her knowledge, she asked her Egyptian friend, who confirmed her skepticism that the idioms do not exist in Egyptian. She wanted to provide her partner with a constructive reply. Shaden's behavior of asking another knowledgeable person is a clear indication of her interest in establishing a friendship that is based on reciprocity. Saudi students in the low functionality groups (groups 4 and 5) did not demonstrate a willingness to offer language help. This could be due to the lack of participation of American students in those groups, as discussed in the previous section.

Questions as a sign of interest and curiosity

Asking questions is notable evidence of showing interest in discovering other perspectives about one's own and another's culture. Byram (1979) stated that the attitude of interest of an intercultural speaker could be demonstrated by "the curiosity and wonder

expressed in constant questions” (p. 50). However, the discussion regarding questioning will be left to Section 4.1.3.3 (Skills of discovery and interaction) as it is more related and to avoid overlap. Another related objective is willingness to question the value and presupposition in cultural practices and products in one’s own environment. As this objective required a high cognitive processing as well as longer immersion in another culture that would allow for contrasting and comparison, and in some sense it is conflicting with Saudis' educational and religious policies, few participants were ready to question their home culture’s values during the online exchange.

The Americans appeared more open to criticizing their cultural practices. The majority Saudi students, as will be discussed in the following sections, focused on presenting their home culture and correcting stereotypes They declared in the post-project interview that the project helped them present their culture in a correct way and not how it is presented in the Western media.

Extracts 10 and 11 Questioning one’s own values

11	(Group 1) Laura: We do not get educated on any other cultures than American, and the education system is <u>the best</u> example of that. For 12 years of our school life at least 10 are spend just learning <i>AMERICAN</i> history! <u>which is crazy</u>, thinking of how young of a nation America is. <i>How can so much time be possible spend on it??</i> it has <u>always baffled me.</u>”	1 2 3 4
12	(Group 1) Sana: A women in Saudi Arabia no matter how old is she, she <u>can't travel alone!!</u> And <u>she can't drive a car</u> because of honor matters because no one wants to see a guy flirt other women. But its ok for <i>THEM</i> that a woman go to her work or other business with a male driver who she doesn't know at all!!	5 6 7 8

These extracts offer examples of how students were ready to criticize their own cultural practices. Laura explained why she does not have knowledge about Saudi Arabia by criticizing the American educational system, which focuses mainly on American history. She capitalized the entire word American to emphasize how ridiculous the situation is, especially given that America is a young nation. Her negative attitude toward the situation is evident in

words “crazy” and “baffled,” while her critical stance is presented when she asked a rhetorical question with two question marks.

Sana, on the other hand, criticized the status of women in Saudi Arabia. She stated that she lacks some fundamental rights like not being able to drive or travel alone. She talked about Saudi women using the third-person pronoun *she* instead of the inclusive marker *we*, thereby distancing her from accepting this position. She also used “can’t” several times to negatively judge Saudi women’s ability. She used sarcasm to explain the reason for such a situation, which is honor. She thinks Saudi men’s practices are ironic: They do not allow women to drive out of sense of honor but at the same time let her go with a male driver whom she does not know. Sana revealed her critical attitude by first referring to men indirectly as “THEM.” In Arabic, indirect reference is sometimes used to underestimate the status of the referent. The use of three exclamation marks at the end of her post also increased her critical position of the situation.

4.1.3.2 Knowledge

Knowledge is the second domain of Byram’s ICC and plays an important role in carrying out a successful interaction. Learners bring to the interaction knowledge about their culture and the other culture. Byram (1997) divided this type of knowledge into two main categories: knowledge of social groups and knowledge of process of interaction at the individual and social levels, in both one’s own and another’s culture. This includes the knowledge of historical and contemporary relationships, national memories, definitions of geographical space, process and institution of socialization and social interaction, and distinctions not in one’s own and the interlocutor’s country. Byram’s definition of knowledge and what it entails adopts a more critical perspective (O’Dowd, 2014) with which language learners are not expected to be equipped prior to the interaction or easily acquired throughout

short-term online exchanges. Byram (1997) stated that one's knowledge of social groups can be refined, expanded, and changed through an interaction, while the knowledge of the process of interaction is fundamental to successful interaction and "is not acquired automatically" (p. 35).

An analysis of the data revealed that students' prior knowledge about their own culture and more importantly about the other culture largely affects the direction of their interaction. Saudis students believe that Saudi Arabians have been negatively presented and many Americans have a stereotypical image about them and their culture; Saudis' role in this interaction is to correct this negative image. Americans also have limited information about Saudi Arabia. As Randi said, "my exposure and knowledge of Saudi culture is something that is briefly discussed in my Arabic class, so I have a very limited information about it" (Randi, group 1, Facebook comment). They might also have a partial view that they think is wrong and stereotypical (Jennifer, group 3, Facebook post). On the other hand, Saudis think that the American culture is very well known and is like an "open book" (Aseel's interview). Thus the topics and questions initiated by participants—although influenced by the task design—reflect students' interests in filling the gaps in their preexisting knowledge. Americans were more interested in learning more about Saudi culture and about women's position in Saudi Arabia. Saudi students were more interested in exploring Americans' perception toward their own culture and presenting a correct image of Saudi culture rather than learning about American culture.

Many students were able to provide their partners with the needed information referring explicitly to the hidden ideological values and ethnocentric perspectives to provide an evaluative analysis of the topic at hand. For instance, the following extract is Jennifer's response to Aseel's question about marriage in the United States.

Jennifer started with the categorical assertion that marriage in the United States is strange. Before explaining the reason for her statement, she stated her personal attitude toward marriage as “conservative,” which is influenced by her religious values. She made clear from the beginning that her perspective is not popular, and few people have a similar perspective. She explained her perception of marriage based on this belief. Jennifer then explained that the primary reason for divorce is because many people do not follow this conservative perspective. She moved on to explain the various forms of marriage practices in the United States. In her explanation, Jennifer made an explicit reference to the ideological American value of independence and how it affects people’s practice.

Extract 11: Marriage in the United States (group 3)

<p>Aseel: Jennifer we don't know anything about marriage in the US, but what we see in movies.. And usually what in movies is not necessarily true. So tell us about it October 12, 2014 at 10:51am · Like</p>	<p>1 2 3</p>	<p>Asking question</p>
<p>Jennifer I will try!</p>	<p>4</p>	
<p>Marriage in the US is <u>strange</u> because it takes <u>a lot of different forms</u>. My view of marriage would be considered <u>conservative</u>. I come from a Christian family. Christians believe that marriage is for life, it is a holy union before God, and that you should marry before you have children. There is usually a wedding ceremony in a church and a large celebration.</p>	<p>5 6 7 8 9</p>	<p>Indicating complexity Categorical assertion Personal view</p>
<p>A large part of the US does not believe this, though, and so marriage has become less permanent. (I believe there is a 50% divorce rate, which means that half of married couples end up getting divorced. I think this is horrible and sad.)</p>	<p>10 11 12</p>	<p>Awareness of ideological values</p>
<p>Most of the time there is still a wedding ceremony but it may be <u>less formal</u>, and the focus is more on the celebration. In America, to be married, you do not have to have permission of a priest or a church. You need permission from the government, so some people just sign a form and have a party afterward. This form also makes it easier to <u>get divorced</u>. Sometimes people in America live together for years, or even their whole life, without officially being married. There are a lot of reasons for this; I think the most popular is that they want "<u>independence</u>" from their partner. Many Americans love the idea of <u>independence</u>. <i>(It might be our culture.)</i> I think it is <u>stupid</u> to want independence in a marriage because marriage is supposed to be a <u>partnership</u>. Most Americans think that a man and a woman should have equal roles in a marriage.</p>	<p>13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22</p>	<p>Explaining different forms of marriage Explicit reference to ideological values</p>
<p>Traditionally the man works and the woman takes care of the home, but as I mentioned before many women now want the opportunity to work as well. Most women still want children, but want to work also, so there is a big business for childcare. (Childcare is when someone else is paid to watch the children.) I hope to get married, work for a few years, and then retire when I have children. This is what my mother did. I think most Americans would agree, though, that <u>a healthy</u> marriage has a lot of <u>communication</u>, <u>compromise</u>, and of course <u>love</u>. I believe the reason so many get divorced is because they are <u>too lazy</u> to put in the effort when things get difficult. (Americans being lazy is a stereotype, but sometimes stereotypes are true! :D)</p>	<p>23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31</p>	<p>Negative attitude Personal view</p>
<p>Most Americans get married before they are 30 or so. Some get married when they are older than 30, especially if they have been divorced already. Getting married before you are 22 or so would probably be considered young. Most people who are younger than 22 are more likely to live together, but not be married. (They might get married later.) I think it is a mistake to live together before you are married, <u>but this is an unpopular opinion</u>.</p>	<p>32 33 34 35 36 37</p>	<p>Awareness of stereotype Age of getting married Personal view</p>

<p>Some of my older friends are getting married in a few days. I will try to post pictures of their wedding so you can see them! <u>Sorry for</u> so much writing. I hope this made sense. It is a <u>complicated</u> subject in America and there are a lot of arguments about it. <i>Do you think you could explain more about Saudi marriage? I don't know much about it!!</i> October 12, 2014 at 3:46pm · Like.1</p>	38	
	39	Closing
	40	Showing interest
	41	in sharing
	42	Question
	43	
	44	

Jennifer negatively evaluated the effect of this concept on marriage: “It is stupid to want independence in a marriage because marriage is supposed to be a partnership” (line 21). She then explained what this concept means in marriage before providing her view: “I hope to get married ...” (line 33). She went back to explain another reason for divorce which she thinks to “be stereotype” but it could be true that is Americans are too lazy to make an effort to solve problems. She mentioned the average age of people when they get married and added her personal opinion. Again she negatively evaluated" it is a mistake" the current practices of people who live together before getting married.

It is clear that Jennifer’s own belief towards marriage affected the information she provided to her partners, even though she made it very clear that her view was different from that of the majority. For Saudis to read about such a perspective from an American is surprising as it is different from the typical image that they have. In the post-project interview, Alanod (group 3) said, “it is surprising that there are some Americans who still value religious perspectives, and it is interesting to learn that Christianity’s perspective of marriage is similar to Islam’s.” Reading such response allows students to develop an understanding about other cultures and helps them become aware of the heterogeneity perspective regarding culture; which is the existence of cultural differences within the culture.

Not all students, however, were able to give an explicitly detailed response. Some students had trouble formulating or providing information on topics that required statistical or factual information or topics with which they did not have personal experience. For instance,

the majority of Saudi students' responses to the word "tax" during the word association task were negative and bad. This led American students in many groups to wonder why. In Saudi Arabia, people do not pay taxes, and giving the government money is contrary to their expectations about the government. The government is seen as the one who should give the people money, for instance, Saudi students are given money during college years. However, Saudi students were not able to provide this piece of information to American students clearly as in the following example.

Extract 12 Kathleen and Shaden (group 6)

Kathleen: Hello! I was looking at the "tax" portion of the second task, and saw that some of the Saudi responses were "cruelty" and "punishment." I was wondering if that is generally how people there think of taxes? What percent in taxes do you pay?	1
October 18, 2014	2
Shaden: Hello, now I'm in university and I will answer you when I back home.	3
October 18, 2014 at 10:01pm · Like	4
Shaden: Hi Kathleen, <u>I am so sorry</u> that I didn't answer you in Sunday because when I back home my iPhone fell in water and I don't fix it until Wednesday..You asked about why some Saudi response answer cruelty and punishment, because in Saudi Arabia we don't have a Tax at all . I think you have to pay a tax in America, isn't it? And why you need to pay it? Again I am so sorry	5
October 24, 2014 at 12:40am · Like	6
Kathleen: Oh no! I hope your phone is ok! In America we pay taxes for national defense, healthcare, education, social security...stuff like that. Social Security is for people who can't make enough money for themselves on their own...people who are disabled and cannot work, unemployed people, or people who are retired.	7
October 24, 2014 at 7:34am · Like	8
Shaden: Yah thanks it's ok no . Aha, I asked my father about tax to make sure about my answer to you , he said only the merchants whose pay a tax .	9
	10
	11
	12
	13
	14

Kathleen asked about Saudis' perspective towards taxes and the percentage they pay. Despite all the interactive and linguistic features in Shaden's comments (e.g., apologizing, giving reasons for late response, quoting her partner) that reflected her interest, her reply was very brief: "We don't have taxes at all." This kind of response did not add much to Kathleen's knowledge. Shaden's last comment, in which she asked her father about taxes, is also not illustrative either, but reflects her involvement in the discussion.

The analysis of responses to questions that require declarative knowledge revealed an interesting difference in communication styles between Arabic and American students that affected their understanding of the other cultural groups. One noteworthy finding is that

American students do not mind saying “I don’t know,” “I have no answer for that,” or “I am not sure about that.” For them, they are being accurate; they really do not know the answer and do not want to provide any misleading information. Meanwhile, Saudi students avoid such responses, as they do not feel comfortable with them. This situation is related to face-threatening acts, especially in an intercultural context where they are supposed to provide foreigners with correct information. In contexts where they are not equipped with enough information, they provided very brief and short responses (as in extract 12). Interestingly, they interpreted Americans’ responses of “not knowing” as Americans lacking knowledge of their own culture and having a shallow understanding. Yet when I asked Americans about some of the Saudis’ brief responses, they stated that such responses were expected, as no one is knowledgeable about everything. The different interpretations, especially on the Saudi side, led to the formulation of a new stereotype about American people.

The difference in communication styles between Americans and Saudis is manifested in several examples that impeded the conveyance of the desired message, especially for the Saudi students using English. The following example reflects a high culture context (Arabic) versus low context (American) (Hall, 1979), which makes it harder for Americans to understand.

Extract 13 Laura, Randi, and Sana (group 1)

Laura: This one is the most surprising to me. In America, I've never questioned a tax It is simply something the government enforces to get funding, and although we don't like them particularly either we understand the importance of them. Why is tax seen as bad in Saudi Arabia?	1
October 14, 2014 at 10:36am · like · 1	2
Randi: I am curious as well, why is tax seen as bad?	3
October 20, 2014 at 12:54am · Like	4
Sana: <u>The meaning of Tax in America is not the same in Saudi Arabia. We actually don't have this term. In the old Islamic empire we used the word Jeziah as in the Bible, where Christian and Jewish people will pay an amount of money every year to the government to protect them from their enemies. Only Men would pay the jeziah. Children, women, ill people, poor people, and even men of the church are exempt from paying it. And as for Muslims they will pay an amount of money according to a specific rules every year to poor people we call this "Zakat" and we still do it until today because its one of the five pillars of Islam.</u>	5
October 20, 2014 at 10:02am · Like	6
Laura: But if it represents one of the pillars of Islam why are there words such as "punishment" on the Saudi side?	7
October 20, 2014 at 12:53pm · Like	8
	9
	10
	11
	12
	13

Sana: Because girls here are commenting on the American Tax not the Islamic Jeziah. October 20, 2014 at 12:57pm · Edited · Like	14 15
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Like Kathleen in group 6, Laura and Randi in group 1 asked similar questions regarding taxes. Sana did provide an explanation involving critical knowledge about a similar concept to taxes in Islam that was used in the past, *jeziah*, or another similar Islamic principle, *zakat*. Yet her explanation was loaded with contextual information that the Americans were not aware of, as demonstrated by Laura’s question in line 12, which revealed her confusion between the concepts of *zakat* and taxes in Islam. Hall (1982) stated that, in a high context culture (e.g., Arabic culture), “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person” (p. 18); hence, meaning is found in context versus the text (either spoken or written).

The Arabic language is characterized as being indirect, emotionally rich, and sometime ambiguous as speakers can bury the message, especially when the speaker is emotionally attached to the topic. The following extract typifies the Arabic style of using metaphorical, emotional language.

Extract 14 Randi and Nouf (group 1)

Randi: I do find it very interesting that the word "weapon" was used. I would like to know more about why that specific word was used and how Hijab is a weapon. October 13, 2014 at 11:41pm · like · 1	1 2
Nouf: Randi Your questions <u>is interesting</u> , the Hijab to Muslims women is <u>like weapon</u> to them. The Hijab <i>protect</i> them from many things like assaults, and the Hijab <i>protects</i> their privacy even <i>protects</i> the beauty of the Arabic Women. Arabs in literature describe in details the beauty in the Arabic women how they are <u>beautiful</u> . They describe deeply the Arabic women creature her eyes how they are big, how the nose of the Arabic stand and taller, and the shape of their body. Men around the world see women like glamour to them. And our religion Islam <u>protects</u> the women from many things not only from assaults but from many things. That why we think that hijab like a weapon to us <u>protects</u> the women from many things if i try to tell u all of them i can't traps them all. October 14, 2014 at 4:03am · like ·	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

Randi, an American, asked her Saudi partners why the word “weapon” was mentioned when they responded to the word *hijab*. Nouf tried to explain that “weapon” is used metaphorically to mean that they wore *hijab* to protect women from men’s abuse. She used the word “protect” five times to emphasize this meaning. Instead of providing reasoning, she

used rhetorical language that emphasizes the beauty of women, which needs to be protected. Nouf's explanation is a reflection of how the *hijab* is explained taught to young Muslim girls when they first start wearing. American students might not understand this type of language, even though they might get the message of how the *hijab* is important for Saudis; thus, the reasons provided are not satisfying for Americans.

Despite the mismatch between Arabic and American communication styles in the above examples that impede the sharing of messages or create new stereotypes, the intercultural exchange enhanced the domain of knowledge about one's own and another's culture. Many students on both sides tried to provide their partners with detailed information by including an objective explanation intertwined with the subjective point of view similar to Jennifer's example, as will be discussed in Section 4.1.3.4. This was evident in students' post-project interviews; several students reported that the project exposed them to knowledge that they would not have encountered in a traditional classroom. The Saudi students reported that:

- Family is important in the United States, which was not as they thought before.
- Relationships in the US are usually not as shallow as they imagined especially marriage and family.
- They are open and eager to learn about others; they are perceived as "acceptable" and "open minded."
- Their college system is different than that in the United States in terms of majors and minors.

The Americans students stated:

- Saudi women are content and have reasons for what they do.
- Saudi women are just like American women; they use social media the same way, listen to Western music, like fashion, etc.
- Family has a strong status in Saudi Arabia.
- Religion is important and is visible in every aspect of their lives.

Both sides of the partnerships reported that they unexpectedly learned about their own culture as well, as they have brought up the subconscious, taken-for-granted knowledge during discussions and explained it to their partners (as will be discussed in Section 4.1.3.4). Saudi students reported language gains; along with vocabulary and phrases, the students mentioned that they learned how to carry a conversation with native speakers—something that was a little intimidating at the beginning of the project.

4.1.3.3 Skills of discovery and interaction

Byram (1997) divided the skills dimension of his model into two separate components: skills of discovery and interaction and skills of interpreting and relating. The former is, although not always, manifested through social interaction and stems from a person's interest in discovering more knowledge to build on his or her lack of or partial knowledge whereas the latter does not require social interaction and depends on existing knowledge. Skills of discovery and interaction play a crucial role in Byram's model as they are considered the door to building "specific knowledge as well as an understanding of the beliefs, meanings, behaviors which are inherent in particular phenomena" (p. 37) and are "the means whereby skills of interpreting and relating can be supplemented when the learners meet unknown familiar" (p. 99). Skills of discovery are defined linguistically as the interest in discovering new understandings, compelling the learner to "use a range of questioning techniques" (p. 99) to elicit new information, connotations, and dysfunction allusions. Skills of discovery are to a great extent influenced by one's skills of interaction, where the individual needs to be able to manage time constraints, mutual perception, and attitude in particular circumstances "to ask the kinds of questions which elicit further knowledge" (p. 99).

In this section, I will analyze students' skills of discovery and interaction in light of the frequency and types of questions following Belz (2005) and Ware (2003) whom based their analysis on the work of (), In addition, I explore the purpose of questions, and the manner of asking questions.

Frequency and types of questions

Table 4.1.11 shows the frequency and types of questions across groups. The columns list the group number followed by the cultural groups (A represents American students and S represents Saudi students).

The rows list the different types of questions: (1) information-seeking questions that include why, opinion, what/how, yes/ no, and either/or; and (2) information-checking questions and rhetorical questions. The table reveals the distribution of questions across the different question types.

Table 4.1.11 Frequency and Types of Questions Across Groups

Groups		Type of questions							Total
		Information seeking					Info. Check	Rhetorical	
		Why	Opinion	What/how	Yes/no	Either/or			
1	A	7	2	4	6	0	3	1	23
	S	2	3	9	4	1	1	15	35
2	A	1	2	7	2	2	0	0	14
	S	1	1	4	3	0	1	0	10
3	A	2	2	11	6	1	0	0	22
	S	2	1	3	8	0	1	2	17
4	A	1	0	3	2	0	0	0	6
	S	4	1	8	4	0	2	0	19
5	A	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
	S	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	6
6	A	2	0	9	8	0	1	0	20
	S	5	1	11	9	0	1	0	27
Total		28	13	74	54	4	10	18	201

The last column provides the total number of questions asked by each cultural group, and the last row gives the total number of questions of each type across groups.

At the first blush, it seems that there is no balance in the number of questions between the group comparisons (e.g., in groups 1 and 6, Saudi students asked more questions; in groups 2 and 3, American students asked more questions). However, an analysis of the table data and group dynamics indicated that Saudi students in group 1 asked about 15 rhetorical questions to either provoke thoughts or enforce a point of view rather than acquire more knowledge. Removing this type of question from the analysis resulted in the two sides having a balanced number of questions. In group 6, the Saudi students asked seven more questions than Americans, but the group included four Saudi participants compared to only two American participants. Considering this difference in participants, the imbalance in the number of questions is plausible. In groups 2 and 3, the differences are relatively low (five questions in group 3 and four questions in group 2).

Groups characterized as being highly functional based on the balanced number of posts/comments and written words (i.e., groups 1, 3, and 6) were also the groups that asked a balanced number of questions. Similarly, groups 4 and 5, which were characterized as low functionality, demonstrated an imbalanced number of questions in favor of Saudi students; group 4 revealed a striking sticking discrepancy while group 5 asked the fewest questions of all groups. Group 2 presents an interesting case: It was characterized as a high functionality group in terms of the number of posts but as a low functionality group when it comes to the number of written words. In terms of the number of questions, the group posed a balanced number; however, the number of questions was relatively low compared to other high functionality groups. As discussed in Section 4.1.1 on attitude, group 2 built successful relationships from the beginning of the project and engaged in lengthy interactions; however,

when it came to the task-oriented topic, their interactions were more information exchanges than the elicitation of different cultural perspectives.

Regarding the types of questions, the analysis indicated that information-seeking questions were more common than the other two types (i.e., information checking and rhetorical questions). The most common type of information-seeking questions were what/how (78), followed by yes/no (54) and why (28). Rhetorical questions came next (17), following by opinion questions (13), information-checking questions (10), and finally either/or (4).

Interestingly, the analysis revealed no difference in the types of questions based on the cultural group. The differences seem to stem from the personal/group level rather than the cultural group. The only noticeable difference in this regard is that Saudi students asked almost all the rhetorical questions, with most being asked in group 1 (15) compared to only two in group 4.

Purpose of questions

Although it is informative to analyze the types and the number of questions, such an analysis still provides a limited picture of what these questions entail. Therefore, I found it critical to include an analysis of the different purposes of questions and their roles in telecollaborative projects as not all questions call upon individuals to reflect on their own or another's culture.

The first purpose of questions is “to grease the wheels of social interaction” (Belz, 2005, p. 19). They might not require an answer, but they can be employed as interactive strategies to maintain social relationships. As evident in the following examples, such questions were used at the beginning of a post/thread and were not the focus of the post. Interestingly, these social interaction questions were only used by Saudi students.

Extracts 15 and 16 Social interaction questions

Shaden: Hello Kathleen and Janet, *How are you?* How was your week? I hope you have nice weeked. Well What I know about American culture as my friend Arwa said ...etc

Alanod: Hello girls! *How are you doing?* All of us complete the survey and it is interesting to see the responses ...etc

Instead, American students tended to start their posts with statements like “Hello, as I read your discussion and question ...” This could reflect what Thorne (2003) called the “culture of use” of Facebook; Americans are used to employing Facebook for social purposes (e.g., keeping in touch with friends, posting pictures, updating statuses). They are not used to start off a new thread with “how are you” types of question. Saudi students, on the other hand, access Facebook for different purposes: to play games, follow pages of interest, or keep up with the trend to use Facebook. Consequently, they perceive commenting on Facebook as writing in a forum or an email as it allows writing with no limits. It could also present the Arabic culture where it is important to ask about one's health and even about the family. Arabs tend to ask about the other person when first engaging with someone as a sign of politeness instead of being truly interested in the answers.

The second purpose of questions is to reflect the attitude of interest in others' personal/daily lives. Altman and Taylor (1973) called such questions peripheral or (biographical questions) (as cited by Belz, 2007). These questions were mainly asked at the beginning of the project when students introduced themselves; they were asked by both sides of the partnership. As discussed in the attitude section, these questions serve to build a meaningful relationship of trust and reciprocity. The analysis revealed that asking as well as responding to personal questions is important for a successful intercultural exchange whereas not replying would discourage partners from engaging in more cultural questions. For instance, in the following example, Amal (group 5) posted two threads aimed at engaging in informal interactions with her American partners.

Extracts 18 and 19 Amal's social interaction questions

Amal: (feeling excited)

It is weekend in Riyadh, *so what is your plans*. I have on Sunday Quran exam + literature criticism oral exam ☹ and I just finished my homework. Soooooo I am gonna watch my series (city hunter) it is Korean BTW.

Amal: with Maria and Jessica

Family gathering is the most boring thing! *Does anyone agree with me? :/*

Amal wrote these two posts during the first two weeks of the project. She wanted to engage in informal interactions with her partners. In the first, she wanted to know what her partners normally did on the weekend. She also mentioned her interest in Korean shows, providing a way to start talking about types of TV entertainment they enjoy. In the second post, she used a Facebook feature of tagging her American partners to trigger their attention and get them engage in her post about family gatherings. Despite her attempts, she did not receive any response—not even a “like.” She became discouraged and felt that her partners were not really interested in the project. She never initiated any subsequent topics or questions, only commented on her American partners’ posts.

Another set of personal questions reflects one of Byram’s objectives related to an intercultural speaker’s ability to identify ways to connect with other countries and cultures. Several active students in their groups utilized questioning techniques to identify other social networking sites to facilitate contact with their partners beyond the group page, especially when the project ended. For instance, in extract 4, Banan and Elizabeth (group 2) exchanged their Instagram accounts and followed each other. Sana and Laura (group 1) also made an interesting connection beyond the project. During the chat task, Laura convinced Sana to download the Snapchat app (another social networking app that sends short videos [up to 10 seconds] or pictures to connected friends; the videos/pictures are deleted as soon as viewed) so they could exchange more pictures and videos about their own cultures. Sana mentioned in the interview that she enjoyed Snapchat even though she was initially hesitant. She said, “we exchanged pictures and video of school, friends gathering. It is so much fun and also a

learning experience because you could see the similarities and differences.” Similarly, in group 3, Aseel and Jennifer as well as Alanod and Sara discussed venues that would facilitate contact when the project ended. Their aim was to teach each other languages. They reported during the interview that they realized Skype would be the best fit; hence, they exchanged Skype user names and decided to do the teaching during the summer, when they have reduced course loads.

The majority of questions were task related (Ware, 2003), meaning the students were trying to “elicit from one interlocutor the concepts and values of document or events” (Byram, 1997, p. 52). This kind of question plays a vital role in intercultural exchange as it reflects the skills of discovery that require reflection on one’s own culture and perspectives about the other culture. The word association task seemed to serve as a springboard for an eye-opening discussion to understand others. Most students reported that they enjoyed this task the most, as they were able to see what the others thought. According to the ACTFL national standards (1996), “through comparison and contrast with language being studied, students develop insight into the nature of language and the concept of culture and realize that there are multiple ways of viewing the world” (p. 6).

As task-oriented questions are the focal point of the discussion, I will delve into analyzing the manner in which these questions were posed to illuminate how the online exchange could promote/impede understanding of participants’ own and others’ culture by eliciting information from the others. From the outset, no correlation was found between the low and high functionality groups and the effectiveness of the questions as both groups asked questions that are characterized as either weak or strong. However, unlike low functionality groups, the balance and higher number of questions posed by both sides of the partnerships in high functionality groups compensated for the weak questions. Obviously, high functionality groups engaged in more deep and back-channeling questions, which Tanenen (1981) called

“machine gun questions” (as cited in Belz, 2005, p. 7); meanwhile, low functionality groups were less engaged and lacked well-formatted responses, which discouraged further intercultural interactions.

An important aspect of a successful interaction is how students “use in real time knowledge, skills, and attitudes for mediation between interlocutors of one’s own and foreign culture” (p. 53). This entails how students handle questions with “phatic communion, politeness phenomena and ace work” (Belz, 2007, p. 135) as they venture through their discovery journey. An analysis of questions in the following extracts 19-26, revealed that affective questions include phrases that express the attitude of interest and engagement preceding the questions, such as “I am just interested” (Q1), or amplified their interest by using intensifiers such as really, as in “I really want to know” (Q3, Q5, and Q7), or to show readiness to change previous misconceptions, such as “and I really hope you will correct any misconceptions I have” (Q4). Several politeness features (Brown & Levinson, 1987) are also displayed in these questions; examples include starting with a greeting and offering wishes (e.g., “Hello everyone! I hope all of you are doing well both in health and in school work”; “Hi everyone. How are you?”). Several students also apologized for not being involved or responding late, such as “Hello, everyone! I am very sorry I have not posted much this week”; they also provided reasons, such as “It is midterms week here at the university, which means we have large exams in most of our classes” or “It is Eid holiday here in Saudi Arabia. I will post soon.” Using a polite way to ask questions, like “Could you explain...” (Q6), or describing a hypothetical situation to lessen the impact of the question, as in “if any of you have had women in your friends or family who have wanted life in Saudi Arabia to be different such as wanting to go out or to not to wear the hijab and full body covering” (Q7) also served to engage participants. Another feature that caused the interlocutors to be involved was using an inclusive maker or identifying the listener by name using the tagging

feature offered by Facebook (e.g., Q2, Q6, and Q8). All these linguistic features used before posing questions show the interested attitude and encourage partners to provide feedback to fulfill their desire.

Extracts 19–26 Effective questions

<p>Q1 : Laura (American) <u>I'm just interested in the differences</u> of answers on the Saudi Side. There seems to be a mixture of pets, most saying they are disgusting, and others referring to traits similar to the American side. <i>Why is it so split?</i> I was under the impression that Pets throughout Saudi Arabia were not accepted. <i>Does it depend on the house? Also, the word motherhood was used, why?</i></p>	19
<p>Q2: Sana (Saudi) Hey Laura, <u>I'm not surprised</u> of the idea that you didn't hear of Saudi Arabia but only in the subject of oil industry reasons. <i>But what about 9/11 attack? Did Saudi Arabia has been mentioned then? And what was your idea about it?</i> However, as you said connections in my country is maybe much stronger in so many ways, you see the cultural difference is that most families here meet every week for at least one day in the grandparents house. And as for freedom, you are absolutely right....!! But I would like to ask you about this picture (picture inserted).. <i>What do you think? It is about how equal men and women could be when it comes to their salaries? Do you pay also the same when it comes to taxes?</i></p>	20
<p>Q3: Aseel (Saudi): There is one response <u>that captured my attention</u> about Saudi Arabia. She said lack of freedom for women; I do not know <i>why people think that when actually we the Saudis women did not say anything.</i> <u>I really want to know</u> what kind of freedom that we don't have? <i>What is freedom anyway?</i></p>	21
<p>Q4: Jennifer (American) Hello everyone! I'm sorry I have not posted much this week. It is "midterms" week here at the ----, which means we have large exams in most of our classes. I am very tired I wanted to ask about the hijab, mostly <u>because I really don't know much about it and I want to change that.</u> So I have a few questions! (As usual :) <u>I hope none of these offend you, and I really hope you will correct any misconceptions I have.</u> <i>Do you all wear the hijab? Is it required for Saudis or Muslims? Do you wear it all the time, or just in public? How do you feel about wearing it? Are there different types?</i> I think in America, seeing the hijab can provoke two reactions. If people are more open-minded they see it as a sign of Middle Eastern culture and its beauty. This is more how I see it. I also think women who wear the hijab in America are very brave, because unfortunately some people have very racist reactions when seeing it. Because of recent wars and events in the Middle East a lot of (stupid) Americans lump everyone from that region together, and are very threatened.</p>	22
<p>Q5: Sara (American) Hello everyone! I hope you all of you are doing well both in health and in school work. I think I might not have mentioned that I am from Somalia and have grown up here in America. Generally speaking Somalis tend to know more about Saudis since Somalia has 100% Muslim population; many people going to hajj, studying Islam etc. And since the second language spoken in Somalia is Arabic. However, I personally don't know much although I have cousins there. <i>I was wondering how is the day to day life in Saudi?</i> I am asking this because although I am a Muslimah (Muslim female) I never lived in a Muslim Country where I have to be completely separated from men at work or in school. It must be really cool! Of course, in the Masajids (Mosques) we have separate Prayer areas which I love, but</p>	23

almost everywhere else, we are mixed; With the exception of public bathrooms lols. <i>what do you wear to school and work?</i>	
Q6: Alanod (Saudi): Jennifer & Sara could you explain the mechanism of taxes in your country in simple way ? because we don't have taxes in our country <u>and I really want to know</u> . <i>Should all people pay taxes ?</i> I hope this explanation made sense. But I am curious, if you don't pay taxes, how does your government pay employees or the military? How is education funded? I am very used to a system where we pay taxes	24
Q7: Janet: Hello ladies! I hope that you are all well. I'm sorry that I have not been involved, I've been very busy with school and work. I'm really glad that we are discussing this topic, I think that it is really important. I believe that there are many misconceptions in the West about Saudi Arabia and Islam, in general. The media continues these misconceptions and like the article discussed, they do come from facts about life in the country sometimes. I would really like to know if any of you have had women in your friends or family who have wanted life in Saudi Arabia to be different, such as wanting to go out or to not wear the hijab and full body covering. If you have, how is this handled? I think that I've learned a lot more by listening to you talk about how women in Saudi Arabia live and are content.	25
Q8: Shaden (Saudi) with Janet and Kathleen Hi everyone, how are you? The topic of discussion for this week is so Important for us as Arabian women, because we need to tell the world we live a respectful life and in freedom from our perspectives not the western way. Most of western people think that Arabian or lets say muslim women are oppressed, and many of them don't know how we exactly live. I can tell that from the comments on the photo for the lady. There is much so misunderstanding. . . . ^^^ I am interesting to see your perspectives about women life in Saudi Arabia? And i wonder how women life in America. I am curious about working women bc they are presented in the media as they are suffering e.g they could work on jobs that are hard designed for men because of the idea of being equal with men in everything. Also we hear about the high percentage of women being raped I am not sure if this info is right or it is just the media?!	26

Another strategy of effective questioning is providing a (sociocultural) context that makes the question more understandable and easy to answer. For instance in Q1, before posing her questions, Laura states the reason behind her interest in learning about the “pets in Saudi Arabia” topic as she noticed a mixture of contradictory responses. She further provided some contexts regarding her previous impression about pets in Saudi Arabia. She was expecting more negative responses, but noting some positive responses made her wonder and look for an explanation. Using past tense in the phrase “I was under the impression” indicated her willingness to suspend her previous belief and adhere to the new perspective that she

might get from her partners. Alanod in Q6 asked about taxes, but she bent her question with a statement that clarified her question—namely, “because we don’t have taxes in our country and I really want to know how it works”—so she was not looking for an answer that could help her to compare the situation in her country to the other, but rather wanted a general explanation of taxes. Similarly, Sara in Q5 was interested in learning about the daily life of Saudi/Muslim girls: “I was wondering how is the day to day life in Saudi Arabia?” This question is overly broad and vague, but providing background information about herself as being originally from Somalia and Muslim as well as describing her daily life focusing on her clothes in public places made her question clear to the Saudi students. Failing to provide sufficient information about oneself or the cultural context would lead to a misunderstanding and responses that would cause embarrassment (as in Extract 32; Section 4.1.3.4). This echoes O’Dowd’s (2004) study, in which he found that students who make an effort to explain the context before asking their question are more likely to engage in a successful intercultural exchange.

While asking a series of questions is not recommended (O’Dowd, 2014; Belz, 2005) as it could be too demanding, I found in this study that several questions on the same topic can be beneficial, especially when the students move from general questions to more specific ones or they break the question into more manageable questions. Most of the extracts provided herein include more than one question. For instance, in Q2, after she offered her agreement with Laura about women’s status in Saudi Arabia, Sana posed two related questions, moving from a general one that targeted her opinion (i.e., “what do you think about the picture” [picture was inserted]) to a more specific yes/no question about tax payments (i.e., “do you also pay the same when it comes to taxes?”). Likewise, Laura first used an open-ended question (i.e., “why is it so split?”) and then broke it down to make it easier for her partner to answer and used a yes/no discrete-answer question. Laura ended her

post with one additional related question: “Also, the word motherhood was used, why?” She wanted her Saudi friends to comment because she found it unrelated and was not sure if it was positive or negative, as she reported in the interview. A good example of this strategy is Q5, where Jennifer asked five consecutive questions: “Do you all wear the *hijab*? Is it required for Saudis or Muslims? Do you wear it all the time, or just in public? How do you feel about wearing it? Are there different types?” Jennifer’s questions were on the same theme and did not demand much; rather, they showed her genuine interest in understanding the whole picture of what *hijab* means to Muslim women. Although most of her questions were yes/no and arguably might require only short answers or place limited constraints on her partners (Belz, 2005), asking several related questions about one topic could elicit deeper responses. Moreover, she inserted one open-ended question targeting personal experiences: “how do you feel about it?” She concluded her post by giving the sociocultural context of how the *hijab* is viewed in America and how she personally sees it. Providing a personal view is also a good strategy that encourages feedback. Shaden, Q8, wrote a long thread describing her view of women’s status in Saudi Arabia and how they, as Saudi girls, suffer from stereotypes from the West. Her lengthy post was perceived by Americans with appreciation, and they mirrored her style and shared their views and Americans’ perspectives in general. They also answered her question from a critical stance, as will be discussed in the following section.

Discussing the effective questioning strategies necessitates the exploration of weak or less effective questions (Belz, 2005; O’Dowd, 2003, 2004). As previously presented, questions that lack a (sociocultural) context are often hard to answer or respond to. Q6, for instance, “Can you explain more why you are confused?” is very vague. Although Nadeeh posted this question on the post related to the *hijab*, she did not provide sufficient details for the question. It is not surprising that her American partner ignored the question altogether.

Some students seemed to throw out generic questions, as they only wanted to complete the task rather than showing true interest in and curiosity about learning about the other culture. Q5 is a good example of this. Although it is specific as Maram is looking for reasons why Americans eat turkey during Thanksgiving, she did not make any effort to formulate her question in a way that showed interest and encouraged good responses.

Extract 27–31 Weak questions

Q1: Sana (Saudi) Two of the answers considering family had put the word “vacation” is communicative with family in the U.S is connected mostly in vacations. So you do see your friends a lot more than your own family? And does a lot of American girls leave there family's house in the age of 15 or 16? How much in percent?	27
Q2: Randi (American) I find it surprising that mom and dad are specifically mentioned and not brothers or sisters. Q3: Jessica (American) I think it's interesting how the Saudi responses are different than the American responses because the word "disgusting" is thought of when the word pet is said.	28
Q4: Aseel (Saudi): Jennifer we don't know anything about marriage in the US but what we see in movies .. And usually what in movies is not necessarily true. So tell us about it	29
Q5: Maram (Saudi): Thanks giving, why turkey? Why not chicken or cows or something	30
Q7: Nadeah: (Saudi) Can you explain more why confused?	31

Students sometimes showed interest and surprise, but they did not turn their statements into questions, leaving their partners unsure about how to react, as in Q2 and Q3. In Q4, Aseel asked an interesting question, but it was too broad. O’Dowd (2004) explained that demanding requests are likely to be ignored as respondents do not know what aspects to cover. Regardless, Jennifer—Aseel’s American partner—responded in detail (Extract 11; Section 4.1.3.2), exploring the different facets of marriage in the United States, including her personal stance. However, when Jennifer asked the question about marriage in Saudi Arabia a second time, Aseel did not respond to her. Yet several weeks later, she wrote, “Yeah and sorry I didn’t tell you about marriage in Saudi Arabia, but that’s because it’s a lot of information and details and I didn’t have time yet, but I promise that I will tell you all about it when I have time. Sorry again.” Similarly, asking philosophical or hard questions can impede

responses, as shown in examples 1 and 3. In Q1, Sana—instead of asking why the word *vacation* is associated with family—asked a limiting yes/no question as to whether or not communications with the family happen only during vacation. She asked two more questions about leaving the house at age 15 or 16, but again used yes/no questions. Her final question was difficult for undergraduates to answer: “How much in percent?”

Back channeling or following up is another interaction feature in successful groups where students repeatedly ask similar questions to learn about the other. For instance, when Alanod asked about taxes, Jennifer responded, ending her response with a question: “I hope this explanation made sense. But I am curious, if you don’t pay taxes, how does your government pay employees or the military? How is education funded? I am very used to a system where we pay taxes.” Individuals can also ask more specific questions that show their real desire to understand the phenomenon. For example, Jenat wrote, “I really like what you have said here! But I do have a specific question for you; you said that most families have their own drivers in Saudi Arabia. How do women who do not have drivers get to work or school or to shop or visit family?”

A final point regarding task-oriented questions is that the topics of these questions confirmed a previously discussed point (Section 4.1.3.2). Although Saudi students asked questions to learn about American culture, they were more interested in learning about Americans’ perspectives about themselves, their culture, and their views of Muslim women, as is clearly demonstrated in all groups—low and high functionality alike. American students, on the other hand, did not seem to care much about what Saudis thought of them or how they were perceived by the other culture. Yet they did seem interested in learning about Saudi women and their lives and understanding Saudi Arabia’s social system.

4.1.3.4 Skills of Interpreting and Relating and Critical Cultural Awareness:

The skills of interpreting and relating is defined as “ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate to documents from one’s own” (Byram, 1997, p.52); and it is different than skills of discovery and interaction in that it is dependent on pre-existing consciousness and taken-for-granted knowledge. Therefore, it was difficult to split the discussion of knowledge and skills of interpreting as the two components overlap in many aspects. These skills might be hard or unclear for language learners, especially for taken-for-granted knowledge that involves identifying ethnocentric values and connotation in a given document. They include three main objectives: a) identifying socially contingent values and perspectives; b) identifying areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction and, finally; c) mediating between conflicting interpretations.

Critical cultural awareness is the fifth principle in Byram’s model and results from the interplay of the four discussed components. It is defined as an “ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (p.101). Its educational objectives are more related to the skills of interpreting and relating, except that critical cultural awareness adds the notion of evaluation (Byram, 1997). Its objectives are a) identifying hidden values in one's own and other culture, b) evaluating practices and events with reference to an explicit perspective, and c) mediating and negotiating intercultural exchange with a degree of acceptance when it is necessary.

While not all the students in this study were not able to provide critical analysis as suggested in Byram's model, they were still able to demonstrate many objectives of these two components. This section will discuss three main themes: cultural awareness of ideological

values, re-constructing intercultural understanding through differences, and co-constructing intercultural understanding through similarities.

Cultural awareness of ideological values

One of the areas in which students manifested cultural awareness is their ability to explicitly refer to their ideological values and perspectives, such as in Jennifer’s response (Extract 11; section 4.1.3.2) when she explained marriage in the U.S. In so doing, students from the other side will not only learn a perspective of one person from that culture, but will develop a deeper understanding of how certain cultural practices were impacted by ideologies that they are not aware of.

There are several students who showed awareness “of their own ideological perspectives and values,” and were able to refer to them explicitly to explain certain practices. The following extract exemplifies how Saudi students were able to explain certain behavior based on religious values.

Extract 32: Randi and Sana (Group 1)

Randi: I find it surprising that mom and dad are specifically mentioned and not brothers or sisters. In my opinion, I feel that several of the qualities mentioned are the same in both cultures, such as love, warmth, and gathering/vacations.	1 2 3
Sana: Laura about the mom and dad thing. I <i>believe</i> its a religious thing, you see in the Quran mothers and fathers are mentioned a lot in order to obey them and listen to them, to take care of them and to not ever shout or say bad words to them even the smallest thing. Here is a Hadith by prophet Mohammad (PBUH) 2. A man came to the Prophet and said, ‘O Messenger of God! Who among the people is the most worthy of my good companionship? The Prophet said: Your mother. The man said, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said: Then your mother. The man further asked, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said: then your mother. The man asked again, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said: Then your father.”	4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Randi expressed her surprise that, for the word “family” in a word association task, Saudi students only mentioned mom and dad, not siblings. Even though she didn’t explicitly ask why, Sana understood her partner utterances as looking for reasons which signal her engagement with her partners as she feels every utterances on the group needs to be responded to (Bakhtin, 1981). She started her comment with the phrase “Laura about mom

and dad thing” to direct her partner’s attention that her comment is to explain why Saudis mentioned only mom and dad. In her response, Sana stated, “I believe” indicating her personal view, and that there might be other interpretations. She thought the reasons they considered parents to have a higher status in the family are due to the religious background of the Saudi students. She supported her response with Prophet Mohammed’s hadith that emphasizes the importance of the good companionship of mom first and then dad. Two main points reflect the cultural awareness in Sana’s reply: first, her belief that there is possibility of other interpretations, and second is her citation "intertextuality "of the prophet’s hadith that supported her explanation, which presents awareness of how religious values could impact their practices and even in their responses to the survey.

Becoming aware of one’s own cultural practices and perspectives might be visible after engaging in discussion with others. As the taken for granted knowledge is being suddenly questioned, students wonder about their own understanding and later re-construct new knowledge. In the following conversation (Extract 35) in group 4 between Haneen and Maram (Saudis), and mainly Lana (American), the conversation started with Maram asking about the reasons for using turkey and not another animal in Thanksgiving, followed by Haneen’s question requesting more information about Thanksgiving. Lana, who is American Muslim but never shared this information with her partners, responded to them with very general information that the Saudis already knew and they wanted further information. She stated that doesn’t celebrate it but didn’t explain the reasons. She asked her Saudi partners to share something important about their own culture (line 8 and 9). Due to the context of this question, Haneen and Maram thought about similar holidays and Maram talked very briefly about Ramadan, and the two holidays (line 10 to 15).

Extract 33: Cultural awareness through misunderstanding (Group 4)*

Maram : Thanksgiving, why turkey? Why not chicken or cows or something	1
Haneen: Lana, Anna tell us about thanksgiving, what traditions do you usually do ?!	
Lana :Hi, for thanksgiving here people usually buy turkey and stuff it with different kinds of stuffing.	2

I honestly don't celebrate this tradition but I am aware it has some background history back to when America became independent. So people usually get food and they give out free turkey for the poor people sometimes, we have a break from school so that everyone gets to get together with their family and celebrate this feast.	3 4 5
Lana: how about you guys, what can you guys tell us Saudi culture something that is very important over there.	6 7
Maram: Will we have something called a fasting month, I don't know if u heard of it. Some people think we just don't eat all day, that's not the case. The point is be be able to show how much u'd give to ur religion that u would give up on eating also sins ... And yea it's a pretty big deal in out saudi/Islamic cultural	8 9
Maram : Also we have two festival a year, one is after the fasting month which we eat for the first time in the day ! And one after it in a couple of months which we eat sheep's in it. There pretty fun lol	10 11
Lana: Oh well I don't know if that is very cultural because I am Muslim, and I know that no matter where you are, you fast the month of Ramadan. So here in America the Muslims do that as well is there anything more cultural that is based on Arab culture?	12 13 14
Haneen : Well, our culture is based on our religion ISLAM. For that, our traditions are all about Islam. But there is one knew festival we have every year. Which is called "Aljnadrya" it refers to the place the festival is. It is an hour away from Riyadh the capital of Saudi Arabia. It begins when the weather is good, by good I mean cold. In the festival you we'll find people sell traditional food and sweets which are home made. People singing and dancing in a traditional, by that I mean like how we're old people used to sing they use drums. As you know Saudi Arabia is a big country so each part of it has some different traditions and the houses are different. So in the festival you will find the please is divided by parts each part present a city. You will find how the old houses were in each village or city. It is a very fun to go there to buy some old things and to see how our grandfathers used to live. I always love t go there. This festival may begin next month enshalla.	15 16 17 18 19 20 22 23
Haneen : This festival has nothing to do with Islam	24
Maram :Yea will cuz when u say cultures in Saudi Arabia it's mostly Islamic cultures cuz think Allah most Arabs are Muslims so... But yea ur right it's not the cultural :))	25 26
Maram I was also wondering how's islam in America, Lana?	27
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Lana: Haneen that festival that you are talking about sounds very interesting! and why is it celebrated in that specific month?	36 37
Maram :U mean Ramadan month !? Will u see in the history of Islam prophet Muhammad peace be upon him had told his people about it and how it's a month to cleans our souls , also our book " The Quran "it was sent or reached down to us, Muslims	38 39 40
Haneen : Lana as I said before the festival usually starts when the weather become colder an rainy. For us Saudis cold weather considers the best time of the year. And because this festival is in an open area. So it's not about the month it's about the weather.	42 43 44
Haneen: Maram I think Lana is talking about the Jenadreyya festival.	45

Lana replied by saying “Oh well I don't know if that is very cultural because I am Muslim, and I know that no matter where you are, you fast the month of Ramadan.” she revealed her identity as a Muslim, which embarrassed Maram because her comment regarding Ramadan and the two Muslim holidays were obvious information to any Muslim. This group is one of the groups that didn't build a meaningful relationship at the beginning of the project due to lack of sharing/requesting/responding to personal information. If Haneen and Maram knew that Lana was Muslim from the beginning, the interaction may not have

been awkward. Haneen shared with Lana a very special Saudi festival called Aljenadieah that is only celebrated in Saudi Arabia and is not related to Islam. She mentioned at the beginning that most of their cultural practice is related to Islam. Haneen tries to find something special to share with her partners. She reported in the interview that she had to ask her Saudi friends to help her because it was hard for her to find something that has nothing to do with Islam. Maha commented after Haneen with similar message that their culture is related to Islam but stated: “But yea ur right it's not the cultural :))” which shows her realization of the difference. The conversation took another direction talking about Islam in America. But Lana seems to be interested in Aljanaderiah, the Saudi cultural festival, and wanted to learn more so she brought the topic back to the discussion “that festival that you are talking about sounds very interesting! and why is it celebrated in that specific month?” Again, Lana’s question didn’t seem clear as she didn’t specify the name or whom she meant by “you.” Maram jumped to the conversation and discussed Ramadan history, which shows that she still struggled to understand Lana and to differentiate between what is considered Islamic and what is purely cultural. Haneen corrected Maram and provided Lana the requested information. Maram’s knowledge about Ramadan as being Islamic, not specifically Saudi culture, is unexpectedly questioned and it was not easy for her to reconstruct the new knowledge. However, when I asked her in the interview about this discussion she said, “Well, Ramadan is more Islamic than to be Saudi specific.. It is just that we are in Saudi, it is easy to mixed between what is Islamic what is cultural related to Saudi or Arabic people. It is confusing but when you speak with people from out outside, it becomes clear”. As Bakhtin (1986) states:

“in the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. ... meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered... another foreign meaning... we raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it didn't raise itself; we seek answers to our

questions in it; the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to use its new aspects and new semantic depths" (p.7)

This episode can be characterized as unsuccessful with regard to skill of discovery and responding, lack of genuine dialogue, and reflecting on deep cultural knowledge. However, Maram’s interaction with a foreigner (outsider) still enhances her cultural awareness about her own practices and understanding. It is through miscommunication where cultural understanding of one's own is promoted.

Intercultural understanding through discussion of differences

The topic of women’s freedom or the status of women in both cultures was brought up in most groups’ discussions. This could be an influence of task design or due to the fact that all participants were female. More importantly, as discussed earlier, the Saudi students were aware of the stereotype of Saudi women, and they were interested in correcting this image. In the following extract, Aseel—by reading through the responses for the words “Saudi Arabia”—was able to sense an area of misunderstanding between the two cultures regarding women’s freedom. Instead of writing a post to correct or defend Saudi women’s position, she posed two questions. She first wanted to know what kind of freedom Saudi women lack; she followed this with a broader question—namely, “what is freedom anyway?” Here, “anyway” acts as a dismissive to what was stated previously. Aseel seemed more interested in knowing about other perspectives of freedom. Her question suggested that Aseel was irritated with this view of Saudi Arabia and that this was her attitude even before joining the project. Reading such responses, however, ignited her anger.

Extract 34: Aseel and Jennifer on women’s freedom (Group 4)

Aseel: There is one response that captured my attention about Saudi Arabia. She said lack of freedom for women, I do not know why people think that when actually we the Saudis women did not say anything. I really want to know what kind of freedom that we don't have? What is freedom anyway?	1
October 11, 2014 at 7:57pm · Like	2
Jennifer: I don't know much about the situation for women in Saudi Arabia, but in America it is certainly a stereotype that they are not given the same opportunities as men, usually because of religion. I don't know if that's true or not, and I don't want to make assumptions. American women would probably define freedom as opportunity to be equal to men. They want to choose who they want to marry or date, where they will work (if they will work), where they will live or who they will live	3
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with, how many children they will have (if they will have children). They want to be respected like men, make the same money as men, and hold the same jobs as them. When they said lack of freedom for women, they are probably thinking of this American definition of freedom. It sounds like Saudi culture just values different types of freedom. Do you agree with this? What types of opportunities do women want to have in Saudi Arabia?	9
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Aseel: Yes definitely agree because our definition for freedom is different. Before I answer your second question I just want to comment on women equal men. In my (personal opinion) I think that women have their job in life and men have their job. That doesn't mean that women are bad and men are good or the opposite, I mean you can't just say there's no difference between the two genders like women get pregnant but men don't, men are physically strong women are not and that's a fact that's reality you can't change it. So there's jobs that suits woman and jobs that suits men and I don't see that as a bad thing or defensive. As I said that is my personal opinion. For your second question: We definitely have things that we wish were there in Saudi Arabia, but I can't say that women here don't have any freedom.	14
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For example, woman in Saudi Arabia don't drive. And sadly we are the only country in the world that don't allow women to drive. But, that doesn't mean that women in Saudi Arabia only sit in home, they go every where (sometimes it is devastating because you see them everywhere) yes we don't drive but women here have her father, brother, husband, or even a driver. So there is a lot of solutions, though I wish they allowed us to drive.	23
	24
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October 12, 2014 at 3:43pm · Like	
Jennifer: I mentioned this a bit when I wrote about marriage, but in America it is very important that women equal men. There is a large emphasis in our culture on this, and many arguments about whether we have achieved it yet. I am divided on how I feel about "women equal men". I agree with you that women and men have different "jobs" in life that they are good at. I personally want to work for a few years, but stop working when I am married with children, so that I can take care of them better. But I also think that women should have the choice of whether they want to do this.	28
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Jennifer showed an awareness of the sensitive nature of the topic and how inaccurate perceptions offended Saudi girls in her group. She tried to mitigate the possible misunderstanding by first declaring her uncertain position toward the topic by saying “I don’t know” three times in the first few sentences. Then she attributed the view to America, not to herself (“in America ...”). Furthermore, she negatively evaluated the views as being stereotypes. Again when she started to give a definition of freedom, she brought in an external voice rather her own to distance herself from the position (i.e., “in America”, “American women”). She successfully employed this strategy of taking herself a step back to avoid a direct clash with Aseel as they had already established a good relationship.

Jennifer defined Americans’ view of freedom primarily to mean women should be equal to men in all aspects of life. The last two questions showed that, regardless of the different points of view that they had, Jennifer was willing to engage in dialogue with Aseel

to learn about other perspectives and, hence, develop a cultural understanding. Aseel started with a proclaim stance “yes definitely,” intensifying her agreement with the fact that Saudis value different forms of freedom. She was interested in explaining the differences, especially after reading Jennifer’s comment. As she explained the other view of freedom, she adopted different stances. One showed her recognition of the diversity of viewpoints when she stated “my personal view” at the beginning and end of her comment. However, as she explained her understanding of freedom, she denied the idea that women and men are equal by using an explicit negation—“You can’t say there is no difference”—thereby taking a disclaim position (Martin & Rose, 2003) where she closes off any alternative positions. In the second paragraph, she answered Jennifer’s question regarding the opportunities women have in Saudi Arabia. Aseel expressed her dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities, but she emphasized that this did not mean that Saudi women do not have freedoms. Jennifer emphasized the importance of the concept of “equality” in her culture when defining freedom. However, she showed tolerance for other viewpoints when she agreed that women and men are different and each is good at certain jobs. Moreover, she was also able to bring an example from her own culture that supported Aseel’s explanation: the argument of having women in the military.

Jennifer and Aseel in this episode were able to interact and mediate conflicting interpretations without direct confrontation. They explained the same concept with different connotations and explanations in a way that helped each other overcome conflicting perspectives and, more importantly, identify areas of misunderstanding that led to the forming of stereotypical images about the other’s culture.

Understanding cultural differences in an online exchange can be explored not only by discussing the differences, but also by reading different posts/comments from both sides of the partnership. In the following extract, Kathleen wrote a post commenting on the discussion

that took place toward the end of the project regarding women's harassment in the United States and women's freedom in Saudi Arabia. Just like Aseel in the previous example (group 3), Saudi students in group 6 were trying to present the status of women in Saudi Arabia and that they never felt that they lacked freedom, regardless of some of the opportunities that people in the West think they lack. Americans, on the other hand, confirmed the seriousness of abuse and harassment of women in the United States, although they emphasized that the law is strict and women usually get help when needed. Eleven posts/comments were made on this topic.

Kathleen demonstrated her critical cultural awareness as well as her interpretive skills in her posts as she was able to read the various posts by Saudi students, interpret them based on their own values, and relate them to her own personal experiences. She interpreted the various posts written by Saudi students (lines 2–11) and was able to recognize that the misunderstanding between the two cultural groups stemmed from the different understanding of freedom in the two cultures. Kathleen stated that she believed freedom for American women refers to freedom of choice. Using this definition, she juxtaposed the two contexts (Saudi versus American) and how people in each context choose their life to be. By so doing, she was able to a "was able to establish common criteria of evaluation"(p.64) and demonstrated an understanding of Saudi women's choices in wearing the *hijab* and unrevealing clothing, especially when it related to religion, as she would do the same if her religion asked her to do so. Then she critically evaluated the context in the United States by focusing on the harassment and abuse of women (lines 11–25). Before explaining the reasons, she stated "deep-rooted cultural thing" which reveals that she critically reflecting on her own cultural practices She asserted that the reasons stem from women's and men's views of women as they might oppose certain looks for women. As Kathleen was talking about this issue, she stated that, "in a weird way," women in America could be seen as lacking freedom

as they are continuously judged based on their appearance. She related the two topics discussed in her group—namely, women’s freedom and women’s abuse—and how they were related. It is clear that Kathleen was trying to bring “together bits and pieces of information to make a coherent picture” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 242) not only about the other culture, but also about her own culture.

Extract: 35 Kathleen’s post on women’s freedom (Group 7)

Kathleen: <i>Hello all! Hope everyone is doing well! Sorry about the late response, I have been working a lot and school is in the "busy" part of every semester. I think that this is a very <u>interesting</u> topic. After reading through the article, and reading through everyone's posts, I think maybe the misconceptions about freedom for women in Saudi is just a difference in how people define freedom. To Americans (generally speaking, it isn't true for everyone), a lot of what makes freedom be freedom is being able to choose what clothing to wear, and do everything a man does (or almost everything...). From what I have read in this group, women in Saudi (mostly) choose to wear what they want, and are ok with things like not driving. Personally, I understand this, especially the clothing thing. I dress in a way that isn't revealing, and almost always wear long sleeve shirts and jeans even though it is very hot in Tucson, and this is totally 100% my choice. If my religion wanted me to cover my hair, I would, and I would have no problem with it. The harassment and rape that happens in the US is a <u>very serious issue</u>, and no one ever deserves to be treated like that. I think, though, that it is a very complex issue, and there are many layers to it, and, as hard as it is to say, it may be deep-rooted cultural thing. Sexualizing women (which means viewing women mainly as sex objects or "pretty things" to look at, not viewing women as people), is something we have here in the US that may not be as prevalent in Saudi. I think this is not only men's faults for doing this, I think it's women's faults too for allowing themselves to be seen that way. Media and advertisements here use "sex" to sell products, and many advertisements here use "ideal" looking women, or even just a women's body part in a picture, like a stomach or legs for example. Doing this takes away whatever personality that women has, and degrades her to a simple object fit for pleasure. Women participate in this circle here too, by dressing to show off their body, by spending money on making their hair, face, nails, and body perfect, just to "look desirable" for the outside world. I think this is a cultural thing here that is very deep rooted, and a lot of Americans participate in it without even knowing it. I also think, in a <u>weird way</u>, that this actually represents less freedom for women in America. American women have to represent the American standard, just like Saudi women do. The "lack of freedom" for American women, in my eyes, is being expected to look a certain way all the time, and constantly having men and other women "judge" your appearance. Does this ever happen in Saudi? Do women feel judged because of appearance when they talk to a man, or walk down the street? I also have another question. If a women is raped in Saudi does she get the help she needs? Or if a man says something harassing to a woman on the street, what should the woman do?</i>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33
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A linguistic analysis of her post revealed that Kathleen integrated an “entertain” style (Martin & Rose, 2003), where her voice indicated that her position is “one of a number of possible positions ... and thereby makes a dialogical space for those possibilities” (p. 117)

and avoids generalizations, which is an important aspect of an intercultural speaker. This is presented by her repeated use of the low intensity modality “maybe” and the mental verb that attributes projection “think.” She also engaged the Saudi students (highlighted in yellow) by first inviting them explicitly to compare the situation in Saudi Arabia to the US, then by asking them three questions toward the end of her post, thereby signaling her willingness to listen to other voices.

Intercultural understanding through discussion of similarities

“Anna: I am not surprised that there are a lot of similarities. Most of these ideas are pretty universal.”

“Amal: I think (all these responses) are very much alike, especially the marriage.”

Similarities do exist between the two cultures. However, comments like those in the preceding example overemphasize the similarities in asserting notions of universality. This attitude prevented participants from identifying differences or even cultural discussions based on similarities. Bennett (1993) warned against the denial of difference as such denial can hinder speakers from identifying aspects that are culturally specific. Kramsch (1998) also emphasized that ESL students should be encouraged “to find differences within the apparent similarities and analogies beyond obvious differences” (p. 244).

However, a data analysis revealed that some students were co-constructing similarities throughout the discussion. For instance, Elizabeth and Lana reported in the interview that they were excited to learn about the many common things between American and Saudi girls, like listening to Western music, being interested in fashion, and reading similar books. Likewise, Saudi students were surprised to learn about some American values that are similar to theirs. For instance, Areej said, “I was surprised to see my American partner is so attached to her family and how she cares about them. I thought all Americans, after the age of 18, they forget about their families, but it turns out to not always be true.”

Shaden was also surprised to learn that her 27-year-old partner not only still lives close to her family, but lives with her fiancé and his mom. She said, “[laughing] this is considered in Saudi context too much. I mean we used to do so in the past, but nowadays people when they get married like to live in their own house.”

The following example demonstrates how similarities in using social networking sites in both cultures were co-constructed throughout the dialogue. Jennifer started the discussion by explaining the different SNS sites that she uses or that are popular among Americans. The way she explained each site (e.g., Instagram) indicated her assumption that Saudi girls might not know them. This showed that she was aware of cultural differences between the two cultures.

Extract 36: Co-constructing interculturality through similarities (group 3)

Jennifer: Hello everyone! I will talk a little bit about the social networking sites that I use. I use	1
Facebook and Instagram mainly; you all know about Facebook but Instagram is a site that is used	2
mainly for sharing pictures. Many American girls will also use Twitter , which is for sharing short	3
thoughts (there is a limit on how long the thoughts can be). They might also use Tumblr, which is a	4
site that lets you find art, stories, quotes, music, and images that you like and share them. You can also	5
create these images or stories and share them as well. (I used to use Tumblr, but it took up too much of	6
my time so I had to stop!) Another popular site is Pinterest, which is similar to Tumblr because you	7
share images, but usually these have more to do with crafts or recipes.	8
I think there are a few downsides to these websites. For one thing, there is not very much privacy,	9
especially on Facebook; I think people can tell a lot about me by what I've posted there or what I am	10
tagged in, which can be a little bit scary. My parents were against me getting a Facebook because they	11
felt it was dangerous to tell the world so much about me. Instagram is similar but typically I post less	12
often to Instagram, so there are only a few pictures that people could use to learn about me.	13
Many Americans are stereotyped as being obsessed with technology or always on their phones, and I	14
think that social networks contribute to this. It is easy to spend a lot of time on a website and not really	15
do anything; for example, sometimes I get distracted looking at my friends' photos on Facebook or	16
Instagram. Like I mentioned, I spent so much time on Tumblr that I had to delete it because I wasn't	17
getting anything done! What are the social networks that you all use? How much do you use them?	18

<p>Alanod: For me I spend a lot of time on instagram , twitter & youtube. I use them from 8 to 10 hours a day However, I think that social networking sites influence the life style of the Saudi girls. Also the advantages of (SNS) overshadowed its disadvantages. Most of the girls have benefited from their talents and hobbies. They display and share their opinions and put their own impress in the (SNS). I believe that (SNS) are one of the successful things in saudi girls life specially in latterly years. Actually the most popular applications are used are Instagram and Twitter. Social networking sites open the door for Saudi girls to start their own businesses regardless of the age of girls. They start as any users who want to show the followers their talents in various aspects such as , sewing ,cooking, painting, photography, sell clothing & beautiful things from foreign countries ...etc. I'll put some of famous Saudi girls users in Instagram: (users on Instagram with some description)</p> <p>Alanod I want to add some of main disadvantages of (SNS) for example, Twitter is main source of rumours & it's travels very fast ! Moreover, some accounts in Instagram deals with customers by Commercial fraud. They offer their merchandis and say it's high Quality but they not. It's worse than low quality degree. My cousin has had previous experience of one account that sells clothings from China. It was a bad experience. In my opinion I think that not any accounts should be trusted especially which sell clothing & shoes.</p>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18
<p>Aseel: have nothing to say Alanod explained everything well. For me I really spend a lot of time on social networks specially youtube, twitter, vine instagram, snapchat. But I still think it's not a bad thing, and Mashael explained why. Of course the social networks have effects on our lives, when you sit with a group of Saudi girls you can see that because most of the things they talk about is what did they saw or read about on social networks. Sorry I do not have any Saudi girls account that you can have benefit from because they talk in an informal language. BUT I have some amazing short films that talks in a formal language + translation in English. 1. Book of sand short film http://youtu.be/fGD9jJ1QeGY . . Aseeel)Ooh yeah I forgot That is my account in instagram @.... I don't talk in English but you can check my pictures</p>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 15 16
<p>Sara: There isn't much different as to what you just explained about how Saudi girls use it. Social media is a tool and it is how you use it. Some girls use it to show talent, make business, share daily life stories with family and friends; using media outlets like Facebook, twitter, Instagram, viber, youtube, so on and so further. It has both good and bad outcome. For me, I am always concerned about privacy and information ending up going in the wrong hand. Info... such as, address, name, number, etc.....There have been times where girls went missing for months and later found out that they were kidnaped by a perverts. Some of the good out come is that you can be conncted to they world through your phone regardless of were you are. I personally get daily Islamic reminders that help me, from family, friends, and teachers. I use it to seek Islamic knowledge through connecting with my teachers who are not in the same state. It is always a really good way to share live with family since most of my family and relatives live in different countries around the world. It is good way to keep in touch with friends, express ideas. present your view about a controversial issue. Learn more about others cultures with having to travel.....I think I have said enough.... let my know if there is any thing particular you would like to know.</p>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
<p>Jennifer: I think it is so interesting that Saudi girls use SNS for businesses just like Americans do! I loved looking at some of them, thank you all for sharing I forgot about Youtube as well, it is one of my favorites but I can't spend time there often or I will lose 5 hours every time.</p>	1 2 3
<p>Aseel: Yeah Fatima you remind me about something I wanted to say before. I feel that after SNS and the fact that everyone use it, brings all nationalities closer. I can really see that when I'm on Vine Everything happens to them happen to us (I mean experience with families, friends, and society), will there is differences since we don't have the idea of a boyfriend, but other than that it's pretty much the same that it amaze me and make me laugh.</p>	1 2 3 4 5

In the second paragraph, Jenifer focused on the disadvantages of SNS, especially privacy issues and distractions. She talked about her family's attitude toward Facebook at the beginning. Her story resonated with many Saudi families' practices that allowed Aseel and Alanod to draw a line of similarities between the two cultures. During the interview, Alanod reported being surprised by Jennifer's story. Jennifer showed an interest in the other group's uses of SNS by asking two questions at the end of her comment. Alanod wrote a detailed comment that starting by answering Jennifer's questions. Her answer revealed the similarities between American and Saudi SNS use and time spent on these sites. When she continued, instead of focusing on the downsides as Jennifer did, she explained the positive impact of SNS on Saudi girls' lives and how they provide space for them to start their own business regardless of social or cultural constraints. Alanod then discussed the disadvantage of SNS from business perspectives, focusing on commercial fraud. Aseel, the other Saudi student, followed Alanod's example and specifically talked about how SNS can be useful from an educational perspective. She provided her American partners with YouTube links that teach Arabic in an effective way.

Although American girls might not face the same constraints, many were using SNS for business purposes; this manifested in Sara's comment. After reading through the different comments, Sara realized that there was not much difference between the two groups in terms of SNS uses. However, she did not stop at this point, instead continuing to express her point of view and experience and providing her partners with new perspectives on how American Muslims would benefit from SNS. She echoed Jennifer's concerns about privacy issues and how they could lead to serious consequences, but also emphasized the positive aspects of SNS, such as updating her on Islamic knowledge and news that she needs as she lives in a non-Muslim country. After her comment, both Jennifer and Aseel wrote additional comments that displayed their discovery of the great similarities between the two cultures in terms of

how they use and perceive SNS. Aseel adds a new point on how SNS helps them see other cultures' daily lives, which helped them understand how much they have in common.

What is interesting about this episode of interaction is that, regardless of the similarities that the two groups noticed about each other in SNS use, each added new and different points and perspectives, which were followed by confirmations from the other side and, consequently, new points. The two groups were building new knowledge about each other's culture and did not stop when they realized they were similar. As they talked about the same point, they simultaneously shed light on different contexts. For instance, while both Saudis and Americans use SNS for business, Americans might not experience the same constraints as Saudis. Likewise, the discussion of privacy issues by Americans resonated with practices of Saudi families, but was not brought up in the discussion.

The analysis in this section revealed that the OIE project provides students with opportunities to reflect, explain and constructing intercultural understanding by engaging in dialogues that demonstrate an interest in learning about other points of view, tolerance to different stances, and an enjoyment for learning about the similarities that both have.

4.2 Facebook Affordances for Intercultural Learning

The second research question of this dissertation focuses on exploring Facebook (FB) affordances in intercultural projects by investigating two sub questions that target two main aspects of affordances phenomena, user's practices and perceptions. The questions are

1. What affordances for intercultural learning might Facebook offer in OIE projects?
2. What are students' perceptions toward Facebook affordances?

In this study, the semiotics as well as multimodal resources that students drew on to make meaning (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010; Paltridge, 2011) during their interaction with their partners were analyzed and triangulated with the researcher's journal and post project interview. In addition, I brought the impact of task design and learners' background use of technologies into the discussion. The second sub-question that investigates students' perception toward the affordances of Facebook was answered through a post project questionnaire.

4.2.1 Students' Technological Use and Experience

Similar to the previous question, I will first present participants' previous use of technologies and SNS. This information will help to understand the subsequent discussions regarding affordances and constraints of Facebook in an Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) project.

4.2.1.1 Saudi Students

A) Use of Technologies and SNS

Concerning using technology in general to practice English, all the Saudi participants were positive toward using technology for language learning. Interestingly, they mostly use social networking sites to practice their language skills, chat with native speakers, read English posts...etc. Some mentioned that they switch their phone's setting to English, which

forces them to use the language. Others also stated that they uploaded language learning apps, and made voice recording for pronunciation practice.

Table 4.2.1 Using Facebook or other SNS for learning the TL

Answer	Response	%
• Yes	7	50%
• No	7	50%
Total	14	100%

Table 4.2.1 show the number of Saudi students who have specifically used Facebook or other SNS to learn about the target language. Half of the participants stated that they use SNS for language learning. As for SNS that they used most often, Twitter comes at the top of the list, for all the participants reported using it on daily basis. Instagram comes in second and Facebook third (by only five participants and 3 of them using it to have access to FB games). YouTube, Path and Tumbler were also mentioned but only once each. Most Saudi students report having Facebook accounts, however, they are not active user. Their reason for having an account is mainly to have access to Facebook games, or to follow pages of interest. Four students who reported they are active but stated that they rarely update their status or share photos.

Table 4.2.2 Frequency of Target Language use in SNS

Answer	Response	%
Daily	8	57%
2-3 Times a Week	3	21%
2-3 Times a Month	1	7%
Less than Once a Month	1	7%
Once a Month	1	7%
Once a Week	0	0%
Never	0	0%
Total	14	100%

Table 4.2.2 reveals the frequency of target language use in SNS. All participants stated that they use English in social networking sites. 57% of the participants write in English one a daily basis, and 21 % do it two to three times a week.

Regarding their opinion of using SNS and Facebook especially for language and cultural learning, all the Saudi participants revealed a positive attitude and supported their response with their previous valuable experiences using SNS. They stated that SNS provided them with venues to practice and improve their language either by chatting with native speakers, following native speakers accounts on Twitter and Instagram, or by subscribing to video YouTube channels that provide English lessons, or simply watching channels on fashion, make up and cooking in English. This has provided them with exposure to English vocabulary that is not accessible in academic contexts. Interestingly, Facebook was not mentioned by any of the Saudi participants as a space for language learning. In addition, learning about the target culture does not seem important for Saudi participants

4.2.1.2 American Participants

Participants Use of Technology and SNS:

Similar to the Saudi students, all American students except one positively evaluate the role of technology and SNS in improving second language. However, regardless of their positive attitude, their uses do not go beyond using computer software called Byki that is required by their teacher in their Arabic classes or Google translate for translation purposes. Three mentioned that they listen to Arabic music on YouTube. And only one said that she tries to read news in Arabic on a regular basis.

Table 4.2.3 Using Facebook or other SNS for Learning the TL

Answer	Response	%
• No	11	92%
• Yes	1	8%
Total	12	100%

Table 4.2.3 shows that eleven participants responded negatively regarding using SNS for language learning. Only one stated that she used a Facebook group page for her Arabic class. As this study focuses on Social networking site in language education, I was interested to know what type of SNS they use in their daily life. Not surprising, Facebook is the most used SNS site by all the American participants, Instagram comes in second and Twitter last. Snap-chat, tumbler and Pinterest were mentioned only once each.

Table 4.1.4 Frequency of Target Language use in SNS

Answer	Response	%
Never	7	58%
Less than once A month	3	21%
2-3 Times a Month	1	7%
Once a month	1	7%
Once a Month	0	0
Once a Week	0	0%
Daily	0	0%
Total	12	100%

Moreover, only four participants mentioned that they use Arabic in social media and their use is relatively low, less than once a month, once a month, and two to three times a month). See the above Table 4.1.4 that reports this data.

Even though all of the American participants (except for one) reported that they have never used SNS for target language and culture learning, all of them have a positive attitude toward using them in classroom for learning purposes. They think that SNS would allow for more natural and informal conversation. Unlike the Saudi participants, more than half of the

American stressed the potential of SNS to develop cultural understanding by giving it a more personal and social dimension.

4.2.2 Multimodal Analysis of Facebook Affordances in OIE Project

The following table provides a count of students' use of FB features. The first column presents the group number subdivided into the categories of American and Saudi students (A stands for Americans, S stands for Saudis). Then, the rest is a list of FB features that were utilized by the students.

Table 4.2.2.1: Students' Use of Facebook Features Across groups

Groups		Facebook Features						
		Like	Emoticons	Mentions	Sharing		Edit	Other
					Picture	Link		
1	A	8	11	10	2	0	0	0
	S	10	9	10	5	1	4	0
2	A	5	19	1	2	0	0	0
	S	35	43	9	3	1		1
3	A	17	20	2	1	0	4	0
	S	22	78	7	15	4	0	1
4	A	1	2	4	0	0	0	0
	S	26	5	12	0	0	1	0
5	A	1	4	0	2	1	0	0
	S	13	18	8	11	1	0	1
6	A	13	8	3	2	1	0	0
	S	29	31	10	11	1	0	1
Total		167	284	76	54	11	9	4

Regardless of the fact that Saudi students are not active users of FB, they are making more use of the semiotic resources of FB than their American counterparts. Saudi users used some features (e.g. emoticons and like) twice as often as their American partners. It is possible that Saudi students' previous experience and engagement of other social networking sites (e.g. Instagram and Twitter) allow them to easily understand the function of those features and utilize them to serve their own purpose.

As can be seen from the table, the most used features are *emoticons* (284), *like* (167), and then mention/tag (76) followed by sharing (63). Sharing pictures (52) was employed more than sharing links (11). The least utilized functions were editing (9), feeling sharing (3),

and location sharing (1). Interestingly, students positively appreciated the editing and sharing features; however, the quantitative analysis showed that they are used less than other features such as emoticons, like, and mention. While feeling sharing was only used three times and all by Saudi students, it was used to reflect the attitude of interest and excitement. Even though location sharing was used once by Banan (Group 2) to share the location of her home town, this feature has the potential to enhance a learners' knowledge about the geographical aspects of another country (Byram, 1997) if the students were given specific instructions on how to utilize it. The categories of like, mentions, and emoticons are found to play a vital role in intercultural projects as they approximate or decrease the distance between students (Jewitt, 2009) as will be discussed in the following section.

The qualitative analysis of students' practices on FB during the project identified three main affordances of FB in the online intercultural exchange (OIE): 1) supporting engagement in intercultural communication; 2) facilitating collaboration; and 3) promoting interpersonal relationships. The first and second affordances are considered pedagogical affordances, while the third is a social affordance (Wang, 2008). The technological affordances were discussed within the two other affordances because the discussion of the affordances is not out of context but rather in how they are used by students in a specific, designed context, an online intercultural exchange. Thus, their importance resides in their role in facilitating the pedagogical and social role of any given educational environment.

The following sections will discuss the above-mentioned affordances, but at the same time, they will address constraints that are associated with Facebook in this intercultural project. Some of the perceived affordances were seen by students as constraints that impeded their participation.

Supporting Engagement in Intercultural Communication

A key affordance that emerged during analysis was how the Facebook environment could promote intercultural learning. Dialogue (linguistic mode) between Saudi and American students serves as the main mediating source that affords ICC development (Thorne and Lantlof, 2000) as discussed thoroughly in the previous question. However, it did not explicitly address the role that the FB interfaces and resources play in facilitating engagement in intercultural dialogues and, hence, hopefully, promoting ICC. According to multimodal discourse analysis scholars (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2000; Van Lier, 2004), all other semiotic resources in a given context are not just present but rather, they must be "actively brought in and created, shared and used under the guidance from the teacher and other learners" (Van Lier, 2004, p.97) and contribute as much as language does to the meaning.

Analysis revealed that the comment/post function on FB allows students to engage in formal, lengthy discussions, where they can write text with no size limits. Sometimes, in fact, the comment has a high level of modality (Smith et al. 2003) as it allows for a combination of different modes text combined with external links, pictures or video. Hence, it affords students the ability to express their points of view, negotiate ideas, and consequently, construct knowledge. In the following example, Sana shared a picture in her comment that summarized the whole point of her question. In addition, the picture was visible within her text (e.g. students did not need to leave the Facebook group page to check the picture), which made it easier for her partners to understand her point without getting distracted by leaving the site. For Sana, sharing a picture allowed for "division of labor" (Kress, 2010) where she was able to introduce a cultural point that would be hard for her to explain solely through linguistic code.

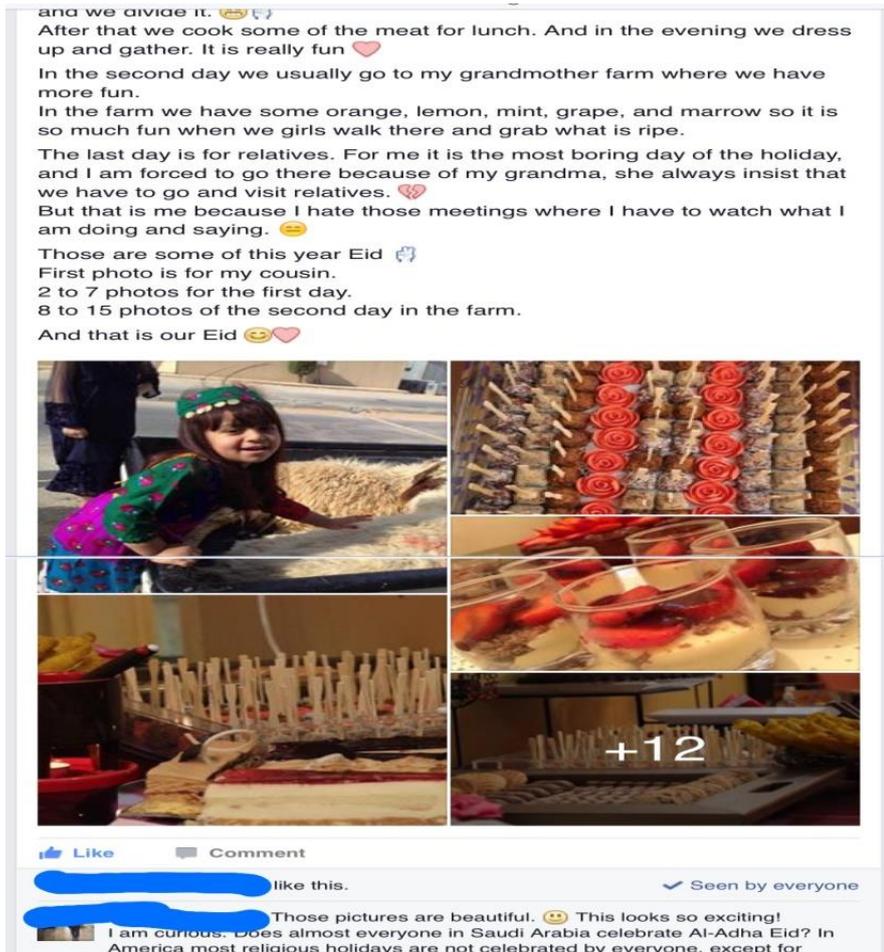
Figure 3: Multimodal text

about 9/11 attack? Did Saudi Arabia has been mentioned then? And what was your idea about it? However, as you said connections in my country is maybe much stronger in so many ways, you see the cultural difference is that most families here meet every week for at least one day in the grandparents house. And as for freedom, you are absolutely right. Here it is much more complicated since we are bound to fathers/brothers/or husbands. A women in Saudi Arabia no matter how old is she, she can't travel alone!! And she can't drive a car because of honor matters because no one wants to see a guy flirt other women. But its ok for THEM to go a woman to her work or other business with a male driver who she doesn't know at all!! But I would like to ask you about this picture.. What do you think? It is about how equal men and women could be when it comes to their salaries? Do you pay also the same when it comes to taxes?



Besides, sharing pictures could add flavor to a dry topic that sounds like an informative lesson and trigger others' attention to engage in cultural discussion, as in the following example. Aseel posted a new thread talking about one of the Muslim holidays, Eid Aladha. She explained what people normally do during this holiday, and then she shared twelve pictures that she took during the holiday, which took place during the project. From Jennifer's comment below on Aseel's post, it can be seen that sharing pictures that depict the occasion attracted Jennifer's attention and subsequently lead to an interesting intercultural discussion about the meaning of religious holidays in Saudi Arabia and America.

Figure 4: Multimodal text



Jennifer explained how many religious holidays in American have lost their spirit, and she wonders how the situation is in Saudi Arabia. She also asked Aseel two questions, which elicited more information about this Muslim holiday. All members of the groups contributed to the discussion. Interestingly, this post was written by Aseel and went beyond the regular task requirements.

FB also affords exposure to different cultural perspectives beyond the group members' perspectives. One of the tasks (3) involved reading an external article that had been posted on a popular Facebook page, Slate.com. The article was written by an American writer who visited Saudi Arabia and wrote about her experiences. In her article, she depicted the life of Saudi women as she observed it. The students were asked to read the post and write their comments, reflections, or ask questions. Interestingly, some Saudi students not only read the

article but also the comments written by the followers of that page. This allowed them to explore different perspectives and thoughts about their own culture beyond the group page members, as can be noted in the following example.

Figure 5.: Facebook comment on popular page



Shaden, in her post, focused on the comments posted on the article more than the article itself to ask about the reasons of misunderstandings about Saudi Arabia.

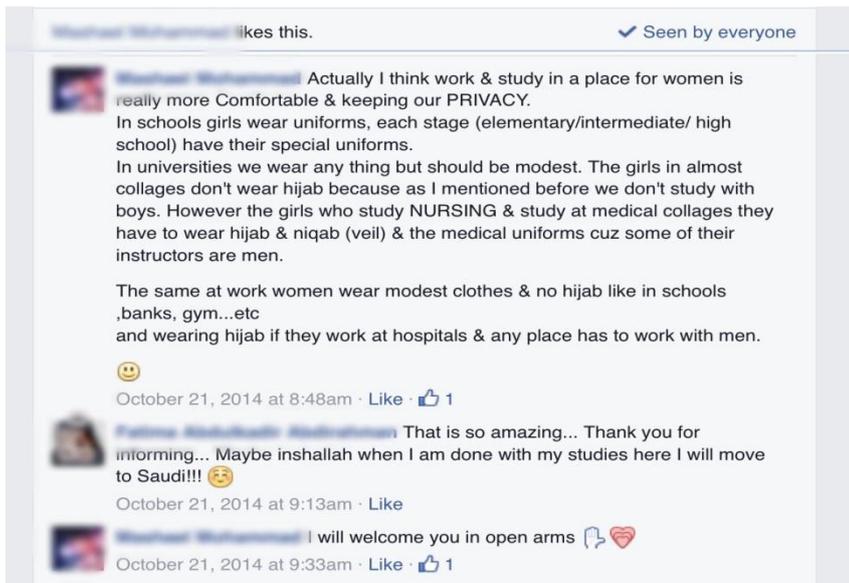
For Saudi students who are less familiar with FB functions, this task exposed them to the potential of FB to understand other cultures and perspectives about Islam and Muslims. For instance, in the post project interview, Walaa said, "I really liked the task where we have to read another article from other Facebook page, all those comments and replies. It is like you get all perspectives at once". Belz (2007) encourages teachers to introduce more macro level demographic statistics like opinion polls and national surveys in addition to the local knowledge and perspectives shared at the local level e.g. group members. FB comments on popular FB pages serve this purpose as they introduce students to various personal written perspectives not just with numbers as seen in statistical surveys.

Moreover, visibility and immediacy are two aspects of FB that support engagement in intercultural discussions. The visibility of all discussions on FB group page walls are chronologically displayed and are visible to all members all the time (e.g. they are not organized by pages). Jennifer said, "What I like about Facebook is that everything is on one

place, you only need to scroll down or up, and click to expand the comment section". The observation of students' practices showed that the asynchronous nature of FB communication, along with the visibility of all the posts in one place, helps students to contribute to the discussion even when the task is over. For example, sometimes students missed a weekly task for various reasons (work, technological problems); however, the visibility of all discussions in one place allowed students to read older topics and reply to others, ask questions, or just share their ideas. For instance, Kathleen (extract 35) posted her point of view on Task 6, which was assigned on November 4, ten days later on November 14. She wrote a very long post, where she demonstrated her deep, critical thinking of the topics as discussed in the previous chapter.

Immediacy is facilitated by the notification feeds and the availability of the FB phone app. The notification feed resides in the top right bar of one's FB profile and displays pop-up notifications when new comments/posts are written in the FB groups. Many students indicated that they appreciated the notification feed as a reminder for them to participate in a new weekly task or keep them updated when a new entry was posted. The effect of notifications can be seen by observing the time gap between comments, which ranges from one minute to one hour apart, as in the following example. The three comments between Sara and Alanod took place in less than an hour, while other interaction episodes occurred within three or four minutes as in picture 4.6.

Figure 6: Time Gap between Comments



The time gap could be due to the popularity of FB among youth since it is already part of their daily lives. However, being on FB does not mean they will check the group pages that they are members of, especially closed groups as their discussions do not go to one's wall.

Immediacy is also facilitated by the availability of FB phone applications with all of its special features. Most the students reported that they check the group page on a daily basis from their phones. For instance, Laura stated, "I like that it [the project] was on Facebook. The other day I was waiting for a doctor appointment, I was reading through the posts and replying I didn't feel it is like a demanding assignment but it is kind of fun and learn". Here, Laura decided to check the group page not because she had to, but because it was fun. Online discourse analysis showed that students would use the phone to give immediate replies by inserting emoticons or click the like button then later write their comment. In the following example, Deem inserted a shy face and then the following day, she answered her American partner's question.

Figure 7: Emoticon/Like as an Immediate Response



Banan, a Saudi student, said, "I like using Facebook app as I can read the post written by other and think about it, and even showed to my friends before I replied on my laptop, on phone I would click the like button which show that I have read your post and I liked it" (Whatsapp conversation). Banan used her app to provide her immediate response, "like", but not really for writing her comment. Reading through the app allowed students to think about the question or the task.

Noticeably, a FB post visibly and immediately afforded students engagement in the intercultural discussion by encouraging them to check the group page or facilitate reading older posts thereby contributing to the discussion.

Regardless of all the above mentioned affordances, Facebook also poses some constraints that limit student participation. For Saudi students, the text-based nature of Facebook was one of the main limitations. More than half of the Saudi students mentioned their preference for oral communication, like Skype, over Facebook. Facebook limits their abilities to explain their points of view clearly and express their emotions. Aseel said, "Facebook is good especially with time difference between the two countries but I don't know I think writing limited us to express our view in a good way, if it was on Skype I think it will be more fruitful." Similarly Nadeeh stated, "I prefer oral conversation over written. Speaking

allows you to negotiate and express yourself more.” While for most students, this limitation of FB did not prevent them from being active participants like Aseel, for other students, the text-based nature prevented them from engaging in discussions. For example, Walaa stated, “I spent probably an hour on Facebook group page and I read through all the posts and I really want to write but I don't know I feel I won't be able to express my point correctly, I prefer live interactive chat”. Saudi students' preference for oral interaction could be due to linguistic incompetence as English is their second language. They might be afraid to write unclear sentences or a make a post that is full of mistakes, and they will not be able clarify the misunderstanding when it occurs. Their preference for oral communication also could reflect the preferred communication style of Arabic people. (Zaharana, 1995)

The low familiarity of FB for the Saudi students also led to some confusion and ignoring some posts or comments. They did not differentiate between writing an original post and commenting on someone else's post. Sometimes, the same topic was discussed in several posts instead of keeping it in one post.

Moreover, the availability of the FB app is found to be a "double edge sword". As mentioned above, it helps the students to check the group pages read new entries anytime, anywhere. Relying on the FB app, however, limited students' deep reflection. Students, who relied on the FB app as they reported on the interview, wrote short comments lacking reflection and failing to engage in discussion.

Facilitating collaboration

Another key affordance of FB is that it facilitates collaboration. The essence of the OIE project is based on collaboration between students from different locations. The findings from the previous section revealed that students in some groups were able to construct knowledge by exchanging perspectives and negotiating ideas to reach cultural

understandings. This was achieved through dialogue and the support of the FB environment and semiotic resources.

Beyond the group page discussion, FB offers a unique feature that allows students to work together to create their final project. One of the telecollaboration tasks is a collaborative task where students are required to work together to produce a joint project. This kind of task involves planning, coordination, and negotiation between students to reach agreement (O'Dowd and Ware, 2009). Students were divided into pairs (each group had two pairs) and each pair was asked to work together to create a Facebook page. Prior to the task, students were given instructions via PowerPoint on how to create a Facebook page and guidelines about the content of the page. Observation of students' work on the final project reveals that feasibility, connectivity, and authenticity are the three main features of Facebook that afford collaboration concerning the production of the final project using the "create page" feature.

Feasibility is indicated by the fact that all pairs in low and high functionality groups (except for one pair in a low functionality group) completed this task and created their pages without asking the researcher any questions or reporting any difficulties. This could be achieved through the instructional guide provided to them as well as the percentage line Facebook provides to show how much has been completed. Students also have an optional skip button in case one wants to work on an element later. Furthermore, students reported enjoying the experience building their own page without any of the difficulties they usually face when working with technology.

Connectivity refers to human-object and human-human communication. The connectivity of human-object refers to the linkage of the page to one's profile (admin). The page created by each pair is connected to their profile, so they do not need to work on another website or platform. The visibility of the page is amplified by the fact that Facebook is so popular among students, and that they check it multiple times during the day, especially the

American students. Moreover, Facebook sends a reminder to users that their page has not yet been completed.

Human to human connectivity refers to the various ways of communication that Facebook supports. Some students were able to communicate synchronously to discuss designing the page, choosing the name, profile and cover page photos, and thinking about the topic that they have to write about. However, there were some students whose chat was not accessible for various reasons, so they used private messages instead. The various options of communicating facilitated students' collaboration in completing the final task.

The accessibility of Facebook features such as sharing/uploading pictures, the support of various languages, and the ease of editing got students engaged and creatively working on their final project. For instance, Shaden said, “I was excited to do the final project, so I get started before I contacted my friend; I just wanted to see how it works. Then I chatted with Elizabeth and discuss what name we should choose and other stuff, and it was so easy to edit all the information I made at the beginning.”

Being able to invite friends to check out one’s page and comment on its content adds authenticity to the project. Even though the interaction with outsider audiences was limited, there are many students whose friends liked the pages and clicked the like button on their posts. While the average number of likes the pages received was between 5 and 10, one page received 44 likes.

Promoting Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships were mediated in this project through Facebook's semiotic features. Analysis revealed that the various channels of communication, friending, and the social affective features including like, emoticons and mentions (Zhao & Liu, 2013) all worked together to make Facebook environment high in spatiality function. This means the

distance between groups members is approximated (Jewitt, 2009) thereby increase the social presence of individuals and positively impact their interpersonal relationships. Social presence means “the degree to which a person is perceived as a real in a mediated communication” (Gunawardena, 1995) that facilitates participants to project themselves socially and emotionally (Garrison et al., 2000). Due to the lack of nonverbal communication in most online environments, social presence is considered an important concept in online education as it has been associated with students' satisfaction, student engagement, and interpersonal relationships. (Garrison et al., 2003)

Facebook's various ways of communication support interpersonal relationships in different formats. As seen in the previous chapter, FB's posts on group pages allowed students to present themselves to their future partners by using multimodal text that includes personal pictures and sometimes links to external personal sites, revealing information about them and facilitating getting to know each other in the process. Additionally, the comment section on the group page's wall was not only used for discussing deep, critical cultural issues but also as a venue for personal interaction in a way the resembles chat messaging as described below.

Figure 8: Facebook Comments used as Chat



The conversation between Banan (identified by the red circle) and Elizabeth resembles to a great extent chat texting not only through the content of the conversation but also by the time gap between comments.

Beyond the group's wall page, FB supports synchronous chat texting as well as asynchronous private messaging. However, in this project, not all students were able to utilize the synchronous chat due to the time differences between the two countries. Private messages were used to discuss personal issues that students thought should not be discussed on the group's wall as in the following example.

Extract. 37: The Use of FB Private Message

Alanod (Saudi): I would like to talk with you about Ramadan. I am CURIOUS about muslims around the world especially their daily system in Ramadan days and their food? Do you have special dishes on Eftar (meal after sunset)?

Sara (American): Asalam alykum my sister in deen. It would be amazing to talk about Ramadan. Ramadan is different in every state and every community but we still share the same concept.

Sara: as for this country usually we have school and during this blessed month so we make our schedule around it. ...

Alanod (Group 3) probably wanted to know more information about Ramadan as it is celebrated in non-Muslim countries, but she decided not to ask her questions openly on the group page because that would exclude the other Americans, like Jennifer, who is not Muslim, from the discussion.

In this project, friending each other serves as another dimension of building and sustaining interpersonal relationships. The majority of students became friends with group members during the first few weeks of the project. During the interviews, they reported that they were completely comfortable friending people that they know because they are real and learning their language. Even though the semiotic activity of sending a friend request and then accepting one does not mean they have become friends in the literal sense of the word, it does indicate an attitude of interest, acceptance toward the other, and readiness to engage in interaction. Being on one's friend list helps in visualizing their partners and allows for exposure to one's daily life. Many students appreciated the opportunity to know their partner on a more personal level. Jennifer stated, "...it (FB) also has a personal dimension where you can visualize people whom you are interacting with". Moreover, students liked the idea of having native speaker friends whose profile they could look at and get exposure to the target culture and language. Elizabeth, for instance, said, "Facebook is a useful cultural learning tool, besides the group page, we are connected to see the daily life of our partner who writes in Arabic which force me to read Arabic." Friending on FB in this project

increased the social presence of the participants which could assist them in sustaining personal relationships after the project is over even if they are not writing to each other.

Furthermore, FB offers multimodal ways of expression, appreciation, and recognition of the other using semi-automated communicative modes (Eisenlauer, 2013) by using either a click or click and insert (e.g. like, emoticons and mentions). Students used these to express multiple meanings, which ultimately assisted in building interpersonal relations. As seen above in the quantitative counts of students' use of FB's features, the most commonly used features are those that serve social purposes rather than more toward cognitive learning, for example, sharing and editing or even comments and posts. That being said, their function goes beyond social purposes. They serve a more important intercultural role by clarifying misunderstandings, mitigating the sensitivity of a topic, or showing understanding and acceptance.

Emoticons have a significant role in this intercultural project. The wide range of emotions that Facebook offers enabled students to express their emotions and feelings visually, especially during the first week of the project where they had to present themselves to each other. Both cultural groups utilized smiles, hearts, and the thumbs up emoticons to express their appreciation, support, and excitement. More importantly, the emoticons were used in a way that lessened the sensitivity of the topic whenever they asked questions that could offend their partners or exploited humor that would not be clear through language. An example of this is clear in the following conversation between Sana and Randi, when they talked about the age a girl leaves her parents' house.

Figure 9: Use emoticon to support humor



In this project, Saudi students not only used more emoticons than the American students, but they also employed them differently. Americans used the emoticons at the end of the sentences or mostly at the end of their posts, and one emoticon satisfied their purpose. Saudi students used them in various places; that is, they would use multiple ones not only at the end of sentences but in the middle and sometimes between words as the previous example (Picture 4.7). The following example shows that as Alanod talked about famous Saudi Instagram users, she employed up to six emotions after each user's account.

Figure 10: Saudi Students' use of emoticons



As discussed above, one of the constraints of FB for the Saudi students is that they found the text-based nature of FB limits their expression and could lead to

misunderstandings. This could explain their apparent overuse of non-verbal expressions. These features were used to make their communication clearer.

“Like” is one of the most well-known FB features, and it is considered a semi-automated communicative mode, for it only requires one click. In addition, it enables students to interact with each other's posts and make comments semiotically. The majority of like's use in this project reflects the obvious meaning of “I like what you wrote”. However, students would also click like to give an immediate response afforded by the availability of Facebook’s app, and then they would later reply with written text. Interestingly, it was used by some students to show understanding of other’s points of view. For instance, in the discussion of the meaning of freedom between Aseel and Jennifer, Jennifer stated that she liked Aseel's comment to show her that she is not offended by what she said, and she wants her to elaborate more on her point of view.

As presented previously, the number of likes given by the Saudis and Americans is unequal. The Saudi students used them significantly more across groups. Most probably, American students utilized the functionality of like according to their previous experiences using Facebook. On the other hand, Saudi students are not active users of FB, but they are active in other social media, such as Instagram, which also has the *like* feature. The Saudis could bring the conventions of like's use in Instagram to FB, where they would click like for any picture that their friends share to appreciate sharing life moments' with each other. Interestingly, the less active students in high functionality groups are the ones who employed like the most. It can be seen that like provides passive participants a chance to be socially present in the group especially knowing that giving like to any post will add a notification to the writer's feeds.

Previous work in intercultural projects (Belz, 2003; Ware, 2003) found that the greater use of personal pronouns correlates with positive impact on intercultural discussions.

On FB, mentions serve a similar purpose; they are another way to interact socially with others concretely. In some sense, mentions amplify Bakhtin's concept of "addressivity". This involves tagging one or more members' names that will link to their profile, which automatically adds to one's notification feed. The whole semiotic activity of mentioning resembles calling someone by name. This invites students to pay more attention to posts and contribute to discussions. It is even more augmented since mentioning someone's name will automatically go to his/her notification feed with a phrase like "someone has mentioned you". Mentioning affords students with an opportunity to recognize their partners' view and invite them in a personal way to participate or to let them know that their question was answered.

Data analysis also revealed some constraints associated with those affordances that have an effect on students' personal relationships. Friending was not welcomed by all students and not all friend requests were accepted for various reasons. The refusal of a friend request could emotionally affect the students who were denied, which could affect their participation. Three of the Saudi students in the low functionality group were not friends with their American partners because their American did not accept their request. Lana, an American student, said that she did not friend her Saudi classmates/partners because she is thinking of leaving FB soon as it distracted her from school. It is important to mention that the selection of closed group configuration was intended to protect the privacy of the students since closed groups don't require being friends with the researcher or group members.

To conclude, utilizing semiotic multimodal analysis, this section showed how Facebook affordances could support engagement, collaboration, and build inter-personal relationships. All of these are important aspects in OIE projects. At the same time, those affordances could be seen as constraints, like the text-based nature of Facebook and friending requests. Moreover, analysis showed that semiotic use of the FB features varied across

cultures, where Saudi students use some FB features far more frequently than their American counterparts.

4.2.3 Students' Perception of Facebook Affordances

This section provides quantitative findings of student perceptions of Facebook affordances in the online intercultural exchange (OIE) project. Students completed a post-project questionnaire that elicited their perceptions of Facebook affordances. It is important to mention that 10 out of 12 of American students and 12 out of 14 of Saudi students completed the post project questionnaire concerning Facebook affordances.

1. Pedagogical affordances

Pedagogical affordances refer the extent to which the Facebook group features could be utilized efficiently as an environment for intercultural learning (Wang et al, 2012). Table 1 below shows the American students' perceptions to the pedagogical affordances of Facebook in OIE.

Table 1: Americans' Perception of FB Pedagogical Aspects

#	Items	SA or A	Neither A or D	SD or D
1	The interactive nature of Facebook made it a valid tool for intercultural exchange.	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
2	Being familiar with Facebook functionalities made me motivated and excited to participate in the project.	62.50%	37.50%	0.00%
3	The Facebook "update notification feeds" allowed me to get instant updates about my peers' posts.	87.50%	0.00%	12.50%
4	Facebook allowed sharing resources in any formats that enriched the cultural discussion.	75.00%	25%	0.00%
5	The "editing function" helped me to edit my posts without deleting them.	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
6	The "ping translation" on Facebook helped me understand difficult words in my peers' posts.	25.00%	75%	0.00%
7	Facebook's "comment section" facilitated formal discussions as well as informal interactions	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
8	The weekly tasks were well organized and relevant to real life language use	87.50%	0.00%	12.50%
9	Facebook has many functions that enabled us to work in groups and hence facilitated intercultural collaborative learning.	87.50%	12%	0.00%
10	With its "Create Page Function," Facebook supports group projects.	87.50%	0.00%	12.50%

As the table indicates, all of the American students strongly agreed or agreed on statements 1, 5, and 7. Additionally, the majority (87.8%) of the American students agreed or

strongly agreed with statements 9 and 10. The same percentage also agreed or strongly agreed on statements 3 and 8, and only 12.5% disagreed with these two statements. While 75% of the students agreed that FB sharing functions enriched the cultural discussion, 25% remained neutral. Similarly, more than half of the American students strongly agreed or agreed with statement 2, while 37% of the students were neutral. Not surprisingly, 75% of the American students remained neutral about statement 6 which addressed Ping translation in helping them to understand their peers' posts since the language used in this project was mostly English.

Overall, American students perceived the pedagogical aspects of Facebook favorably. An interesting point is that their perception of the sharing function is very positive, and none disagreed about its usability in enriching the discussion. It is important to note that their real use of sharing is rather limited as was discussed in previous section. This could probably mean that they benefited from what their peers shared in their groups.

Table 2: Saudi Perceptions of FB Pedagogical Aspects

#	Items	A or SA	Neither A nor D	D or SD
1	The interactive nature of Facebook made it a valid tool for intercultural exchange.	63.63%	36.36%	0.00%
2	Being familiar with Facebook functionalities made me motivated and excited to participate in the project.	63.70%	27.30%	9.10%
3	The Facebook "update notification feeds" allowed me to get instant updates about my peers' posts.	81.80%	18.90%	0.00%
4	Facebook allowed sharing resources in any formats that enriched the cultural discussion.	81.80%	18.90%	0.00%
5	The "editing function" helped me to edit my posts without deleting them.	81.80%	18.90%	0.00%
6	The "Ping translation" on Facebook helped me understand difficult words in my peers' posts.	45.50%	36.40%	18.29%
7	Facebook's "comment section" facilitated formal discussions as well as informal interactions	81.80%	18.90%	0.00%
8	The weekly tasks were well organized and relevant to real life language use	90.80%	9.10%	0.00%
9	Facebook has many functions that enabled us to work in group and hence facilitated intercultural collaborative learning.	63.70%	36.40%	0.00%
10	With its "Create Page Function," Facebook supports group projects.	72.70%	27.30%	0.00%

Table 2 above shows Saudi student perceptions of FB's pedagogical affordances. The majority of the Saudi students (81.8%) strongly agreed or agreed with statements 3, 4, 5 and

7. About third of them (36.4%) remained undecided, while none disagreed. Sixty three point seven percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that the interactive nature of Facebook made it a valid tool for intercultural exchange, and 36.6% were neutral. Similar responses were made regarding statement 9. For statement 11, 72.7 % of the students agreed or strongly agreed, while 27.3 were undecided. While more than half (63%) of the Saudi students agreed or strongly agreed with statement (2), 27.3% were neutral, and 9.1% disagreed. Forty five point five percent of the students strongly agreed or agreed with statement 6 about the usefulness of Ping translation, 36.4% were undecided, and 18.3% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Almost all of the Saudi students (90.8%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the weekly tasks were well-organized on the FB group page, and only 9.1% remained neutral.

While most of the Saudi students' responses toward the pedagogical affordances were positive, there was a number of students who were uncertain or even disagreed with some of the statements. This could be attributed to students' previous use of FB, as many of them are not active users. For instance, several students' responses to statements 5 and 6, which address editing and translation functions, seem to indicate unawareness of their existence. This is demonstrated by two or three consecutive comments by students to just retype words correctly instead of using the editing function.

2. Social Affordance of Facebook

Social affordance refers to the extent in which Facebook group page could provide a safe and friendly environment for social interaction in which students could build interpersonal relationships. Table 3 below shows the American students' responses to eight statements regarding their perceptions of FB's social affordances.

Table: 3 American Students' perception of FB's social Aspects

#	Items	SA or A	Neither A nor D	SD or D
1	The Facebook group page was a safe environment for sharing ideas and resources.	100%	0%	0%
2	The Facebook group page provided a friendly environment for social interaction with peers.	100%	0%	0%
3	The Facebook environment allowed me to share personal stories and images that enhanced friendship building with my peers.	100%	0%	0%
4	It was interesting to read others' opinions throughout the project.	100%	0%	0%
5	The "chat function" helped me to establish friendship with my partners.	75%	25%	0%
6	I think I will keep in touch with my peers after the project is over.	75%	25%	0%
7	Waiting time for my peers' replies was reasonable.	25%	62.50%	13%
8	It was comfortable to disagree with my peers.	50%	25%	25%

Table 3 shows that in general, American students evaluated Facebook social affordances positively. All of them agreed or strongly agreed with statements 1, 2, 3, and 4. Three quarters agreed or strongly agreed with statements 5 and 6, while 25% were undecided. The majority of the American students (62%) remained neutral regarding statement 7, while 25% agreed and only 13% disagreed. Regarding statement 8, half of the participants (50%) felt comfortable disagreeing with their peers, while a quarter (25%) of them was undecided and the other quarter (25%) disagreed.

Table 4: Saudi students' perception of FB Social Aspects

#	Items	A or SA	Neither D or A	D or SD
1	The Facebook group page was a safe environment for sharing ideas and resources.	63.60%	27.30%	9.10%
2	The Facebook group page provided a friendly environment for social interaction with peers.	72.80%	27.30%	0.00%
3	The Facebook environment allowed me to share personal stories and images that enhanced friendship building with my peers.	81.80%	9.10%	9.10%
4	It was interesting to read others' opinions throughout the project.	90.80%	9.10%	0.00%
5	The "chat function" helped me to establish friendship with my partners.	73.40%	27.30%	0.00%
6	I think I will keep in touch with my peers after the project is over.	63.60%	27.30%	9.10%
7	Waiting time for my peer's replies was reasonable.	0.0%	54.50%	45.40%
8	I was comfortable to disagree with my peers.	37.80%	36.40%	27.30%

Table 4 presents Saudi students' perceptions of FB's social attributes. As the table shows, the majority were positive with most of the statements. The most agreed upon statements were 4, 3, and 5 in that order. In fact, statements 4, 5 and 2 did not have any participants disagree to any extent. The most negative statements were 7 and 8. In fact, none agreed with statement 7 to any degree, whereas statement 8 was almost evenly divided between positive, neutral, and negative.

An interesting finding regarding the social affordances is the divergence of responses between Americans and Saudis regarding statements that address waiting and time. Many Saudi students (45%) disagreed about the waiting time being reasonable while only 13% of the American disagreed. This corresponds to the FB's constraint that is associated with Saudi students. Many Saudi students described their preference for oral synchronous discussion as it facilitates expression and explanation and allows for immediate response.

3. Technological Affordances

Technological affordances of Facebook refer to what extent the Facebook group pages could be used in OIE project without any difficulties, and student perceptions regarding this are indicated below in Table 5.

Table 5 American students' perception of FB technological Aspects

#	Items	SA or A	Neither A nor D	SD or D
1	The Facebook group pages enabled us to communicate at our convenience.	100.00 %	0%	0%
2	The availability of the Facebook phone app made it easy to access the group page and engage in discussions.	100.00 %	0%	0%
3	I didn't have any technical problems when I used Facebook.	87.50%	12.50%	0%
4	It was easy to navigate through the Facebook interface.	100.00 %	0%	0%
5	It was easy to start new posts and reply to others.	100.00 %	0%	0%

Based on their responses, the American students perceived all the technological aspects of FB positively. All of them unanimously agreed or strongly agreed with statements 1, 2, 4, and 5. Even statement 3 reveals overwhelmingly positive responses, with only 12.5% reporting neutral opinions. Knowing that almost all American students are active Facebook users, it is expected that they would not face any difficulties communicating via FB and would be both familiar with and comfortable using its many functions.

Table 6 below presents results of Saudi students' perception of Facebook technological affordances.

Table 6 Saudi students' Perception of FB Technological Aspects

#	Items	SA or A	Neither	SD or D
1	The Facebook group pages enabled us to communicate at our convenience.	72.80%	27.30%	0.00%
2	The availability of the Facebook phone app made it easy to access the group page and engage in discussions.	72.68%	18.18%	9.10%
3	I didn't have any technical problems when I used Facebook.	54.60%	36.40%	9.10%
4	It was easy to navigate through the Facebook interface.	63.60%	36.40%	0.00%
5	It was easy to start new posts and reply to others.	81.80%	18.20%	0.00%

Unlike American students, Saudi students were unsure about or disagreed with most of the statements. Nearly three quarters of the Saudi students agreed or strongly agreed with statements 1 and 2; however, 27% and 18% of the students remained neutral respectively, and 9.1% disagreed with statement 2. This is opposite of the American students' responses. Only half of them stated they had few if any technical problems, but 9% strongly disagreed, meaning technology impeded their full participation. More than half of the students also agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to navigate post and reply to others. These Saudi students' perceptions to FB technological affordances corroborate with the qualitative analysis of FB affordances in the previous section. Several Saudi students reported during the interview that they sometimes get confused about where to write their comments or where to find their peers' comments.

The quantitative analysis of both groups' perception towards Facebook affordances is generally positive, which implies Facebook groups could be a valid environment for intercultural learning. As mentioned earlier, not all participants completed the questionnaire. It could be that those who were in low functionality groups were the ones who did not fill out the questionnaire, and their responses would probably change some of the findings.

This section identified three main affordances of Facebook in OIE project; supporting engagement in intercultural communication, facilitating collaboration, and promoting interpersonal relationship. Moreover, students', both Americans and Saudis, perception of Facebook pedagogical, social, and technological aspects is generally positive. These findings suggest that Facebook is a valid and powerful tool for OIE project. The following section will present summaries of this dissertation questions, discussions of the finding in the light of relevant literature. Additionally, it will highlight the contributions, limitations and implications of the study as well as suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings on the research questions that guided this dissertation. I provided an analysis of students' discourse to show to what extent Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIEs) between Saudis and Americans on Facebook could contribute to students' intercultural competence development. In addition, I discussed the affordances of Facebook in this OIE project, and how students perceived them. I drew data from various resources and combined both qualitative and quantitative analyses to answer the research questions. In this chapter, I will summarize each research question and discuss the findings of the study as related to the relevant areas of literature in order to provide new insights for the ongoing discourse in the literature. Finally, I will present the implications, contributions, and limitations of this dissertation, followed by suggestions for future research.

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold: 1) investigating the extent to which OIEs via Facebook can contribute to students' development of intercultural (communicative) competence (ICC) by exploring what and how students demonstrate the components of Byram's ICC (1997) model; 2) examining the affordances of Facebook in the OIE project by exploring students' use of Facebook and their perceptions. This OIE project took place on six closed Facebook group pages and lasted for ten weeks. Students were required to complete a series of telecollaborative tasks that aimed at engaging them in intercultural discussions. The tasks were designed in alignment with the Facebook interface and features to better understand how Facebook can be utilized in an OIE context.

Due to the nature of this study, a mixed of quantitative and qualitative data was collected to allow for triangulations during analysis of the study results. It included 1) students' online discourse on Facebook, 2) the researcher's journal entries, 3) pre-survey results, 4) post-project interview results, 5) post-project questionnaire responses, and 6)

students' final reflections. The pre-survey aimed at exploring students' background information, e.g. age and years of learning the target language. It also investigated students' expectations of the projects, their previous intercultural encounters, their use of technologies and social networking sites (SNS) for language learning, and their opinion about using SNS for language and intercultural learning. This information helped the researcher analyze and explain the results of this study. It was also used to group students according to their cultural group.

5.1 Summary of the Findings

Q1: How do Saudis and American students participate in the OIE as measured by the frequency of their posts/comment and length?

The quantitative analysis of group participation reveals divergent participation patterns within and across groups. Based on the frequency of written words and posts/comments, three groups—one, three and six—are considered “high functionality,” as the frequency of their posts and produced words are above average and demonstrate a balanced participation. Groups four and five are categorized as “low functionality,” as their participation is below the average and is lopsided towards Saudi participants. Group two, on the other hand, seems to be at a moderate level of functionality. They are above average and demonstrated balanced participation with regard to frequency of posts; however, they did not write as many words as the high functionality groups. An interesting finding is that, unlike in previous studies where one national group seemed to be more active and wrote more (Belz, 2003; Ware, 2005), this study shows that differences in activity and writing stem from personal attributes rather than nationality.

Q2: To what extent OIE via Facebook could contribute to learners' intercultural competence? Specifically, what and how are the components of Byram's ICC (1997) model demonstrated in this OIE project?

Content analysis of the qualitative data revealed that, when students' contributions to the discussion were mutually compatible, the students were able to build and maintain meaningful relationships, ask questions that encouraged feedback, and engage in dialogue, OIE has great potential for developing students' intercultural competence, as many objectives of Byram's ICC model were manifested.

In the area of Attitude, students demonstrated a willingness to engage in meaningful relationships, an attitude of interest and curiosity in discovering other perspectives, and openness to question about personal values and cultural practices (mostly from the American students). In the domain of Knowledge, students gained knowledge about the types of cause and process of misunderstanding, the means of achieving contact with interlocutors (e.g. asking for their accounts on Instagram and Snapchat), and knowledge about institutions (e.g. educational and religious) and perception of them. More importantly, they developed heterogeneous perspectives about the other culture; in other words, they came to understand that not all individuals from one culture have the same behaviors and views. In the area of Skills of Discovery and Interaction, students were able to demonstrate many objectives of this category through questions of various types, purpose and interactive strategies that required them to reflect on their own and others' cultural perspectives and practices. The students were able to elicit concepts and values from their partners and develop explanatory systems. They were able to use an appropriate combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes to interact with other from different cultures. They also identified and used online technologies that facilitated contact with their partners. As with skills of interpreting and relating and critical cultural awareness, students were able to operate these skills by engaging in intercultural dialogue. Even though not all students were able to show elements of critical evaluation, they were able to identify ethnocentric perspectives in their own practices, identify areas of misunderstanding and explain them in references to their cultural system,

mediate between conflicting interpretations and make explicit references to perspective and criteria.

The absence of some of ICC objectives on OIE between the Saudis and Americans is due to several reasons; a) the length of the project, b) the online nature of communication which is different than face to face, c) the task design, and d) students were not prepared and trained beforehand.

Q3: What affordances for intercultural learning might Facebook offer in an OIE project?

The findings suggest that Facebook offers three unique affordances for intercultural learning projects: supporting engagement in intercultural exchanges, facilitating collaborations, and promoting interpersonal relationships. These affordances are stimulated by Facebook semiotic design and a variety of semiotic resources, which include the following: 1) multimodal posts and accompanying comments, 2) sharing, 3) notifications, 4) communication channels (e.g., synchronous chats, asynchronous private messages), 5) friending, 6) semi-automated features (e.g. “like,” emoticons, and mentions/tags), 7) creating FB page 8) easy navigation, and 9) accessibility.

Regardless of these promising affordances, Facebook imposed some constraints that limited student participation due to material, cultural, and social factors. Because Saudi students believe that live interactive communication is more appropriate for intercultural communication, the text-based nature of Facebook discouraged more active participation on their part. Refusals of “friend” requests also negatively impacted student participation in both cultural groups. Finally, the Facebook app impeded deep reflection and discussion.

Q4: What are students' perceptions of Facebook affordances?

The questionnaire results reveal that the majority of students, American and Saudi, perceive Facebook affordances positively. However, due to their communication preferences and unfamiliarity with their American counterparts, some Saudi students perceived certain Facebook affordances negatively.

5.2 Discussion

In this section, I will discuss the findings and analysis of ICC and Facebook affordances (the two central constructs of this study) in light of the relevant literature.

5.2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Previous studies on telecollaboration found that students' participation patterns and engagement lie across a continuum from high functionality (more successful) to low functionality (less successful) (Ware, 2003, 2005; Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2003; Basharina, 2007; Ryder and Yamagata, 2012). Similarly, the current study shows that some groups (1, 3, and 6) were able to build meaningful relationships with each other and engage in deep intercultural dialogue that demonstrated many objectives of Byram's ICC model. In contrast, participation in groups four and five is categorized as low functionality both syntactically and semantically, as their contributions to the discussion was minimal and did not go beyond exchanging superficial cultural and other factual information. Group two was on the moderate level of functionality, as the participants demonstrated elements of both high and low functionality. Unlike in other studies (Ware, 2005; Belz, 2002), which found that only culture influenced group participation levels, this study showed that participatory differences stemmed from personal preferences rather than based on nationality. However, in low functionality groups, Saudi students demonstrated more participation than American students.

This study also supports previous literature (Basgarubam, 2009; Belz, 2003, 2007; Chun, 2011; Kern, 2006; Liaw, 2006; O'Dowd, 2003; Thorne, 2003; Schenker, 2012; Ware & Kramersch, 2005) in the potential of OEI in developing language learners' intercultural

competence as many students were able to demonstrate many objectives of Byram's model (1997). However, as O'Dowd (2004) argued that "such critical understanding of culture and the related skills of interpreting and relating can't be taken for granted in language learners and they should therefore receive explicit training and preparation by the teachers in these aspects of ICC" (P.203). Hence, to gain the full potential of OIE projects, teachers need to prepare students before the project by giving them plenty of examples from previous studies and discuss with them potential tensions that might arise through their interaction. Also this study illuminates the inapplicability of some Byram's model objectives to other nonwestern contexts like the Middle East. Some of the attitudes and critical awareness objectives are in conflict with Saudis' Islamic and educational policy that excludes the critical discussion of religion and political topics. Therefore, it is expected that Saudi students won't demonstrate these objectives. On his observation of English classroom in Saudi Arabia, Osman (2015) found that Saudis teachers' attitudes and practices toward ICC components of Byram's model are mostly positive, and there are many intercultural related episodes that were identified in their teaching. However, he notes that since some of the objectives are not in line with the Saudi Arabia educational policy, there is a need for a modified version of Byram's model that fits within the context of the Gulf countries specifically Saudi Arabia. Byram (1997) himself is aware of this issue as he states "the underlying theme is that FLT [foreign language teaching] should provide opportunities for interaction with people from other countries but should not threaten or undermine the Arab and Islamic of learners themselves" (p. 24). This study supports Osman's (2015) call for a modified version of Byram's model that fits the context of Saudi Arabia. In fact, after king Abdullah made several initiatives to support intercultural communication with other people from different cultures and faiths, many Saudi scholars have discussed these issues from Islamic perspectives. These resources could be consulted to design an ICC framework for Saudi foreign language learners.

The linguistic fine-grained analysis of students' online discourse showed how students were able to engage in fruitful discussions that could either contribute to or hinder the development of their intercultural competence. Strategies used in such discussions included building personal relationships, employing various questioning techniques, engaging in dialogue, and, operating within different communication styles and language use.

Building personal relationships

Literature on telecollaboration has emphasized the central role of the self-introduction in facilitating rich telecollaborative exchanges (Belz, 2002; Muller Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd, 2003, 2009), and in teaching students to effectively present themselves to their peers (Belz, 2007). However, unlike other tasks, this task used to be "monologic" in nature, which does not involve negotiation of meaning (O'Dowd, 2012). Most often, researchers/teachers will ask one cultural group to write introductions of themselves (O'Dowd, 2003; Ware; 2005; Schenker, 2012) or build personal websites (Belz, 2002) to be used as selection criteria by the students of the other cultural group. Few studies, however, have analyzed the impact of self-introduction on subsequent intercultural discussion (Xia, 2012).

In this study, analysis of student-introduction posts and accompanying comments showed that the quality and quantity of students' writing varied across groups. Various linguistic and interactional strategies were identified in those students' posts who successfully managed to build and maintain friendships and engage in intercultural discussions. These strategies included self-disclosure; humor; code-switching; alignment; showing support, appreciation, interest, and concern; personal questions; displays of positive emotions; and the use of emoticons. All of these strategies revealed students' willingness to engage in meaningful relationships with each other (Byram, 1997). An important finding related to personal relationships occurred in group two, where the two active participants (Banan and Elizabeth) had a great amount of social and personal interaction but did not engage in

intercultural task-based discussions. According to Garrison and Anderson (2003), “while strong social presence does provide the basis for respectful questioning and critique, it doesn’t guarantee an optimally functioning community of inquiry” (p. 54). Instead, too much social interaction at a personal level encouraged superficial comments and social teasing and hindered deep intercultural discussion. Jin (2007) similarly found that one pair who built a hyper-personal relationship quickly was also not able to maintain intercultural discussions. Banan and Elizabeth's interest in being friends led them to avoid intercultural discussions that might involve disagreement. Other studies (Thorne, 2003), however, have shown how hyper-personal relationships have positive impacts on students' language learning. This might indicate that strong relationship bonds could be useful for language learning but not for intercultural learning, which requires questioning, disagreement, and confrontation. Therefore, I would suggest that, for successful intercultural encounters to take place, a balanced and valued rather than a strongly personal relationship is necessary.

Questioning Techniques

Asking personal questions encourages relationship building among students, which in turn serves as a catalyst for deep intercultural questions. Previous studies on telecollaboration report that a notable characteristics of successful groups is the use of a range of questioning techniques (Belz, 2001; Ware, 2005) that lead to prolonged discussions and multiple turn-taking. Similarly, in his identifications of successful groups, O'Dowd (2003) states that "students who wrote emails in which they asked questions which encouraged feedback and reflection from their partner were those who were able to establish intercultural rich electronic relationships" (p. 138).

In this study, I conducted a fine-grained analysis of students' questioning techniques not only by analyzing the frequency and type—as in Belz's (2005) and Ware's (2003) studies—but also the purpose of questions and the strategies used to ask these questions.

Analysis of frequency and type of question does not provide a fuller picture of students' questioning techniques, however. Instead, it showed that students across groups asked information-seeking questions more than information-checking and rhetorical questions, and more specifically, they asked “what” and “how” questions more frequently than any other category of question (why, opinion, etc.), which are considered to indicate the operation of discovery strategies in eliciting cultural information and allowing respondents to reflect on their own cultures (Belz, 2005). However, a deep analysis revealed that not all what/how questions aimed at eliciting cultural information. In group two, for instance, all what/how questions related to personal topics and social interaction (e.g. “How are you doing?” and “How is your week?”). Questions requiring “yes” or “no” responses tend to limit intercultural discussion, as they constrain respondents to choosing between only two options. In this study, however, I found that yes/no questions could lead to deep cultural interactions; therefore I analyzed the purpose as well as the linguistic and interactive strategies used, as these two phenomena seem to be as important as type and frequency of question.

Three main purposes for questions were identified: social interaction, personal, and task-related. An example of a social interaction question was, “How are you doing?” Questions like these did not require explicit answers; they were used to start new posts. Interestingly, they were only asked by Saudi students, which could reflect the “culture of use” (Thorne, 2003) of Facebook; Americans are more used to employing Facebook for social purposes (e.g., keeping in touch with friends, posting pictures, updating statuses) and tend not to start new threads with “how are you” types of question. Saudi students, on the other hand, access Facebook for different purposes: to play games, follow pages of interest, or be part of the Facebook trend. Consequently, they appear to associate Facebook posts with forum discussions or emails, both of which encourage longer written entries. It could also present

the Arabic tendency to ask about another person when first engaging with his or her as a sign of politeness (as opposed to being truly interested in the answers).

Questions related to personal topics play an important role in intercultural communication, as they reflect an interest in learning about another's personal life and a willingness to build a meaningful personal relationship. The purpose of this type of question does not seem apparent in previous studies, which used asynchronous communication media like email and discussion forums (Ware, 2003; Belz, 2005). In fact, one of the frustrations of the students in those studies was the lack of personal interaction. The Facebook environment encourages building personal relationships and stimulates personal questions, as will be discussed later. Here, I argue that students should be encouraged to spend the first two weeks learning about their partners instead of jumping in with culturally related questions. Establishing a strong interpersonal relationship appears to stimulate successful intercultural encounters, as discussed earlier.

The majority of questions asked in this study were task related, in which students called upon each other to reflect on their cultural practices and share their insights. Task-based questions also reflect the type of declarative knowledge gained by students. Analysis revealed that students used various types of information seeking questions (section 4.1.3.3); however, I suggest that successful questioning techniques relate less to the type of questions and more to how students assemble these questions with linguistic and interactive strategies before posing them. Several strategies were identified in students' questions including phrases that showed interest and curiosity, which consequently encouraged response and reflection, statements that mitigated the sensitivity of a topic, politeness features that indicated respect, encourage involvement through personal pronouns, and the mention/tag features of Facebook, sociocultural contexts that made questions understandable and relevant, and asking several questions with different types on the same topic or theme. All of these features

in some way or another recognized and respected the students' status and encouraged response and feedback. In a similar vein, weak questions lacked those strategies, tending to be vague and out of context, overly general, or too demanding for an immediate response (e.g. like asking a statistical question).

Engaging in dialogue

In 2007, O'Dowd provided an evaluation of his intensive work on telecollaboration, stating that "telecollaboration can contribute to the development of intercultural awareness when it contains a period of dialogue involving explicit comparisons of the two cultures and direct reaction to the submissions of others" (p. 147). Kramsch (1993) adds that not all interaction and dialogue lead to intercultural learning; it is when dialogue takes on other perspectives, hence new knowledge, that meaning is reconstructed.

Analysis of students' discourse revealed that through dialogue of rich points (Belz, 2007) between the two cultures, enabled students to demonstrate many components of Byram's (1997) ICC model and achieve critical cultural awareness. As has been discussed thoroughly in section (4.1.3.4), students were able to refer explicitly to their ideological values and perspectives (cultural awareness); interact with and mediate conflicting interpretations (skills of interpreting and relating); identify areas of misunderstanding between the two cultures (skills of interpreting and relating); show empathy and tolerance (attitude); and show interest in discovering other perspectives (attitude). Dialogue that promotes intercultural development is achieved through asking well-structured questions that call upon deep reflection and analysis (skills of discovery and interaction). Through such deep dialogue, students build knowledge about each other and construct new knowledge about their own cultures (knowledge).

Cultural Communication Style

The difference in communication styles between Arabs and Americans has a negative impact on the outcomes of exchanges. Several scholars have discussed the distinct perspectives on written and spoken language and the different understandings of effective communication styles between Arabs and Americans (Hall, 1976; Dodd, 1882; Zaharna, 1995). The simplistic view of culture that regards culture as homogenous has been recently described: Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) point out that “the assumption that a coherent "genre" or style" is characteristic of national cohorts is rarely interrogated” (p. 6) O'Dowd (2016) argues against overgeneralization, in which individual differences in interpersonal interactions are dismissed. He maintains that “the existence of culturally specific genres would appear to be at least one of the factors that contribute to how groups of learners interact" (p. 353). Even scholars who work on cultural frameworks and categorization are aware of the existence of individual differences, tendencies, and experiences which might "override any number of cultural generalities" (Zaharana, 1995, p. 253).

An implication of Hall's cultural framework is that a linguistically high-context culture (Arab) tends to place meaning on context; that is "most information is either [contained] in the physical context or internalized in the person while very little is in the [linguistic] code" (Hall, 1982, p. 18). Conversely, low-context culture (American) places meaning on the linguistic code; that is users of the language tend to convey meaning accurately and thoroughly via text (either spoken or written). In addition, Arab and American cultures are also classified in term of directness. The Arab communication style tends to be indirect and ambiguous compared to the American style, which preferences direct and clear communication. According to Levin (1985), Arabic style is also emotionally rich when the topic is personally connected to the writer or speaker. The focus in this cultural

communication context is "on emotional resonance with the audience" more than on the content (Zaharana, 1995, p. 250).

In this study, communication style does affect students' interactions as well as their understanding of one another—not in a way that causes severe clashes between two cultural groups (Belz, 2003; 2005, Ware and Kramersch, 2005; Thorne, 2003) but certainly in ways that impede the conveyance of a desired message. In episodes (e.g., extracts 13 and 14), where students were asked about declarative information that required clear knowledge about a topic and its history, or were required to explain an issue that they were emotionally attached to, Saudi students used English (since it was the language of interaction in this project) but conveyed the message in an Arabic style, which confused their American audience. For instance, Sana (extract 13) tries to explain what “tax” means in a Saudi context, but her comment is full of contextual clues that are not stated clearly in the text but rather contained in the physical context of her own mind. Her comment reflects that she is clearly unaware of this difference since when her American partner asks her for further explanation; her reply uses a similar style. Similarly, in Nouf’s (extract 14) response to her American partner regarding the reasons for associating a hijab with the word “weapon,” tries to convey the concept of protection, but her style is vague because it contains references to old Arabic literature and various emotional expressions rather than articulating a specific definition or articulating her personal reasons for wearing a hijab. Saudi students did not seem to have an issue with American writing styles, as all of them had an English education background (they had specialized in the English language for at least two years). Similar finding was reported in AlJamhor's (2005) study where American participants reported that some writings of the Saudis' participants were incomprehensible, not linguistically but pragmatically.

One issue of an online intercultural project is the assumption that students are completely familiar with their own cultures and can easily explain various aspects of their

cultural practices. In this study, students from both cultural groups approached the lack of knowledge about their own culture differently. American students were comfortable with stating, "I don't know" or "I have no answer for that." To them, such a response indicated that they were being clear, explicit, and honest. Saudi students, on the other hand, tend to be a bit conservative in confessing their lack of knowledge, as this could affect their sense of credibility in intercultural communications, in which, from their perspective, they are supposed to be knowledgeable "intercultural informants." In such a context, a Saudi student provided only a brief response that did not fully answer his or her American partner's question. Conflicts sometimes arose when Saudi students interpreted the "I don't know" response as Americans having shallow awareness of their own culture, influencing the Saudi students to form new stereotypes about American people. Ironically, their brief responses also communicated only shallow knowledge of their own culture.

Distinct communication styles between the two cultures did not lead to a severe clash of communication as discussed in previous studies (Belz, 2003, 2005; Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Thorne, 2003). This could be because the factors causing misunderstanding did not exist in the current study. For example, access to technology and the Internet did not seem to affect both groups as they all have access to the group page through their laptop and most of them via the Facebook app. Class requirement, which normally puts students under the stress of meeting course demands, was also not an issue here since all participation was voluntary. In addition, the academic calendar of the two institutions is almost the same. The Saudi university fall semester started one week later than at the American university, and the Thanksgiving holiday occurred at the same time as the Muslim Eid holiday.

Cultural Identity

Warschauer (2000) discusses how interacting in an online environment allowed students to explore their social and cultural identities as they "carve out online space for their

own language and culture" (p.65). In other words, in online intercultural communication, students' cultural and ethnic identities are amplified, especially when their image has been misrepresented in the target culture's mass media. O'Dowd (2003) similarly found that students from Spain perceived their online exchange as an opportunity to defend against stereotypes of their country and provide a correct impression of their culture.

Analysis of the data revealed how students, especially Saudi students, took control of their interactions in order to present their cultures accurately and to correct pre-existing misinterpretations held by their American peers. This approach is particularly notable in "types of knowledge" questions. For instance, most task-related questions asked by the Saudi students showed an interest in discovering Americans' perspectives on Saudi/Muslim cultural practices, focusing on how Americans thought about these practices rather than attempting to elicit information about the target culture. It can also be noted that there are a large references to Islamic teachings and how it relates to their practices and perspectives.

The American participants in this study are barely exposed to the culture and life of Saudi people. They have the opportunity to learn about Egyptian, Levantine, and Moroccan dialects but not about the Arabic Gulf or Saudi. Therefore, they were more interested in learning about aspects of Saudi culture than to learn about what their partners thought about them and their culture. Even though the two cultural groups had different interests and expectations, both served the same purpose, giving the Saudi students an opportunity to provide a correct depiction of their culture.

For Saudi students, this OIE project seemed to strengthen their sense of their own Islamic and cultural identity. In fact, this is a reflection of some of Saudi Policy of education objectives regarding English teaching; 6) to develop student's awareness about the cultural, economic, religious and social issues of his society and prepare him to participate in their solutions and 7) to develop the linguistic competence that enables students, in the future, to

present and explain Islamic concept and issues, and to participate in spreading Islam.

(AlHjaillan, 2003)

5.2.2 Facebook affordances in an OIE project

One of the core research questions was to explore Facebook affordances in an OIE project. To gain insight into students' participation within the Facebook social networking environment, I examined learners' practices in using various Facebook semiotic resources, as well as students' perceptions.

The results showed that, as in any online environment, a Facebook group offers both affordances and constraints. These results align with the majority of previous research on the potential use of Facebook (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Reinhardt and Ryu, 2013; Aoki, 2009; Alshehri; 2011; Blattner & Lomicka; Mills; 2011; Omar et al., 2011; Menan et al., 2012; Jin; 2015). Unlike the majority of Facebook-related research into affordances dealing specifically with an OIE project, this study thoroughly analyzed how students made use of Facebook semiotic resources and page design to make meaning.

Affordances

This study confirms McBrick's (2009) and Sykes and Holden's (2011) hypotheses concerning the validity of Facebook as a cultural and intercultural learning tool that facilitates interaction with native speakers. This study found that Facebook supports language learners' engagement with native speakers in predesigned telecollaborative tasks that aimed at promoting intercultural discussion. Three main Facebook affordances were identified; supporting engagement in intercultural discussion, facilitating collaboration, and promoting interpersonal relationships. First and foremost, multimodal posts and accompanying comments were used by students to engage in lengthy discussions that could combine text, images, links, and videos. The Facebook post and comments section, in fact, is one of main

features emphasized in language-learning literature. Mills (2011) found that students' posts and comments contributed to their engagement during a global simulation project. Similarly, Alshahri (2011) pointed out the rich nature of comments in which students shared pictures and videos to support their arguments and consequently engage each other. Likewise, this study explores how multimodal comments were also used to enrich intercultural discussions and explain unfamiliar cultural concepts and practices.

Blattner and Fiori (2011) discuss how students' observation of Facebook groups and analysis of language use could promote sociopragmatic uses of Spanish. I found in this study that linking students to popular FB group pages that discuss cultural issues globally was beneficial not only because of information contained in the pages themselves, but also because of the comments written by members of the target culture, which expose students to various perspectives concerning the particular cultures under discussion.

Notification feeds that keep others updated (Knobel and Lanksher, 2008) are another Facebook feature as it assists in connecting students to all activities that are going on in their group. In discussing Facebook's notification feed, Kent (2013) distinguishes between the push versus pull information approach, stating that "Facebook pushed information automatically to its users by sending alerts to either mobile phone or website while other tools like email or discussion forum, ones need to actively seek the information" (p. 55). This feature reduces the time gap inherent to online asynchronous environments that occurs between response postings and that was often associated with students' frustration with the waiting time for responses from their partners.

Facilitating collaboration is another affordance of Facebook identified in this study. Several studies have indicated the potential of Facebook for group work between students via the Facebook group page (de Villiers, 2010; Shih, 2011), allowing for collaborative work that is the essence of success in OIE project. In addition to the Group Page, I noticed that the

Facebook Create Page functionality also supports collaboration but is underexplored in the literature. One type of telecollaboration task often used in courses is a collaborative activity that requires students to produce a joint project. This kind of task involves planning, coordination, and negotiation among several individuals to reach agreement (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009). Usually, students will work on external platforms or sites to complete this task (Belz, 2003). In this study, students were able to complete a group activity using only Facebook resources, discussing how to build a Facebook page with their partners. Enabling this kind of sharing of multimodal resources with the possibility of making the page public to outsider audience made Create Page functionality a unique feature that other online environments don't provide.

The third key affordance identified is that Facebook promotes interpersonal relationships. Unlike other asynchronous computer-mediated communication tools used in telecollaboration (e.g., email, discussion forums, blogs) (Muller & Hartmen, 2000; Furstenberg et al, 2001; O'Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005; Schenker, 2011), Facebook resembles synchronous communication (texting, video conferencing), which is usually associated with its promotion of interpersonal relationships among members of various cultures (Thorne, 2003; Jin, 2007). Facebook's various channels of communication (asynchronous commenting and private messaging; synchronous texting), semi-automated features (emoticons, "like," and mention/tag), and friending combine to bring students closer (Jewitt, 2009). They increase students' online presence and sustain their friendships symbolically through being on their friend lists where they will be able keep in touch even if they are not actually interacting. Previous research on Facebook found that students were able to build relationships among group members regardless of whether they were classmates or had never met before (Mills, 2011; Alsaari, 2012; Omer et al, 2012). However, this study illuminates

the unique features of Facebook that afford students the opportunity to interact on a personal level and increase their presence to their partners.

Constraints

Gibson states that "affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (p. 127). Gibson's claim suggests that Facebook also imposes some constraints that might have limited students' participation in this study. The main two constraints identified in this study were Saudi students' preference for oral communication and negative reactions to refused friend requests.

Saudi students demonstrated a preference for oral over text-based communication. Thorne (2003) found that students saw email as not being the right tool for intercultural communication. In this study, Saudi students' expectations about intercultural communication caused them to favor live, interactive chats that would allow them to discuss, express, and explain their points of view more thoroughly and clearly. This preference might have stemmed from the general Arab preference for oral communication (Zahrana, 1995). Arabs have shown a preference for oral communication where the audience plays an important role in making meaning of a message by trying to understand "the meaning or gist rather than the actual content (Gold, 1988, p.170; as cited in Zahrana, 1995). Moreover, friending was not welcomed by all students equally, especially American students. The rejection of friend requests from partners affected student participation negatively, as they feel there is no mutual interest in being Facebook friends. Analysis of the data found that, except for one individual, all students in groups with low functionality did not friend each other. Finally, accessibility of Facebook through via its phone app was found to be a technological affordance that made group participation convenient anytime, anywhere. However, this accessibility also made some student participation a bit shallow.

Saudi and American use of Facebook semiotic resources

Findings also revealed that the Saudi students were more active in using Facebook semiotic resources than their American counterparts, as indicated through quantitative counts. Jewitt (2009) points out that using multimodal resources is socially and culturally situated. Similarly, Thorne (2003) argues that technologies are like any other cultural artifacts; their use varies across culture depending on individual experiences and histories with available tools. Saudi students are not active Facebook users; however, they are very active in other social network sites, such as Twitter and Instagram. They also, as indicated in the pre-survey, are used to using social network sites for language-learning purposes, and these usage habits might have been transferred to their Facebook groups.

Additionally, their preferred use of the semi-automated Facebook features might be a way to compensate for the limited nature of text-based communications. The American students' less frequent use of Facebook features could have been due to not being as aware of Facebook's educational possibilities (Blattner and Fiori, 2012); in other words, they tended to use Facebook features almost exclusively for social daily purposes.

Students Perceptions of Facebook Affordances

Students' perceptions of Facebook affordances were generally favorable. American students viewed the pedagogical, social, and technological affordances as predominantly positive. This could be due to their familiarity with Facebook features and convenience of access. Most Saudi students' perceptions of Facebook affordances were similarity positive; however, some Saudi students expressed uncertainty about or negativity toward some of the affordances. This finding, in fact, supports findings from the qualitative analysis of Facebook affordances and constraints, as most of the constraints are associated with the Saudi students. Many studies that explore students' attitudes and perceptions of Facebook have found that the majority of students viewed Facebook as a valid and engaging language learning tool

(Aoki,2009; Blattner & Fioris, 2009; Alshahri,2011; Mills, 2011; Jin, 2015; Reinhardt & Ryu, 2013).

5.3 Contributions of the study

With this study, I aim to contribute to the literature in the area of online intercultural exchange (telecollaboration). In the last two decades, a widespread interest has developed in investigating several issues concerning computer mediated intercultural exchange. One of these areas is the impact of OIE on language learners' intercultural competence (e.g. Muller & Hartman, 2000; Belz, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003; Schenker, 2011; Jin, 2015).

However, a remarkable gap in the literature is the scarcity of studies that link English language learners whose native language is Arabic with Arabic language learners whose native language is English (Aljamhour, 2005) with native speakers of English from the West, particularly the USA. There is a dire need to encourage intercultural communication between western and the Middle Eastern cultures to spread respect, peace and understanding of each other's cultural views. In this respect, this study is unique in its exploration of how an OIE project between Saudis (English language learners) and Americans (Arabic language learners) could contribute to/or impede the development of intercultural competence.

In addition, this study adds to the limited existing research that investigates the potential of Facebook in an OIE project. Previous analysis of Facebook use in OIE has not extended beyond exploring students' attitudes towards using Facebook in an OIE context. Leather and Van Dam (2003) noted that "whereas the new media can provide immensely rich learning environment, their potential for catalyzing fruitful peer interaction has been under explored" (p. 4). Following on this claim, this study employs a multimodal discourse analysis perspective to identify the affordances and constraints of Facebook tasks in an OIE project by analyzing student use and activities within the semiotic design and resources of Facebook.

The analysis offers implications on how effectively Facebook can be used for OIE in alignment with Facebook's affordances and constraints.

5.4 Limitations

Even though this study offers pedagogical and methodological contributions by expanding the discourse of intercultural communication to a rarely investigated context, Saudi Arabia, and less commonly taught language, Arabic as second language, the study has a number of limitations. First is the issue of generalizability. The results of this study are not generalizable to other contexts due to the nature of qualitative analysis as lacking internal validity and being vulnerable to researcher bias. I tried to manage this limitation by consulting with native speakers from both cultures to check my interpretations of unclear results arising during data analysis phase. Triangulation of data is another way to increase the validity of the study. I triangulated the analysis of students' online discourse with their interview and reflection. Second, because of the limited number (12 Americans and 14 Saudis) and exclusively female gender of the study participants, the results cannot be easily generalized.

Third, my role as researcher, designer, and facilitator of the OIE project has the advantage of having the students participate freely and not feel anxious about their teacher's observations and grades. However, not being a teacher for either cultural group limited the discourse of OIE that encourages classroom discussion. I tried to overcome this limitation by 1) conducting deep interviews with the participants and conducting a Facebook group tour; that is, I asked the participants before the interview to review their Facebook group page—and read their interaction so they could have it fresh in their mind. I also printed the group pages and brought them with me during the interview so I could show them episodes that I am interesting to know more about; 2) I asked student to write a final essay to reflect on their experience more deeply.

Finally, the lack of objective or subjective assessment of students' ICC before and after the project makes it impossible to confidently attribute their demonstration of ICC to their participation in the Facebook exchange. Future studies should take this assessment issue in consideration.

5.5 Implications

The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications. Analysis of the available data shows how the components of Byram's model are manifested linguistically in an OIE. This analysis could be used for teaching students how to carry on an effective intercultural communication online. Ware (2014) suggests that comments on OIE can be taught to students, but she cautions against prescribing or policing online interaction. Teachers also need to raise student awareness of various interactive and linguistic strategies and questioning techniques so students can be engaged in dialogue that encourages feedback and deep intercultural interactions.

Knowledge is an important domain for successful and beneficial intercultural exchange (Byram, 1997). However findings in this study showed that students struggled when they were asked questions that required deep factual information about their cultural practices or aspects. Kramsch (1993) point out that "students usually have ... little or no systematic knowledge about their membership in a given society and culture, nor do they have enough knowledge about the target culture to be able to interpret and synthesize the cultural phenomena presented" (p. 228). Therefore, for language learners to be better intercultural communicators, it is important to train them from an early stage to reflect on their own cultural practices. If this is not possible because of situational or course constraints, then a training session for the students on how to collect information and critically interpret it to convey it to foreign partners is necessary before embarking on an OIE project.

The study also has several implications regarding the use of online multimodal environments. Teachers need to be aware that each online environment offers certain affordances and constraints. Thus, telecollaborative task design needs to align with those affordances to leverage desired outcomes. For example, in this study, I found that Facebook affords students exposure to authentic texts beyond the Facebook group page, giving them additional opportunities to read through members' comments on popular Facebook pages and thus broadening the range of perspectives they were exposed to. Knowing this affordance, a teacher could design a task that engages students in a "wild intercultural communication" (Thorne, 2010).

Additionally, findings revealed that students, particularly Americans, were unaware of the educational potential of some of the semiotic resources and choices available on Facebook. As Blattner and Lomicka (2012) note, students are not necessarily aware of the great potential of social networking sites. They need guidance, overt instruction, and well-designed activities. The findings support this argument, as some students did not make use of features (like sharing pictures and links) that have great potential to enrich cultural discussion. Some students also used features that resonate with Byram's (1997) model. For instance, location sharing (which was only used once) could be a great tool for expanding the discussion on the geographical space of one's own and another's cultures (knowledge). Likewise, feeling-sharing—where learners can insert how they feel within their post (e.g. Feeling excited, feeling curious...etc.)—which was used only 3 times during this study provides opportunities for students to amplify their attitudes about the subjects they post on. Raising students' awareness of these affordances could empower their online intercultural discussions.

5.6 Suggestions for Future Research

This study suggested that OIE is beneficial and has the potential to contribute to the development of language learners' intercultural competence. It also proposed that Facebook is a powerful and valid online environment for an OIE project since Facebook offers three affordances central to intercultural learning: 1) supporting intercultural learning, 2) facilitating collaboration, and 3) prompting interpersonal relationship. Indeed, there are still many areas for further research that need to be explored.

The act of reflection

Previous studies on telecollaboration have emphasized the importance of students' reflecting on their interactions because this reflection "serves as a peeling away process, slowly unravelling the layers of meaning that are embedded in the interaction" (Ware, 2003, p. 344). In a similar vein, I found it very informative when students had to reflect and comment on some of their interaction episodes during the interview. Future studies could investigate student's reflections on a daily or weekly basis, along with their online discourse, during a project. On Facebook, each student could create a personal Facebook page for reflection which would be linked to his or her FB profile and avoid the need to use an external journaling or blogging platform.

Case studies to trace ICC development

This study employed content analysis to investigate the occurrence of ICC objectives as described in Byram's model. Future studies could focus on two or three groups as case studies and conduct thorough linguistic investigations using e.g. the appraisal theory (as conducted by Belz, 2003) to trace the development of ICC.

Oral and Written communication

This study shows that the majority of Saudi students expressed a preference for oral over written communication. Future OIE Facebook studies that involve Saudi students could examine the potential of including oral interaction tasks by using Facebook video calls (free

and Wi-Fi accessible), and assess whether their intercultural discussions differ from those using only text-based tasks.

Intercultural communication in the wild model

Hanna and de Nooy (2009) advocate an emerging model in the area of intercultural communication wherein they encourage student engagement in public discussion forums (Hanna and de Nooy, 2003) or multiplayer online games (Thorn, 2010). Facebook, as indicated in this study, affords an opportunity to similarly engage students using discussion forums. Many public Facebook pages promote global discussion of social and cultural issues. Future studies could investigate students' experiences participating in these environments, particularly in terms of the potential this participation has on developing students' ICC.

APPENDIX (A) PRE-SURVEY

Please fill out the following survey. You're honest and detailed responses will help in understanding your experience with the project.

General information

(1)

Name: _____

Major: _____

Age:

- 18-20
- 21-25
- More than 25, please specify

Is English your native language? (For Americans)

If not, what is your first language? (For Americans)

What is your language proficiency?

- Beginner
- Intermediate
- Advanced

Language learning and intercultural experience

How many years have you been studying Arabic/English?

- Less than one year
- 1-2 years
- 2-4 years
- More than 4 years, please specify

Where did you study Arabic/English? In your country, abroad, or both, please specify which country.

Do you have experience with cross-cultural encounter either in your country or abroad? If yes, please write about it.

Why are you studying Arabic/English?

- Liking the language.
- Better job opportunities.
- Enjoyment.
- Fulfilling a foreign language requirement.
- Liking the culture of that language.

- Continuing something I started.

What kind of activities do you participate in to use the target language outside the classroom?

- Watching movies or TV in target language.
- Using social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blog...etc.) to find people speaking the target language.
- Using the Internet to find target language websites.
- Reading target language books, magazine or stories.
- Talking in target language with friends/ relatives.
- Having a native speaker partner.

- Participating in clubs.

What are your expectations about the project?

- Improving language skills.
- Making friends from other culture.
- Learning about American culture.
- Other (please specify)

Social networking use and language learning

What social media do you use regularly? (E.g. Facebook, twitter, Instagram, Path...etc.)

Have you used Facebook or other social networking sites for learning the target language? not, why not?

- Yes
 - No
- If your answer was yes, would you please write about your experience?

Do you use the target language in social networking?

- Yes
- No

If yes, how often?

- Daily
- 2-3 Times a Week

- 2-3 Times a Month
- Less than Once a Month
- Once a Month
- Once a Week
- Never

Do you think Facebook or other social networking sites could be used for language and cultural learning? If so, how?

APPENDIX (B) POST-PROJECT SURVEY

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>Pedagogical Aspects</i>					
1. The interactive nature of Facebook made it a valid tool for intercultural exchange					
2. Being familiar with Facebook functionalities made me motivated and excited to participate in the project.					
3. The Facebook “update notification feeds” allowed me to get instant updates about my peers’ posts.					
4. Facebook allowed sharing resources in any formats that enriched the cultural discussion.					
5. The “editing function” helped me to edit my posts without deleting them					
6. The “ping translation” on Facebook helped me understand difficult words in my peers’ posts.					
7. Facebook’s “comment section” facilitated formal discussions as well as informal interactions					
8. The weekly tasks were well organized and relevant to real life language use					
9. Facebook’s functions that enabled us to work in groups and hence facilitated intercultural collaborative learning.					
10. With its “Create Page Function,” Facebook supports group projects.					
<i>Social Aspects</i>					
11. The Facebook group page was a safe environment for sharing ideas and resources.					
12. The Facebook group page provided a friendly environment for social interaction with peers					
13. The Facebook group page enabled us to communicate at our convenience					
14. The Facebook environment allowed me to share personal stories and images that enhanced friendship building with my peers.					
15. It was interesting to read others’					

opinions throughout the project.					
16. The “chat function” helped me to establish friendship with my partners.					
17.					
18. Waiting time for my peers’ replies was reasonable.					
19. I was comfortable to disagree with my peers.					
<i>Technological Aspects</i>					
20. The Facebook group pages enabled us to communicate at our convenience.					
21. The availability of the Facebook phone app made it easy to access the group page and engage in discussions.					
22. I didn’t have any technical problems when I used Facebook.					
23. It was easy to navigate through the Facebook interface.					
24. It was easy to start new posts and reply to others.					

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