

STRENGTHENING ONE'S SOCIO-CULTURAL SKILLS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE THROUGH VIDEO CONFERENCING

FORTALECIENDO HABILIDADES SOCIOCULTURALES EN UNA LENGUA EXTRANJERA A TRAVÉS DE VIDEO CONFERENCIA

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Abstract

The use of different technological aids in educational settings such as the video conferencing equipment has increased throughout the last years. This article reports the benefits that a group of twenty-four advanced in-training English as a Foreign Language teaching students at University of Costa Rica (UCR) have gained through their participation in the Global Classroom Project. This project, which was created by University of Nebraska at Lincoln back in 2005, started to be implemented at UCR, Western Site in 2010 and it aims to connect students from several countries synchronously through the use of video conferencing equipment to provide its participants an opportunity to discuss and exchange information on socio-cultural topics by using English as a tool of communication. Qualitative and quantitative techniques were applied to collect the data for the study. The research revealed that although UCR students reported high levels of anxiety during their participation in the project, they felt highly confident and motivated to take part in the project as they felt proud to present about Costa Rican culture to a group of college native-speakers of English. In terms of learning of vocabulary, the study revealed new words which students argue helped them to better understand the topics under study. Yet, the

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greatest benefit was the socio-cultural knowledge gained by the participants as they could confront the stereotypical views of the foreign language culture portrayed on mass media and redefine their views and perceptions based on the information provided by UNL students. Our hope is that as future EFL teachers, participating students from UCR will reproduce this way of learning socio-cultural aspects by using the English language as a vehicle of communication.

Key words: Global classroom; video conference; EFL; cultural learning, language teaching/learning.

Resumen

Este artículo reporta los beneficios que un grupo de veinticuatro estudiantes avanzados de enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera obtuvieron mediante su participación en el Proyecto Aula Global⁴, creado por la Universidad de Nebraska Lincoln, y el cual conecta sincrónicamente estudiantes de distintos países usando video conferencias. Técnicas cualitativas y cuantitativas se emplearon para recolectar la información. El conocimiento socio cultural obtenido por los participantes fue el mayor beneficio obtenido ya que se pudo confrontar las percepciones estereotípicas de la cultura del idioma extranjero presentadas en medios de comunicación masiva y redefinirlas basándose en la información proporcionada por los estudiantes internacionales.

Palabras claves: aula global; video conferencia; EFL; aprendizaje cultural; aprendizaje/enseñanza idiomas.

I. Introduction

Undoubtedly, computers and information technology have come to improve learning and teaching because of the many distance learning and web-based learning contexts

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which we have access to today (as argued by researchers such as Lee, 2003, Tapanes, Smith, and White, 2008, & Pop, 2010). Indeed, web-based technologies and Internet connections offer students and teachers the opportunity to access new trends to teach and to learn (Sarica & Cavus, 2009; Wang & Seungwon, 2013).

Nowadays, access to the Internet is found in most schools and homes around the world (Lim, Kim, Chen, & Ryder, 2008). Additionally, given that there is a large percentage of today's population who work part time or full time, online education has become very useful and popular, mainly because it offers students flexible schedules and independent study. Therefore, the Internet has become a subject of interest in educational institutions, and new practices such as the creation of digital libraries, online courses, and other ingenious ways to deliver instructional materials through virtual campuses have risen (Al-Asmari, 2005; Knutzen & Kennedy, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2013).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1990), online education availability, courses, and enrollment have increased rapidly since the 1990s, and steadily, colleges and universities are implementing online education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). For instance, a survey reported by Artino (2008) and which included 2500 US colleges and universities reported an increase in the number of institutions that offer online courses. In fact, he states that in the United States, that number doubled from 1.6 million 2002 to 3.5 million in 2006. Similarly, according to Silvio (2004), by 2004, around 62% of Latin-American universities had implemented online platforms to teach online courses. Yet, there is still doubt about the real percentage of teachers who actually use these platforms due to the undeniable load of work it takes to use them in terms of organizing, preparing, and finally teaching an online class.

In Costa Rica, several colleges and universities do incorporate web-based teaching-learning through online and distance learning programs (e.g., Universidad para la Paz -- University for Peace; Business School at University of Costa Rica; Fidelitas). Nonetheless, these programs are mostly offered by private colleges and universities, whereas public universities have few web-based learning programs and distance online learning, including: University of Costa Rica, Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica (Costa Rican Institute of Technology), Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica (National University of Costa Rica), and UNED (National Distance University). Furthermore, most of these distance learning programs consist of online courses wherein class activities are substituted for

tasks that can be conducted online⁵. Students are required to complete work online and to interact with classmates and teachers through online discussions. In such discussion, normally questions are posted and there is a question-answer sequence of communications through which students interact with one another under the guidance of the teacher; the instructor posts assignments, asks and answers questions, and leads the discussions. Some courses may also include live chat sessions, but by and large, these programs consist of instructor-led programs which are *asynchronous*.

Various results for and against the significance of computer-mediated teaching/learning have been reported. For instance, some studies have shown that computer mediated learning/teaching results in more equal participation among students (Warschauer, 1996). Furthermore, learning is more autonomous in that the learning process becomes more a responsibility of the learner as opposed to the case of traditional learning contexts wherein teachers oversee the teaching/learning process. Additionally, online learning implies more flexibility regarding the time and place where the teaching/learning process might take place⁶.

⁵ As reported online regarding academic programs at the University of Costa Rica, some programs therein include what is referred to as *live webcasts and archives*, namely, a virtual classroom scenario which employs live video and audio, and gives learners the chance to observe and discuss ideas with other online students, classroom students, and instructors. Since these courses are not synchronous, if a student misses a class, he/she can view it later.

Other universities such as Universidad para la Co-operacion Internacional (University for International Co-operation) in Costa Rica offer *self-paced* courses in which students are given the opportunity to commence and complete courses at their own pace and all course materials are available online to be reviewed at the time which is most convenient for the learner. These programs are most suitable for students who hold part- or full-time jobs.

Finally, *blended/hybrid learning* courses at universities such as UCR combine face-to-face instruction with online discussions, quizzes, and other activities. The proportion of face-to-face and online meetings varies from class to class.

⁶ Despite the clear possible benefits in the use of computer-based learning and teaching, it is fair to refer on aspects that should be taken into account when discussing online teaching and learning. As stated by Rovai and Jordan (2014), for instance, online courses are not necessarily the best option for *all* students and faculty. Similarly, Collins (1999, cited in Rovai & Jordan, 2014) argues that student and teachers have different ways of reacting to technology, and it can go from excitement to deep fear. Abrahamson (1999, also cited by Rovai & Jordan, 2014), “reported that distance education required students who were self-regulated and independent” (p.3). Likewise, some researchers justly warn that Internet classrooms shall come to

Researchers such as Brustein (2007) argue that in order to respond to today's globalized world, "it is essential that our institutions of higher education graduate globally competent students" (p.382); that is, students who can work effectively in international settings, who are aware of the need to adapt to various cultural contexts, who are familiar with the main tendencies in global change and the issues implied therein, and who are capable of communicating across cultural and linguistic barriers; without this, our graduates would be unable to succeed in today's global market. This researcher even argues that, "there is a great demand for globally competent workers who possess the skills to transcend cultural barriers and work together in global teams" (p.384). He insists that "foreign language proficiency is a necessary component of global competence" and that "if our institutions are to become globally competent, foreign language preparation must *extend beyond students matriculating in our departments of foreign languages and literature* [emphasis added]" (p. 390).

To achieve global professionals, one option is to travel and live overseas, but in the United States, only 3% of college students participate in education abroad per year (Brustein, 2007). In fact, some of the challenges which prevent today's societies from achieving a globalized educational system are financial issues, as paying for study-abroad programs is not only expensive but difficult to coordinate, because it involves students' integration into campus life, expensive health and life insurance fees, among many other variables.

One could argue that given the lower per-capita income which most countries around the world experience, as compared to that in the United States, the use of computer-based education is a necessity to provide a large number of college graduates with abroad cultural and language experiences in case they are unable to afford moving to another country where they can learn not only a foreign language but also gain a foreign view of the world. As stated by Brustein, "if we are to achieve global competence, then we are obliged to internationalize the educational experience no matter the discipline" (p.385). International education will not only internationalize teaching and research; "it will build interdisciplinary bridges across our campus and international linkages to scholars" (Brustrein, 2007; p.387) outside a specific university. In sum, internationalizing education

complement instead of replacing traditional classroom teaching (e.g., Graham, McNeit, & Pettiford, 2000; Posey, Burges, Eason, & Jones, 2010; Chengjie, 2015).

could easily be achieved through computer-based teaching/learning, and faculty as well as students would obtain clear benefits from such educational settings.

Although no studies report on the number of Costa Rican college students who study abroad, given the issues described above, one could predict that it is very small. Regarding the teaching and learning of foreign languages, fortunately (as stated by Warschauer, 1996), in the 1980s, a desire to provide L2 learners with authentic native speech, exposure to real cultural experiences, and new language skills has emerged (as also argued in Paramskas, 1993). In this article, we argue that this goal can more easily and effectively be achieved through computer-based teaching/learning initiatives like the Global Classroom (described in more detail in Section II below)⁷.

In this project referred to as the Global Classroom Project, advanced in-training English as Foreign Language students from the University of Costa Rica (UCR), Western Campus and students from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, (UNL) of comparable ages take part in *synchronous* video conference sessions wherein they give academic presentations on topics related to their culture. These topics are suggested by the students themselves, based on their own interests. Through such live sessions carried out once a week, students from UCR and UNL work in small sub-groups and give formal presentations on a given topic to teach students from the other country about their own culture. After each presentation, students from both countries have the opportunity to make comments and ask questions on the target topics live. In this way, the English Teaching Major students from UCR not only get to improve their English proficiency level in that they must research on the target topic, prepare formal presentations, present, and answer questions on it in the target language, but they get to learn about topics of interest, interact with native speakers and non-native speakers from various countries enrolled at UNL, ask and answer questions, and live a unique experience of interacting with a large group on English-speaking peers in another country synchronously without having to travel abroad to do so.

⁷ Nevertheless, in order to successfully implement any computer-based teaching/learning initiatives, teachers shall be prepared to comprehend and use current technology and be familiar with theories such as Computer Assisted Language Learning Theory (CALL; Godwin-Jones, 2002).

II. A closer look at key issues related to computer-based teaching/learning

A. Computer-Based learning defined

Lee (2003) defines an Internet classroom as a software system that makes use of computer mediated communication facilities and which includes features such as “a notice board for announcements, class list/ - registration/list; mark books; conferencing facility; messenger for staff-student and student-student communication; chat rooms for group discussions and collaboration; assessed work assignments for posting essay questions; quizzes, and mock exam papers; document postings links to other Internet pages” (p. 67). Bulletin boards, newsgroups, email, computer conference systems, homepages on the World Wide Web, among others, are also included in what we call Computer Mediated Communication (CMC; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997).

Furthermore, Perveen (2016) points out that online learning environments might include three modalities: *synchronous*, *asynchronous*, and *hybrid* environments. Synchronous interaction requires that all participants be present simultaneously for communication to take place, fostering the incorporation of what is called *activities*; *these refer to* “frameworks for enabling active and participative online learning by individuals and groups” (Salomon, n.d.). This lead to a student-centered environment which, at the same time can be used by an instructor of any field of expertise. For instance, video-conferencing, used in this research project, is a synchronous communication system which transmits video images between two or more sites. *Asynchronous* communication includes “electronic e-mail, topic oriented mailing lists, electronic bulletin boards, and computer conferences” (Jarrel & Barthe, 1986; p. 184). In the case of *hybrid environments*, both synchronous and asynchronous activities take place. For example, in the Global Classroom reported in this article, after each presentation, students were asked to post their Power Point presentation on a Facebook group page, and whoever wanted to ask additional questions was free to do so, as described in detail in section III. In this case, the Global Classroom project created a synchronous environment, making it a hybrid communication system.

B. Benefits of online learning/teaching

As pointed out in the introduction, several benefits have been emphasized in the use of online learning and teaching; the main ones are listed below:

1. Self-regulated learning

While traditional teaching classrooms imply direct guidance and instruction, Jonassen et al. (1995, cited by Puzziferro, 2008) suggest that the necessity for self-regulation in online learning environments may be even more important than in the traditional environment because of the less active role of the teacher. Online courses entail a high degree of peer interaction and teamwork, which requires more proactive and self-directed involvement on the part of individual learners. Learners must access the course independently and structure the time, pace, and strategy of their own learning processes (p.74)”

This entails taking more responsibility and discipline for management and control of one’s own academic progress (as suggested by Daggaght & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005). In fact, Artino asserts that, “you may say that online learning, as a mode of instruction, shifts control from the instructor to the learner” (p.38). Self-regulated learning is defined as “self-generated thoughts, feelings, strategies, and behaviours, which are oriented toward the attainment of goals” (Zimmerman, 2000: p.14). Self-learning implies a constructivist assumption, as learners construct their own meanings, strategies, and goals.

Lim et al. (2008) describe self-regulated learners as “active participants who efficiently control their own learning experiences in many ways, including establishing productive work environments and using resources effectively; organizing and rehearsing information to be learned; seeking help when they do not understand; and holding positive motivational beliefs about their capabilities” (p.39). These beliefs lead to greater academic success, enhanced overall satisfaction, more likability to enroll in online courses in the future, and enhanced academic achievement (as demonstrated in studies by Artino, 2007; Lee, 2003; Lim, 2001; Bell & Akroyd, 2002; Hsu, 1997, among others).

2. Development of critical thinking and more commitment

Artino and Stephens (2007) report a higher *degree in the use of critical thinking and lower degrees of procrastination* in graduate students enrolled in online courses, as compared to undergraduate students. Similarly, Richardson and Newby (2006) describe a *higher propensity in the use of surface processing strategies and motives*, which were

evidenced in audients' focus on essentials such as rote learning and meeting requirements minimally. Duffy, Dueber, and Hawley (1998; reported in Kyong, 2005) claim that allowing students more time to process answers for different tasks fosters "in depth information processing and critical thinking" (p. 337).

3. Higher level of self-control

Similarly, Lim et al. (2008) point out that learners evidence higher control, higher degree of monitoring, and higher degree of regulation in their own cognition, motivation, and behavior. This author refers to three phases in self-regulation: 1) forethought (i.e., defining goals), 2) performance, and 3) self-reflection (i.e., assessment of one's own performance).

In fact, in a regular class conference, for instance, students must use writing to provide their opinions on a given subject matter. In order to participate in these conferences, students must not only research so that their opinions are well-supported; they also must make an effort to use grammatically correct formal language, unlike they would do in a live interaction.

4. More flexibility regarding where activities take place as well as schedules

Online learning/teaching additionally might imply asynchronous learning; that is, learning contexts which go beyond the classroom. Through this modality, students additionally learn by means of active involvement, and they make informed and intellectual contributions to the discussion by *taking time to think over their ideas* and, hopefully, do additional reading on the assigned topic (Laurilland, 1993); i.e., they are not restricted by time as they would be in a regular classroom setting.

Furthermore, individuals are no longer restricted to interact with people from their own cultural group but can interact with people from other locations around the globe. Being able to interact with individuals from other cultures is vital in that, as stated by Davison and De Vreede (2001), "the opportunity to learn from people in different cultures is inestimable, as all too often these people bring their own insights, and values to bear upon the task context". (p.69)

Finally, as reported by Kyong-Jee, Shijuan, and Curtis (2005), based on a study conducted with MBA students where asked about their perceptions of online courses,

flexibility of schedule is one of the main benefits of online classes. These students who were mostly young adults with full time jobs and families found having the option of choosing the right time to engage in the online platform a real stress reliever, feature which is often times the only reason for adults not to pursue higher studies.

5. *More balanced student participation*

According to Warschuer (1986), “computer-mediated communication features more balanced participation” (p.1) as compared to face-to-face communication in which one or two students tend to have control of discussions. This author additionally argues that students who tend to participate less in regular classes are often more accepted in online learning contexts (e.g., women, lower status group members, etc.).

6. *Collaborative teaching/learning*

Tannock (2008) adds that online courses might involve *collaborative teaching*; this is an effective technique as “educators pool their talents” (p.1), and this type of teaching/learning is inclusive given that “educators who seek opportunities to extend their skills through the acceptance of the perspectives of other professionals and interested participants are able to enhance the lessons and activities to address a multitude of learning needs” (p.2). Furthermore, bringing together experience and unique training strategies allows for talent to grow and responsibilities on the part of teachers is shared.

7. *Aids Foreign/Second Language Learning*

As stated by Knutzen and Kennedy (2012), Second (or Foreign) Language Learning in a traditional environment (i.e., in a classroom) is characterized by students’ oral *incompetence* despite being knowledgeable about the target language grammatical structure and vocabulary. On-line teaching/learning of a Foreign Language allows for teacher-student, student-student, and native-non-native interaction; the latter is normally impossible in Foreign Language contexts in which it might be difficult or perhaps impossible to come across native speakers of the target language for students to interact with on a regular basis to improve their language skills as well as their knowledge and understanding of the target culture. This task can easily be achieved through online teaching/learning projects in a way that many language learners can benefit without having to travel abroad to the target country to practice the target language; it is hence an economical manner to expose non-native students to native speakers from anywhere in

the world. Although chat meetings are not thought of as a component of Foreign Language teaching and learning *per se*, they “offer insight into the use of informal language and a conversational manner” (p.90).

Despite all the benefits pointed out on the use of online teaching and learning, it shall be highlighted that various problems have been pointed out, as well (see for example, Graham, McNeit, & Pettiford, 2000; Zhang, 2005; Zhao et al, 2005⁸)

C. Video Conferencing

Computer conferencing began to be used in academic settings in the 1980s (Warschauer, 1986). It was predicted that video conferencing would eventually have a dramatic impact on group communication. “Computer-based systems were developed primarily to facilitate group communication among people who are geographically dispersed” (Jerrel & Barrett, 1986; p.185). According to Ludwig, Lauwers, Lantz, Burnett, and Burns (1999), video conferencing was created as “computer based systems enhancing collaboration between and among individuals who are separated by distance and/or time” (p.1). Furthermore, they argue that the main goal of this tool is to replicate “to the maximum extent possible, the full range, level and intensity of interpersonal communication and information sharing which would occur if all the participants were together in the same room” (p. 1).

C.1. The Global Classroom Project

The Global Classroom Project was proposed by Professor Charles Braithwaite, Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln in 200. It relies on commercial Internet to have live synchronous video classes between UNL and countries around the world, including Russia, China, Japan, Turkey,

⁸ For instance, Artino (2008) argues that in online learning students are deprived from traditional classroom cues such as facial gestures and non-attendance; therefore, a diagnostic shall be used to assess students’ ability to use effective Self-regulating Learning. Similarly, authors such as Ferrera, Brenner, and Whittermore, 1991 and Chun, 1994 claim that the use of electronic communication as a tool to teach/learn a second language does not accurately correspond to natural discourse. One could add that online teaching/learning additionally demands more responsibility and time on the part of both teachers and students. Furthermore, access to network PCs is necessary as well as fast Internet connections. Mediation is also necessary to guarantee that students remain engaged and that discussions be focused and fruitful, not trivial.

and Costa Rica. Starting in 2010, students from UNL Lincoln and UCR, Western Campus have had classes via video conference wherein they design academic presentations on culture and social topics and hence get to exchange knowledge and questions on the target topics live from their classroom settings in their own country; in other words, they get the chance to interact in an academic college setting in real time with students of comparable ages.

III. The Global Classroom Project at UCR, Western Campus

III.1. Setting, history of the project, and participants

As stated earlier, this study involves two sites: The University of Costa Rica, Western Campus and the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Specifically, advanced students enrolled in the Bachelor's and Licenciatura Program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language offered at UCR, Western Campus and students enrolled in the course on Intercultural Communication at University of Nebraska-Lincoln have taken part of this project since 2010.

The Study Program at UCR, Western Campus, comprises six courses whose focus is specifically on developing oral skills in the English language. Through so called Oral Communication courses (in total, six Oral Communication courses are required throughout the Study Program), students engage in various activities directed mainly by non-native speaking teachers. They are trained on gradually but significantly improving their oral production skills on various topics as they move from beginning to more advanced courses; by the time they reach Oral Communication VI, the highest conversational level, these students are required to use advanced academic skills to give oral presentations on various topics by providing scientific evidence, statistical information, clear thorough arguments, examples, great public speaking skills, among others. Complementary courses reinforce listening, grammar, and writing skills, which give students additional tools to succeed in these oral communication courses. These courses are content-based, and the textbooks used at each level are revised and updated on a term basis (i.e., twice a year) to ensure their relevance for students. Nonetheless, students rarely get the opportunity to interact with native speakers in the classroom.

There is one native-speaking faculty member, though she does not always teach these conversational courses. The rest of the staff members who teach oral

communication courses at UCR do possess high proficiency levels in the English language and they hold at least a Master's degree in TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language). Furthermore, these teachers normally participate in updating workshops and trainings on ESL, conduct research, and publish on various issues related to the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (i.e., error correction, collaborative, learning, English literature, teaching writing, action research, language acquisition, technology in the classroom, among many others).

Staff members within the major additionally get to travel to conferences around the world to either present their findings from research or to learn about new teaching techniques and the like. The majority of students, in contrast, do not have the opportunity to travel abroad for academic or tourist purposes, as most come from low-income families and rely on full scholarships to pursue their college studies. In fact, since the Global Program was implemented, back in 2010, students from the major have had the opportunity to travel to the United States to enroll in college-level courses and interact with native speakers as well as to learn from the culture in situ with support from UCR through academic exchange programs or through alliances with organizations such as the UGRAD program sponsored by the United States Embassy through its Culture and Educational Center; all of them have been able to do so through scholarship programs. Hence, by and large, students learn the English language and culture via textbooks and other audio-visual materials available at the language laboratory, on cable television, or online. It is true that these students have access to television programs where they get to listen to native English; these might be accessed through cable or satellite television or through the Internet. Furthermore, given the great advancements in technology, nowadays they have access to a great array of sources on which they can listen to native English spoken around the world.

Despite these clear opportunities to improve mainly their listening skills and vocabulary, these students, all of whom will be certified to be English teachers themselves upon graduating from the Study Program, rarely have the opportunity to interact with English native college-level students on academic topics which might help them improve their overall English proficiency level, especially their knowledge about the target culture.

In 2010, upon a visit conducted by one of the researchers to UNL, the idea to incorporate UCR students in the Global Classroom arose, and since then, after receiving the proper training on the use of the required video conferencing equipment by UNL

experts who traveled to the UCR site, the experience began. During the second semester of each school year, at least one group of Costa Rican students enrolled primarily in advanced oral communication courses has been part of live video conference lessons in which they have presented on various topics related to socio-cultural matters of their choice. To do so, students are given specific directions regarding the ways in which the presentations shall be designed using Microsoft Power Point, the quality of the presentations, the type of information which shall be included (i.e., definitions, statistical evidence, pictures, etc.). One teacher has normally been the head teacher in Costa Rica and she has coordinated with the director of the Program at UNL, professor Charles Braithwaite, as well as the cooperating teachers. They organize and schedule the activities and settle on the number of topics to be presented on, the number of students per group, the time to be devoted on each presentation, the time that would be devoted to questions and the expectations from participating students and staff, as well as how to deal with technical difficulties such as poor internet connection.

Given the positive perception which participating teachers and students continued to express regarding this experience, in 2015 the project was officially subscribed as a research project with the objective of demonstrating with qualitative and quantitative data the true benefits which it has brought about. The goal was also to specifically show the skills which students argue get strengthened the most as well as to evidence possible areas in which the project could be improved.

Twenty-four students enrolled the high-intermediate level course, IO5440, Oral Communication VI, at UCR- San Ramon Regional Campus, as well as 22 students enrolled in the course on Intercultural Communication at University of Nebraska-Lincoln (20 native-English speakers and 2 non-native speakers) constituted the participants. In addition, the head teacher of the course in Costa Rica, the head teacher in the course at UNL and one researcher participated in this course during the II semester, 2015. The data reported on in this article were collected to assess the ways in which learning or improvement of specific language and cultural skills were reinforced in the Costa Rican students and hence, only the UCR students constitute the active subjects of the study.

IX. Methodology

Instruments used

Three different instruments were applied: 1. An instrument to assess students' individual rating regarding confidence, motivation, participation, and anxiety as presenters in this project. 2. An instrument to evidence the learning of vocabulary new to Costa Rican students for each topic. 3. An instrument with open questions about new cultural information regarding each topic.

Unfortunately, although participating students were given the instruments in each session, some skipped class or simply did not answer some of the questions and thus, the data collected was not as thorough nor as much as expected. We believe that, given that the instruments were designed in English, students' target language, it is possible that they hesitated to provide long answers to avoid committing grammar mistakes. Overall, nonetheless, the data collected suffices to show the potential which the project has for participating UCR students, as shall be seen in the next section.

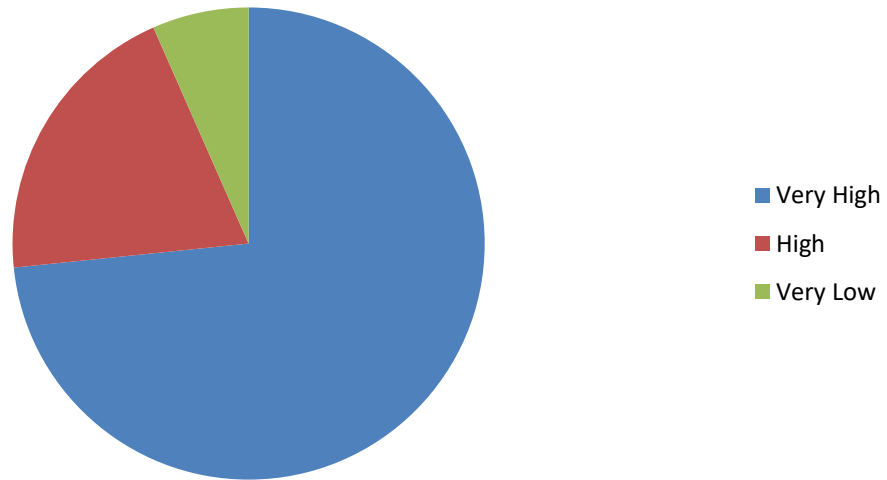
X. Results from the Data Analysis

The results of the data collected firstly show students' undeniable satisfaction with being part of this project and summarizes their reactions towards the experience. The data additionally evidences the ways in which this experience helped the participating students from UCR improve their English vocabulary and cultural knowledge.

1. Students' confidence and motivation

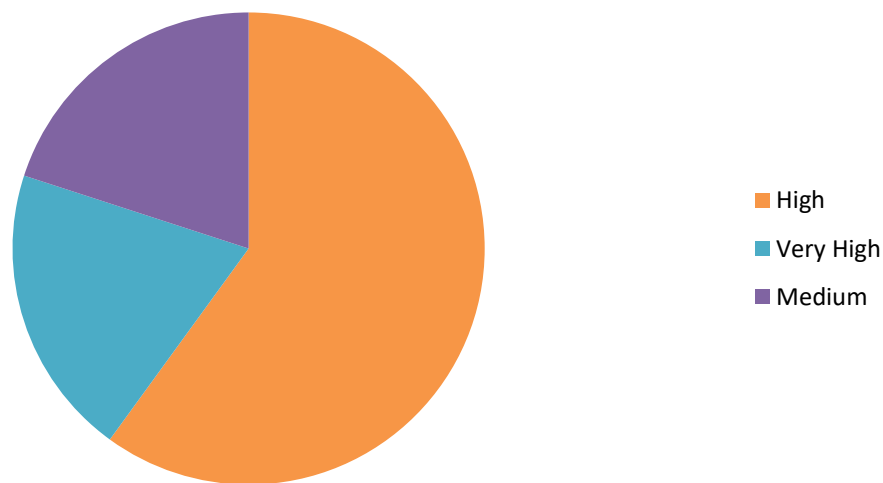
When asked about their experience in the use of video conferencing to give a formal presentation to their peers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Costa Rican students' opinions were quite optimistic, as shown in the graphs below.

Graph #1: Level of Motivation reported by UCR students.



It is evident, as shown in Graph #1, that the majority of participating UCR students felt motivated as part of this project. This was a new experience for them and hence it is not surprising that they were excited to take part of this project. Additionally, the opportunity to give a formal presentation to a group of American students was, more than a challenge, an opportunity for the Costa Rican students to interact, share their culture, and receive feedback from native speakers *in situ*. Recall that these students do not have the chance to interact with native speakers of comparable ages in an academic setting, ever. This was a one-of-a-kind experience for them whereby they got the opportunity to interact with peers on topics of their choice so as to exchange information, ask questions, and learn beyond what they could through the media; interaction took place synchronously and this was undoubtedly exciting to them.

Graph #2: Rating of level of Confidence by UCR students.

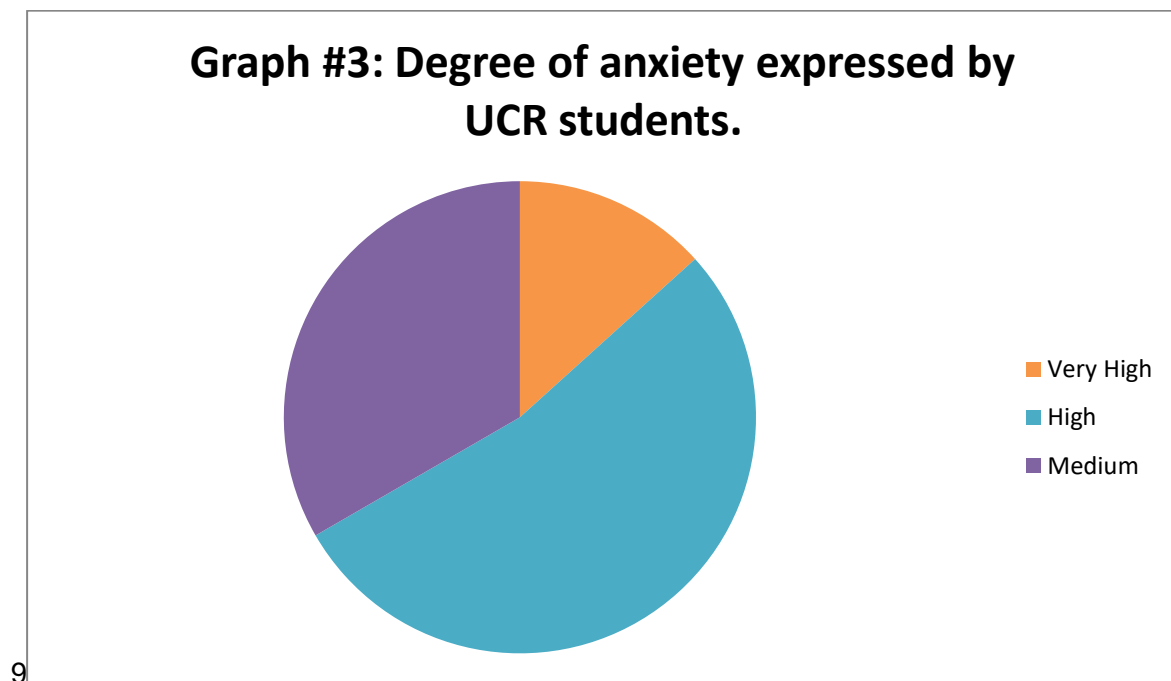


Furthermore, as clearly seen in Graph 2, of the total 15 UCR students who responded to this instrument, 80% state having felt very confident in their presentations. Even though this was a new experience to them in that they had never participated in video conferences before, nor had they given oral presentations to a group of college native-speakers of English, the students had plenty of time to prepare for each presentation and the slides for each presentation were proof-read by the head teacher beforehand. In other words, being able to prepare in advanced might explain their level of confidence while giving a 20-minute presentation in their target language.

Overall, Graphs 1 and 2 point to the fact that being part of this Global Classroom project with students from another country is very positive because, despite the fact that it is a new experience for 100% of UCR students, which might have caused low levels of confidence and motivation and even poor participation, was rated very positively by the responding participants. We would argue that even though presenting in this new virtual set-up required a great degree of dedication, responsibility, commitment, and academic formalism from the UCR students, they were greatly satisfied with their individual level of confidence, motivation, and participation as presenters.

As stated above, we shall insist that these optimistic results are most likely due to it being a unique experience in which UCR students had the opportunity to present well-supported arguments and data on topics *of their interest*, for they themselves selected the topics to be presented. Furthermore, given the fact that the chosen topics were about the Costa Rican culture and society at large, UCR students most likely felt identified and even proud to research and present about each topic. Lastly, the opportunity to share information with a group of native English-speaking students in an academic setting for the first time, might have been enough of a motivating factor for the UCR students to enjoy the experience as exclusive.

Notwithstanding, when asked about their overall anxiety as presenters, a large percentage of the students affirmed feeling very highly or highly anxious, as illustrated in Graph #3.



The high rate of anxiety reported by students is not surprising given at least the following four facts: 1. students are asked to give a formal academic presentation in their non-native language, namely English, 2. They are required to use new technology to present, which requires different skills such as their ability to pay close attention to eye contact,

pitch, and body language. 3. They have to present before native speakers of English, their non-native language, in another country. 4. They were being evaluated by the head teacher as part of their course grade.

2. Learning of new vocabulary

In each session, participating students were asked to list the new words which they learned from the presentations by UNL students and which helped them thoroughly understand the target topics. Only the words and/or phrases that at least 4 students agreed on as being new are listed below from the most to the least common. The reason for this decision was that if multiple students argued to have learned the same word, that word was truly new to them and it was key in understanding the target topic. The number in parenthesis indicates the number of times which each word was listed as new by the participating students. The meanings given in the right column are those provided by the students themselves, based on the presentations.

TABLE #1: New Words/ phrases reported by UCR students.	
New Word/ Phrase	Meaning
Catfish (10)	A person that sets up a false personal profile on a social network.
Pumpkin Spice Latte (7)	A coffee drink made with a mix of traditional fall spice flavors (cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove), steamed milk, vanilla syrup and espresso, topped with whipped cream and pumpkin pie spice.
Melting Pot (6)	A place (such as a city or country) where different types of people live together and gradually create one community.
Dress Code (5)	A set of rules about what clothing may and may not be worn at a school, office, restaurant, etc.
Grade School (5)	Elementary School
Sororities (5)	Organizations of female students at U.S. colleges
Online streaming (5)	Listening to music or watching video in 'real time', instead of downloading a file onto one's computer and watching it later.
Tailgate party (4)	A social event held on and around the open tailgate of a car or truck. Tailgating often involves consuming alcoholic beverages and grilling food. Tailgate parties occur in the parking lots at

	stadiums and arenas, before and occasionally after games and concerts.
Frown upon (4)	To view with disapproval.
Scholastic aptitude test (SAT) (4)	A test that purportedly measures the aptitude of high-schoolers for college, like the admissions test applied at UCR colleges.
Sophomore (4)	Student in the second year of high or college.
Community College (4)	A school that you go to after high school, which offers courses leading to an associate's degree.
Blackout (4)	A period when lights are off because of an electrical power failure.

In addition to listing these words, students were asked to provide a definition as to show their understanding of each term in the target context and to write a sentence to illustrate the use of the phrase in context. Nonetheless, the instrument unfortunately does not necessarily reveal meaningful learning of these items, as students were not tested on their use of such items in real communication settings afterwards, nor were they tested on their long-term knowledge of such words. Additionally, the number of new items reported is shorter than expected; this might be attributed to students focusing more on the actual synchronous presentations, the new information given, understanding of the foreign language through video conferencing, and their struggle to get the gist of each presentation, failing to write down *in situ* the new words and phrases, as requested. Most importantly, the students from UNL presented on topics similar to those presented by the UCR students and hence, they had to search for new words to include in their own presentations; that is, learning of new words might have taken place before each presentation as students prepared their own presentations. As a result, the number of words which student reported as new was less than we had expected given that they participated in 6 sessions altogether.

3. Cultural knowledge obtained

Participating UCR students were asked to list and describe any information on cultural matters which they were surprised to hear about during the UNL students' presentations. To us, this constitutes the key contribution of this experience, as students

point out characteristics which they perceive as surprising or new. Recall that the main source from which our students get to learn about the American culture is through the media, and the things portrayed therein regarding many social issues are normally stereotypes; the Global Classroom Project gives them the chance to either reinforce the things which they know or to realize that things might be different from what they thought.

The results are presented on a per-topic basis and students' opinions are complemented with their comments on a Facebook group which was created to give students the chance to make any comments or ask any additional questions on the target topics after the live video conference sessions took place: all students from the UNL course as well as all participating students from UCR were part of this group. The goal in creating this group was as a complement given that each session only lasted 75 minutes and that in each session, at least two groups presented (1 UNL group and 1 UCR group; formal presentations were between 20 and 25 minutes each, and presentations were given *in situ* at each video conference session⁹); hence, not much time was left for discussion at the end. If students had any additional comments or questions on each topic, they were encouraged to upload them onto the Facebook group as to continue the discussion beyond the class session.

A. *Holidays and Traditions*

When asked about American holidays and traditions, the majority of UCR students stated that the information presented by UNL students was not all that new. However, they stressed being surprised about the fact that most holidays are spent *with the family* and that Americans enjoy spending time with their families as much as Costa Ricans do. The Costa Rican students also noticed that American students felt very proud when talking about their traditions and about how they celebrate holidays¹⁰. Additionally, the Costa

⁹ Nonetheless, we shall point out that the UCR students were required to send their presentations to their head teacher beforehand for her to check content, word choice, punctuation, format, and grammatical structure. Once approved by the teacher and revised, each Power Point presentation was uploaded to the Facebook page for the UNL students to have access to at least three days before it was due in class; this was done to give UNL students time to be prepared for each presentation and to think about possible questions to ask. Although UNL students were also asked to upload their presentations beforehand for UCR students to read them and look up new words or think of possible questions to ask, they did not always post them on time.

¹⁰ In contrast, in Costa Rica Independence Day is not seen as a Holiday to be celebrated with family; it is normally only celebrated by schools throughout the country, and parades of marching bands from most

Rican students were amazed that, to the Americans, one of the most meaningful holidays is the Fourth of July (Independence Day), which, too, is celebrated in families. Finally, the students reportedly learned new terms that allowed them to better understand American traditions such as college life and family life (e.g., sororities, fraternities, melting pot).

On the topic of *traditions*, the Costa Rican students described several college practices reported by the UNL students and which were new to them. Specifically, they learned about the difference between *sororities* and *fraternities* as well as about the importance which these organizations have in American colleges (in Costa Rica, no such organizations are found). Furthermore, they reported learning about the traditions held in college which involve lots of drinking and partying. Another college practice which UCR students learned from UNL students was their custom of watching the Super Bowl and the relevance of the commercials as well as the activities performed during the half-time presented during this sports event (here, for instance they report having learned the phrase *tailgating*).

Finally, UCR students reported having learned about the meaning of *melting pot* and why UNL students constantly referred to it (i.e., the United states is multi-cultural, as it consists of a mixture of cultures and traditions that enrich the so called American culture)¹¹.

B. Social Media

When asked about the similarities and differences regarding the role of social media in the United States and in Costa Rica, the UCR students pointed out mainly similarities such as:

1. Both countries use it as a marketing tool mainly.
2. It is used to communicate with others, to meet new people, and for entertainment.
3. Both countries use the same social networks such as *Facebook* and *twitter*.
4. Both groups of students agree that social media affects family ties, it shows false profiles, and creates addiction among users.
5. Costa Ricans produce less films than Americans do.

schools and high schools are held in most towns wherein children and teenagers march and dance and relatives come to see them perform.

¹¹ In contrast, the Costa Rican culture is thought of as mainly being made up of Cost Ricans, though in recent years this reality has been changing due to immigration from Nicaragua and other Latin American countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, among others.

6. Americans use more online dating than Costa Ricans do.

Regarding online dating, a specific issue on social media was brought up in the discussions. Students from UCR reported having learned that there is a certain age group of Americans that is more likely to use online dating, namely people in their thirties. In contrast, people ranging in ages between 20 and 25 are more likely to have face-to-face dating. An interesting concept which the UCR students learned during this discussion was *cattfish* (i.e., false profile used in social media), which helped them comprehend some of the dangers listed by the UNL students regarding online dating and the reasons why they avoid this type of dating.

Furthermore, UCR students state having learned about the ways in which social media creates false expectations about people according to UNL students. For example, they cite that individuals only show partial images of themselves and post fake profiles that only highlight their positive features (i.e., only showing one's good side).

C. Relationships, dating, and family

When asked about new information on family relationships, UCR students highlighted the fact that American families promote more independence on children than do Costa Rican families. Additionally, just like in Costa Rica, the American nuclear family is disappearing and is being replaced by blended families such as same-sex families. Once again, the UCR students expressed being surprised that American families are close, as the media does not portray this value and hence, their idea was that kids in American families are eager to flee their homes as soon as they enter college and that they try to move as far away from their families as they possibly can.

Concerning relationships with peers, UCR students argue that, based on UNL students' presentations, Costa Ricans are closer and more talkative and that relationships go beyond the academic setting. This was also supported by the fact that the presentations by the UNL students were carried out in a very serious manner, even if some topics called for less formality. Besides, according to UCR students, UNL students did not seem to have a close relationship and it seemed that they actually prepared each speech individually and not in group, as was expected.

During this session, UNL students were asked about how friendship is seen in terms of cultural differences in their context. The UCR students reported having learned that the

Mid West and the North East of the United States are very accepting, whereas the West is accepting, and the South is not accepting towards friendship relationships among different racial groups. This was surprising to them given that they do not perceive such marked geographic differences in terms of inter-racial relationships in Costa Rica, be it friends or love relationships.

Finally, given that UNL students constantly referred to themselves in terms of their ethnic background (e.g., they say they are half Hispanic, half German, half Irish, etc.), UCR students were surprised and reportedly learned that this results from UNL students' eagerness to identify themselves as belonging to different racial groups and having more than one ethnic background, as a result of being part of what they refer to as a *melting pot*. UCR students pointed out that if one is born and raised in Costa Rica then one is simply that, Costa Rican, despite having a different ethnic ancestry.

D. The education Systems in the United States and in Costa Rica

When inquired about the differences and similarities between the Education system in the United States and in Costa Rica, UCR students reported the data summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Differences and similarities between the American and the Costa Rican educational systems reported by UCR students	
Similarities	Differences
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High School goes until ages 17 or 18. 2. Teachers have lower salaries than most other professionals. 3. Standardized tests are used to enter college. 4. The focus is on academic content. 5. Private schools are more expensive, but they normally have smaller classes. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Americans do not go home for lunch. 2. They normally attend college far from home. 3. They do not have as many scholarship options as Costa Ricans do. 4. Their textbooks are very expensive, and copies are illegal. 5. There is a lower level of drop outs in the United States. 6. There is less respect towards teachers.

	7. College students generally do not live with their parents or commute.
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Overall, UCR students were shocked by how expensive it is to attend college in the United States, especially given that 100% of them have at least a partial scholarship; very few did so at UNL. Furthermore, whereas a UCR student pays no more than \$350 for tuition each semester, tuition at UNL is approximately \$8628 per year (two semesters).

E. Social issues in the United States

The following sub-topics were presented on:

a) The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community rights

The UCR students reported having learned that there are more LGBT rights in the United States than in Costa Rica, as they had expected. For example, gay couples can be legally married in many states, and there is a legislation that regulates discrimination against LGBT individuals; this is not the case in Costa Rica. UCR students also stated that LGBT groups are more accepted in the United States than in Costa Rica due to the fact that there is more freedom of religion in the first. Nonetheless, it was surprising to UCR students that, despite the legal rights which LGBT groups have, gay individuals are not allowed to join the military.

b) Women's rights

The Costa Rican students pointed out that, just like in Costa Rica, women get paid less for the same jobs than men (e.g., whereas women might get paid \$0.77 per hour, men might get paid \$1.0 per hour for the same job). Furthermore, women continue being victims of sexual harassment according to UNL students. Given that the United States is a developed country, UCR students expected less gender discrimination in that country.

c) Racism

It was reportedly surprising to UCR students that in the United States, racism is still very much present. UNL students themselves reported current racism against African

Americans, Latinos, and Chinese throughout the United States; for example, they talked about recurring police brutality against these groups in 2015.

Overall, and as stated in the introduction to this section, UCR students mainly pointed out facts which contradicted what one might see on television or read in the media about socio cultural issues in the United States. As they state, this experience allowed them to learn things from Americans themselves and they were able to ask questions and to request clarification on the various issues *in situ*.

XI. Conclusions and implications of the study

This article reported on data which can be quantitatively and qualitatively seen as a result of this unique experience which for that past seven years, students from UCR, San Ramon site, have been a part of.

If we take the definition of video conferencing proposed by Ludwig et al. (1999) in which student interaction and collaboration are enhanced, even if distant geographically, and whose aim is to reproduce real live interpersonal communication, we could certainly argue that this is exactly what was accomplished as a general goal in this experience.

Specifically, it has been shown that the Costa Rican participating students were satisfied with the experience. First of all, besides expressing their overall content and level of confidence as part of this experience, UCR students listed words and phrases which they learned through the video conference sessions with UNL students. These new lexical items were likely incorporated into these UR students' inventory as they wrote them down as examples of the items which they needed to comprehend in order to understand specific socio cultural traits reported by the UNL students.

Furthermore, the information which the UCR students reported regarding the things that they learned about the American culture are what we believe constitutes the main asset of this project, as students can easily look up new words and learn their meaning and pronunciation, but the true novel learning takes place when they get to hear from people their own age about how they interact with one another, about their own intake regarding social issues such as gender roles, racism, LBGTB right, etc.

Even though the instruments applied do not show all the things that students experience in these video conference sessions as they are targeted at very specific data,

students' comments in class and outside the classroom (in hall ways and on the Facebook group) undoubtedly point to the fact that this project is a great initiative and that the more students get the chance to be part of such programs, the more they will learn about the target culture.

It was stated at the beginning of this article that UCR students enrolled in the English teaching major rarely get the chance to travel abroad to experience the target culture; this project constitutes a very successful attempt to give them that chance to interact with the target culture via an academic setting without having to travel abroad. Of course, it would be best if they had the chance to travel and live the target culture themselves, but given their socio-economic condition, described in the methodology section, it is likely that the Global Classroom experience will be the only chance they get to experience interacting with native speakers in an academic setting.

Finally, we are convinced that this idea will be taken by our participating UCR students and that they will likely look for similar opportunities for their own students in high schools and grade schools where they will work as EFL teachers. Given the advantages which participating UCR students have reported as well as their satisfaction with the project, one can easily foresee similar initiatives with different populations in various academic settings thanks to this unique experience.

Limitations of the study and future research

It is prominent to acknowledge that, given that this was the first-time instruments were designed to systematically collect quantitative and qualitative data which would evidence the benefits of this Global Classroom project, some limitations occurred during the data collection process. First, although all the instruments were given to all students, not all of them attended each session, and those who did, did not always hand in the instruments for each session, nor did they answer all the questions in each instrument. This resulted in different numbers of answers per instrument and hence the quantitative data reported herein is not as rich as expected.

As a result of this, during the II term, 2016, a more complex set of instruments were applied to a larger population in order to more thoroughly support the argument that this project is not only unique but also very advantageous. Upon analyzing the data collected during 2015, it was decided by the researchers that *two* groups of Costa Rican students

would be given instruments that would measure specific skills strengthened, and that participating students and staff from UNL would also be asked about the benefits of the video conferencing experience and about ways in which the project could be reinforced even more. These results will be reported on in a new article shortly.

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