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Using social networking sites for language learning to develop intercultural competence in language education programs¹

José Aldemar Álvarez Valencia^a and Alejandro Fernández Benavides^{a,b}

^aSchool of Language Sciences, Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia; ^bDepartment of Language and Foreign Languages, Universidad Santiago de Cali, Cali, Colombia

ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways a social networking site for language learning (SNSLL) enhances or hinders intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The study identifies the components of intercultural competence that emerge from students' interactions and reflections about the SNSLL Livemocha. The research was conducted with second-year students of an English class in a Colombian university. Data were collected through screen recordings, students' logs, surveys, and a focus group. Findings indicate that, of the five dimensions of ICC, the components of Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills of Interpreting and Relating, and Skills of Discovery and Interaction featured strongly on students' exchanges and reflections. SNSLLs hold potential to enhance intercultural skills; however, pedagogical adjustment and refocusing of some of their activities are required to expand opportunities for intercultural engagement.

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Foreign language teacher education programs face more challenges than ever before in light of novel social and cultural dynamics that reshape the nature and purpose of English in a globalizing world. Prompted by various developments in the area of applied linguistics such as the social turn (Block, 2003), language education faces the challenge of articulating the intercultural dimension in the second/foreign language curriculum. Besides reaching communicative competence, learners are expected to develop intercultural competence (IC). Several authors put forth strategies on how to integrate the intercultural dimension in English language classes (e.g., Álvarez Valencia & Bonilla, 2009; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Corbett, 2010; Liddicoat, 2008) and, given the new digital communicational landscape, attention needs to be paid to the promises and challenges of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Previous research that articulates computer-mediated communication and IC attests to the relevance of telecollaborative exchanges in providing opportunities for intercultural engagement (O'Dowd, 2007; Thorne, 2006). Social computing – embodied in chat rooms, personal web blogs, emails, Facebook, and mobile messaging – enables multiple channels that engender mobility, socialization, language learning, and intercultural communication. Of the broad spectrum of digital environments available to language learners,

CONTACT José Aldemar Álvarez Valencia  jose.aldemar.alvarez@correounivalle.edu.co  School of Language Sciences, Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia

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this study focuses on language learning websites with social networking capabilities (e.g., Busuu, Livemocha, Lingq, and Babbel).

Social networking sites for language learning (SNSLLs) are multimodal online platforms that provide access to pedagogical materials and activities in multiple languages (Alvarez Valencia, 2016a, 2016b). On SNSLLs users participate in e-tandem learning experiences whereby speakers of different languages engage in language exchange (O'Rourke, 2007) or establish telecollaborative partnerships; that is, "international class-to-class partnerships within institutionalized settings" (Thorne, 2006, p. 7). SNSLLs have multiplied since their emergence in the late 2000s and, as informal language learning environments, they have opened a myriad of possibilities to language learners. However, educationalists wonder about the potential of integrating these digital environments into formal educational contexts at the tertiary level (Brick, 2011a; Clark & Gruba, 2010). Previous research on SNSLLs has explored issues of navigability (Clark & Gruba, 2010; Liaw, 2011; Zourou, 2013), their pedagogical affordances in terms of structure and materials (Brick, 2011b; Liaw, 2011), their potential to promote autonomous behaviors (Chotel & Mangenot, 2011), and assessment and feedback (Gruba & Clark, 2013; Potolia & Zourou, 2013), while other authors have pinpointed the theoretical principles underpinning such virtual communities (Alvarez Valencia, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Liu et al., 2013; Pélissier & Qotb, 2012).

Alvarez Valencia (2016a, 2016b), for example, in examining the SNSLL Busuu, indicates that these websites provide the context for users to engage in intercultural communication. By drawing on autoethnographic records and a multimodal semiotic analysis of the website, the author establishes that its contents and learning activities are informed by different views of language (structural, interactional, and ecological) and learning (behavioral, cognitive, and constructivist). Brick's (2011b) study addressed the weaknesses, strengths, and affordances of the SNSLL Livemocha in formal education. His findings showed that SNSLLs offer advantages such as the opportunity to practice oral skills with native speakers of other languages and to obtain immediate feedback. Nevertheless, Livemocha's learning material was limiting due to its heaviest focus on vocabulary and the negative interactional dynamics caused by cyber-flirting behaviors within the online community. This latter result was corroborated by Lloyd (2012), who reports that cyberflirting conducted by alpha socializers resulted in female participants' reluctance to initiate online interactions. Despite this shortcoming, Lloyd highlights the potential of SNSLLs to promote cultural learning, awareness of different communicative behaviors, and attitudes of openness and curiosity toward other people.

Loiseau, Potolia, and Zourou (2011) examined user roles, learning pathways, and pedagogical content of three SNSLLs (Livemocha, Busuu, and Babbel). In spite of multiple criticisms concerning the websites' strong focus on vocabulary and dialogs, the findings suggest that the websites encouraged users to adopt active roles through synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Unlike Alvarez Valencia's (2016b) results described earlier, Loiseau et al. (2011) indicate that the three SNSLLs mostly materialized behaviorist and cognitivist approaches to language learning, which makes sense if the analyst only examines the structural design of the interface. Nevertheless, such a research approach overlooks the cooperative and constructivist dynamics that arise when users engage in synchronous language exchanges on SNSLLs (Alvarez Valencia, 2016a, 2016b).

Finally, although Alvarez Valencia's (2016a, 2016b) and Lloyd's (2012) works stress the potential of SNSLLs to foster (inter)cultural skills, to our knowledge, no studies have been found which explore explicitly if and how learners develop IC on SNSLLs. Hence, this research contributes to the studies of SNSLLs in two ways. First, it fills a gap in the literature by examining the role of the intercultural dimension in such digital environments and, second, it sheds light on the potentialities of integrating SNSLLs in language teacher education programs. This study seeks to answer the following: do fourth-semester students in an English language teacher program develop IC through the use of the SNSLL Livemocha? If so, what elements of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) are observed in their interactions on the website and their reflections about their learning experience?

Culture, the intercultural speaker, and intercultural communicative competence

This study is informed by the work of several scholars in the area of social semiotics and applied linguistics. In the field of social semiotics (Kress, 2012), culture is conceptualized as an open dynamic repertoire of semiotic resources (material and non-material), produced in social interaction. Cultural resources are the product of semiotic work that refers to the practice of producing signs in interaction with others and with the world (e.g., reading, painting, talking). Similar to authors in the field of applied linguistics (e.g., Byram, 1997; Kramersch, 1998; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), Kress (2012) acknowledges the dynamic nature of culture that is made and remade by individuals' actions and discursive practices (semiotic work) in social interaction. Culture constitutes an ever-changing entity and embodies the symbolic systems, knowledges, practices, and products of a determined community, contextualized in a particular historical and geographical milieu (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Studying culture has become more complex given the possibilities of travel abroad, the new communication landscape, and the role of computer-mediated intercultural communication in providing access to materials for language learning (Alvarez Valencia, 2014). The construction of views about other cultures is not only mediated by teachers, but also by other resources to which students have access, such as movies, social networking, and language learning websites. The question then arises as to how students will develop proper cultural understandings given the multiple sources of information about the target language culture. An answer to this question emerges from the idea of developing intercultural speakers (Byram, 1997; Kramersch, 1998; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) with skills that enable them to better negotiate meanings between their cultural repertoires and those of the target culture. In short, an intercultural speaker is able to make meaning effectively to maintain human relationships by employing language, knowledge, and behaviors that are sensitive and appropriate to a given sociocultural context.

Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence describes a capability that enables people from different cultural backgrounds to interact, bringing into their act of sign-making their societal, cultural, and individual knowledge about the world to make possible an effective negotiation of

meanings. Different models of IC development have been proposed. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), for instance, describe a variety of intercultural models which they group into compositional, co-orientational, developmental, adaptational, and causal process models. Although space limitations preclude a comprehensive illustration of these frameworks, it is necessary to mention that at least three models have stood out in the field of education: Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence, Bennett's Developmental Intercultural Competence Model, and Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence Model (ICC).

In Deardorff's (2006) model, IC is reached through a process of modification of individuals' attitudes and acquisition of knowledge/comprehension and skills, which, in turn, lead to positive outcomes at the interactional level. Bennett's (1986) model describes the developmental stages individuals go through in transitioning from an ethnocentric (denial, defense, minimization) to an ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation, integration) stage. Byram's (1997) model comprises the dimensions of Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills (of Interpreting and Relating, of Discovery and Interaction), and Critical Cultural Awareness/Political Education. In this study, we draw on Byram's model because it provides the most comprehensive framework to understanding IC and, thus far, it is considered to be the most influential model in the educational field. Each intercultural dimension in Byram's model is accompanied by a general descriptor, which is further explained by a set of curricular objectives. In the interest of space, in the following we present the descriptors and a summary of their curricular objectives.

Attitudes

Byram (1997) describes the attitudinal dimension as the first element learners need to develop in an intercultural view of language learning. Attitudes toward the target culture must draw on curiosity and openness, which imply readiness to accept others' meanings without judgment or disbelief. For this dimension, Byram (1997) elaborates a set of curricular objectives that highlight speakers' willingness, interest, and readiness to seek out opportunities to engage, discover, and question their own and the other speakers' cultural practices, products, and values.

Knowledge

Byram (1997) divides knowledge into two types: knowledge about social groups and their products and practices both in the speaker's own country and his/her interlocutor's; and knowledge of the processes of interaction at the individual and societal levels. The former type of knowledge relates to how acquainted learners are with the structure and functioning of their own country and the target language country. The latter refers to learners' understanding of the ways communication and interaction practices take place in their native and the target culture. Curricular objectives within this component posit that learners need to be familiarized with knowledge about history, geographical features, politics, institutions, social conventions, behaviors, and the past and present relationships between their own and their interlocutor's country.

The next component in Byram's (1997) model is Skills. Skills have an operational nature because they set the stage for speakers to activate the dimensions of Attitudes

and Knowledge in actual communicative practices. The author proposes two sets of skills: Skills of Interpreting and Relating, and Skills of Discovery and Interaction.

Skills of Interpreting and Relating

This skill refers to the ability to interpret and explain an event or document from the target culture by relating it to information coming from documents or events from the learner's own culture. Curricular objectives in this dimension include the learners' ability to decipher, recognize, and explain different cultural views in their encounters with different texts and in face-to-face interaction. In further stages of development of intercultural capabilities, learners are expected to decenter from their own ethnocentric cultural schemata to understand cultural contents or tackle intercultural conflicts that may arise in interaction.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction

Interaction plays a pivotal role in the process of learning about and discovering cultural references, concepts, values, and practices of the target culture. Through this skill, learners use their knowledge and intercultural attitudes under the constraints of real-time communication. Most descriptors within this component emphasize the act of eliciting information about concepts, values, and events from interlocutors as the basis for engaging in meaning negotiation, reflection, and intercultural discovery about one's own culture and a foreign culture.

Critical Cultural Awareness/Political Education

This dimension of ICC poses the most challenging task for language learners and teachers. It emerges from the interplay of the first four dimensions. It underscores the "ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 63). Speakers are expected to use critical thinking in examining documents and events that imply intercultural understandings. Going beyond surface information and interpretations, speakers need to be aware of the cultural semiotic repertoires and underlying ideologies that inform their practices and assumptions in intercultural interactions.

Methodology

Part of a qualitative interpretative multiple case study that involved two universities and students of four English classes, this study hones in on one of the four classes. A case study intends to investigate deeper into participant's understandings of events, activities, and processes through careful observation (Creswell, 2002). Merriam (2009) pinpoints that case studies are: particularistic, focusing on a particular bounded system (situation, phenomenon, event); descriptive, providing a "rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study" (p. 43); and heuristic, bringing about new meanings and understandings of experience. Following these principles, we focused on describing and interpreting the particular experience of a group of students who engaged in interaction on the SNSLL Livemocha.

Context and participants

The study took place in the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures at Universidad del Valle, a state-funded university located in the city of Cali, Colombia, South America. The program offers a five-year language teacher education program with emphasis on English and French languages. In recent years, the program has been implementing several strategies to provide students with more possibilities of exposure to English, including the enhancement on autonomous work (Ramírez Espinosa, 2015) and the investment in CALL materials (Reyes, Berdugo, & Machucha, 2016). This study emerges in the context of this effort, aiming to expand students' prospects of practicing their language skills in digital environments.

Data were collected from students taking the class Integrated Language Skills in English IV, a second-year language class that focuses on developing students' communicative skills. The class met for two hours, three times a week, during a period of 16 weeks. The students' English level matched Level B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference. Nineteen students agreed to participate in the study by signing a consent form. Their ages ranged between 19 and 25 years, and they came from a middle socioeconomic background. A sociodemographic survey conducted at the outset of the study indicated that 92% of the students had used any or several social networks (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) for language learning. The two researchers adopted different roles; while one acted as a participant observer, since he was the assigned instructor of the class (author 1), the second researcher was a non-participant observer (author 2).

Data collection techniques and procedures

The data were collected once a week during the second semester of 2015 and the beginning of 2016. Of the three sessions that the students attended weekly, one session took place in a computer laboratory where students worked on the lessons of Livemocha. The SNSLL Livemocha constitutes part of the broader genre of language learning websites that consist of "online environment[s] characterized by offering language learners practice on some or all of the language skills" (Álvarez Valencia, 2017, p. 128). Livemocha organizes its learning material in sequential courses divided by lessons. Each lesson contains sections on vocabulary, grammar, listening, writing, audio recording, and a chat interface. The work on the website varied along the semester. Based on needs of the class and the course framework, the instructor planned what topics and sections of the Livemocha lessons matched the course contents and made sure that students had opportunities to hold chat interactions. In total, students participated in 13 sessions and worked on 11 lessons of Livemocha. The data collection drew on the students' work on the website and their reactions and attitudes toward it. Thus, the data were collected through surveys, screen recordings, student logs, and a focus group.

Surveys

Two surveys were administered during the data collection process. The first survey was completed at the outset of the study and intended to determine the students' sociodemographic characteristics, including their knowledge and previous experience with technology and language learning websites. The second survey, applied at the end of the course,

aimed to explore the students' perceptions, attitudes, and insights about their experience regarding the intercultural dimension. This survey was used both to corroborate some of the perspectives voiced by students in the learning logs and as a source to plan the focus group questions.

Screen recordings

We collected screen recordings of the students' work on Livemocha. Of the 323 videos obtained, we selected those that contained chat interactions and then limited the sample to 20 videos (1239 minutes of footage) for the analysis. We focused on chat sessions because these communication exchanges permitted the observation of intercultural aspects. A total of 46 chat exchanges were examined.

Learning logs

After each Livemocha session, students responded to a set of questions regarding the activities, topics, learning outcomes, and issues encountered during the session (see [Appendix A](#)). A total of 246 learning logs were collected, from which 75 were purposefully selected for the analysis.

Focus group

Conducted at the end of the data collection process, the focus group intended to obtain in-depth information about the participants' experience using Livemocha. Since the total number of participant was 19, two focus group sessions were arranged. The analysis of the contents of Livemocha together with observations of students' use of the website, the logs, and the responses of the surveys informed the focus group questions.

Data analysis

The data analysis drew on strategies from different analytical approaches. On the one hand, it followed a theoretical or deductive thematic analysis that, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), tends "to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-drive" (p. 84). In accordance with this, our analysis consisted of identifying any of the components and curricular objectives of the ICC model proposed by Byram. In so doing, the process of analysis comprised stages similar to the ones proposed in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): "familiarization with the data"; "transcription" of focus groups and chat exchanges, and design of matrix formats to systematize learning logs and chat exchanges; "generation of initial codes"; and "identification of themes" that mapped on to the descriptors of ICC. We also drew on content analysis in that it "involves converting the qualitative data ... into a quantitative form by counting the number of responses falling in each category" and then presenting the number or percentages of responses in a graphical form (Wilkinson, 2000, p. 434). Thus, based on the frequencies of appearance of the descriptors of ICC across the data set, statistics were drawn to illustrate which descriptors were the most salient in students' reflections and interactions on the website.

Triangulation was ensured by collating information from the various kinds of data collected and via the review and analysis of the data by both researchers. Triangulation

strategies were of great import since occasionally data samples belonged to more than one descriptor of ICC. In such cases, the researchers decided to tag certain sample (e.g., student statement) as belonging to the descriptor that was most representative or closest in definition, or decided to match the sample to more than one descriptor when it corresponded to various descriptors of ICC. The following section presents the findings, focusing on the students' own voices in the multiple data sources.

Findings

Elements of ICC in students' voices and interactions on the website

One way to get a general picture of the students' ability to operate intercultural skills was by drawing statistics of the different curricular objectives within each ICC dimension and then establishing which intercultural dimensions appeared across the data analyzed. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the four dimensions of ICC that emerged from the data analysis.

With 55% (309 times), the dimension of Attitudes appeared profusely in most of the data sets. It was followed by Knowledge about social groups and their products and practices with 37% (209 times). The Skills of Interpreting and Relating scored 6% (32 times), while the Skills of Discovery and Interaction accounted for a low percentage (2%; 12 iterations). Interestingly, the analysis did not render any evidence that the participants had engaged in interactions or reflection that materialized in the component of Critical Cultural Awareness/Political Education.

Attitudes: Curiosity, openness, and readiness

In the field of social psychology, an attitude has been defined as a psychological tendency to respond to groups or individuals by evaluating them with some degree of favor or disfavor (Albarracín, Zanna, Johnson, & Kumkale, 2005). Byram's (1997) dimension of Attitudes is an invitation to evaluate others through the lenses of curiosity, openness, and the disposition to change previous beliefs about them. Many of the students' comments, reflections, and actions about Livemocha reflect their interest and willingness to engage with other users and learn about the other culture and even their own culture and language. The following excerpts illustrate this finding:²

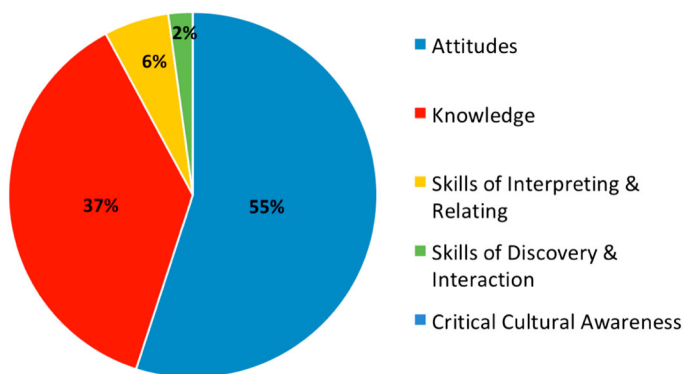


Figure 1. Dimensions of ICC identified in the data analyzed.

Where those themes [the themes discussed on the chat] interesting or relevant to you? Why?

yeah, because I love learning more about new cultures and reasons because people are interested in learning Spanish and specially broaden my mind with the way other people see the same world that I see every day. (Learning log, AG, September 9 2015)

it is very cool, ... I am now talking to a Chinese woman and although we both know that we are not very knowledgeable in English; perhaps I know a little more than her ... But I can tell that the important thing in itself is to be able to communicate and understand each other ... A little time ago they were on the new year celebration there and she explained to me all the tradition. She sent me videos of the fireworks; so it's very cool! (Focus group, CS, February 12 2016)

In these two samples, we see that AG and CS were interested in expanding their knowledge of other cultures and their people. AG emphasizes that she loves learning about other cultures, but also exploring different worldviews. AG stood out among her classmates because her interactions with Livemocha users went beyond the classroom. Her communication with them expanded to other social media tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Like AG, CS was excited about communicating with a Chinese woman who was also a learner of English. Leaving aside the fact that their command of the language was far from perfect, she highlights that they could “communicate and understand each other.” CS’s attitude is a relevant indicator of an intercultural perspective in that it values speakers of other cultures who are learning English, challenging the concept of native speakerism. SNSLLs like Livemocha usually promise that users will learn the language by interacting with native speakers. CS’s attitude evokes results of other studies on SNSLLs in which learners do not limit their interactions to native speakers but reclaim the right to use English as a lingua franca and “position themselves not as nonnative speakers but as intercultural speakers of a lingua franca(s), transcending colonial alienation and linguistic imperialism” (Álvarez Valencia, 2016c, p. 30).

The semiotic work performed on the website by AG and CS and the rest of the participants clearly materializes several curricular objectives within the general dimension of Attitudes. However, AG and CS’s behavior particularly relates to the descriptor: “interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one’s own and in other cultures and cultural practices” (Byram, 1997, p. 58). AG demonstrates interest and curiosity for knowing the reasons that motivate people from other countries to learn Spanish, and she contrasts them with her reasons to learn English. Of the different descriptors introduced in Byram’s (1997) proposal, this descriptor emerged very strongly in the data. Despite the fact that it is listed second in the dimension of Attitudes (the first refers to willingness to seek opportunities to engage in interaction with others), it makes sense to think that the descriptor relating to interest appeared more frequently in the data since, more often than not, willingness arises from interest. This is also exemplified in the following exchange between JD and a user of Livemocha known as N:

1. JD: well what if we talk about, I don’t know books? right now in my class, we are reading Animal farm. Have you ever read it?
2. N: Do you like it? I know it is famous.
3. JD: well I rather best to read science fiction books, but it is a good book! so, could you recommend me a book to read?

4. N: If you want famous books, and science fiction ones, then “1984” by James Onwell is a very good read
5. JD: ahh cool, I’ve Heard about it. it sounds really cool? what is your favorite?
6. N: The Bible and a fantasy series called, “Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn”
7. JD: well, the bible is a really good one but I don’t have any idea about that “Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn” let me google it
8. N: Most people do not, so it is fine
9. JD: well I’m googled it and it looks really interesting. I think I will read It as soon as I finish my semester.
10. N: Yay! ... (Chat session, January 27 2016)

As part of one class assignment, students read the book *Animal Farm*, and during one session of Livemocha the instructor asked them to look for a chat partner and talk about the book. In this excerpt, JD exhibits his ability to operate the skills of engaging with otherness and expressing interest in what N likes reading. After greeting and introducing each other (not included here), JD opens with a rhetorical question and then a confirmation question to introduce the topic of books, particularly *Animal Farm*. N, in turn 2, seems to evade a direct answer and instead replies with a question and a statement that implicitly indicated to JD that he had not read the book. Rather than displaying discouragement, JD in the third exchange intends to engage N in the topic by asking him what book he would recommend. This interactional move is interesting because it seems to motivate the interlocutor to engage in the topic, and as a result N suggests another book by the same author, perhaps in an attempt to save face. JD compliments him by acknowledging that his recommendation is “cool” and formulates another question that shows interest about what N’s favorite book is. In turn 6, N replies providing two options. JD again praises N’s response and acknowledges that he does not know one of the books but will search for it on Google (turn 7). This exchange is insightful because, once more, JD shows his interlocutor that he is genuinely invested in the interaction. This section of the interaction closes when JD praises N’s book pick after searching for it on Google and indicates that he will read it later. In turn 10, N responds with the exclamation “Yay” as an indication of pleasantness.

Although far from constituting an example of deep intercultural engagement, by drawing on compliments and questions, JD’s telecollaborative interactions are signposts of intercultural skills since he adopted an empathetic, friendly, and understanding attitude during the interaction with N. One way of confirming this assessment is by drawing on appraisal theory (Martin, 2000). Martin regards appraisal as “the semantic resources to negotiate emotions, judgments, and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations” (2000, p. 144). Appraisal encompasses all evaluative resources used in meaning-making processes that allow speakers to adopt certain positionings. Appraisal permits the constructions of different meanings, one of them being attitudinal meanings – semiotic resources for creating empathy, negotiating values, and sharing tastes. Attitudinal meaning is divided into affect, judgment, and appreciation. Through affect, speakers express emotions; judgment expresses sanctions or proscribes behavior; while appreciation construes “attitudes about texts, performances and natural phenomena” (Martin, 2003, p. 173). Of the three types of positionings, it is noticeable that JD avoided judgment and adopted an appreciative positioning (good, cool, interesting) toward N’s semiotic work. This attitude is heightened by JD’s use of linguistic resources

to produce graduation. Graduation is another subsystem of appraisal theory that permits users to raise or lower the evaluative intensity of the meaning they make. JD draws on linguistic intensifiers like “really cool!” or “really interesting” to enhance a positive evaluative positioning regarding his interlocutor and the meanings being negotiated in the interaction.

Knowledge: Religion, politics, education, celebrations, and interaction

The component of Knowledge featured strongly in the data with 37%. Manifestations of this skill appeared in the students’ voices when they spoke about the contents of the website and their experience interacting with other Livemocha members. Some of the contents of the website addressed cultural meanings, as CS states when she is asked about what she learned during her session on Livemocha: “Although I did not make an [chat] exchange, with the lesson i did learn about culture ... I learned how important dinner is to American people and about diner locals” (Learning log, September 12 2015). Other students also reflected on how they learned more about factual information and cultural practices of their interlocutors’ country:

I have learned how people from other countries act in different situations, what they think my culture and country and viceversa. I have learned about religion, political issues and education. (Survey 2, MAG, January 11 2016)

That all people think in a different way, I mean, every person has his/her beliefs, customs, traditions, etc. Also, that for example talking about celebrations, in every country there is a way to do a celebration, for example Christmas. (Survey 2, MAG, January 11 2016)

The topic of celebrations and other cultural practices was a common domain of discussion in students’ interactions. The type of knowledge discussed relates to cultural features of the learner’s own cultural background and the interlocutor’s. For instance, MAG states that she has learned about religion, politics, and education while MA reflects that the interactions on the website helped him understand that some beliefs, customs, and traditions are personal, but they are at the same time connected to a broader sociocultural context since they vary from country to country. He goes on to mention Christmas, an example of a cultural practice that is celebrated in different ways in every country. The negotiation of meanings about cultural events and practices from the countries of the two interlocutors are in tune with Byram’s (1997) curricular objectives within the dimension of Knowledge that refer to being acquainted with “the national memory of one’s own country and how its events are related to and seen from the perspective of other countries” (p. 59) and “the national memory of one’s interlocutor’s country and the perspective on them from one’s own country” (p. 59). One central aspect that brings these learners’ interactions into the intercultural realm is their reciprocal interest in finding out about each other’s cultural practices and events, as MAG states: “I have learned how people from other countries act in different situations, what they think [about] my culture and country and vice versa.”

Of all the objectives that comprise the component of Knowledge, the most prominent descriptor in the data was knowledge about “the processes of social interaction in one’s interlocutor’s country” (Byram, 1997, p. 60). The themes identified in the following excerpts show that students not only recognized and reflected on their interlocutors’

ways of interacting but also made comparisons with the communication patterns in their own country. Different students reported that they had realized that for people from other countries the way Colombians communicate gives the impression that they are outgoing. One student reflected on politeness markers and Colombians' seeming over-reliance on the word "please":

When I arrived from the United States, something that struck me a lot is that everything is "please, please, please" and at the end [of an interaction], another "please." And one over there [in the USA] is "do this for me," and from time to time, "please." There, it is more like "do you want to do such a thing?" And it is implicit that you are asking a favor. (Focus group, MGG, February 12 2016)

In the focus group, in answering the question about what sections of the website facilitated an approximation to the cultural dimension, JQ and AG engaged in a discussion about how the section of vocabulary and grammar connected with culture:

JQ: As Angie says, about the snow. We do not have snow here but we know that snow is snow, so in some countries [the word] snow is very, very ... – is used too much, but not here, because we do not have it, so I would think that vocabulary, the use of vocabulary is fundamental too to learn the culture. (Focus group, February 12 2016)

AG: Well, I think that when there is language, right? There is culture. So, this ehm in the, in the ... – in the writing part or in the grammar part; when something is said, as the classmate said, some words that are used in certain moments ... in English would not sound like more appropriate than some other words, that is culture for me. (Focus group, February 19 2016)

JQ and AG's descriptions are insightful because they indicate that language is deeply rooted to culture or, what is more, language is itself culture. This agrees with what has been widely discussed by experts in the area of intercultural communication regarding the connection between language and culture (e.g., Agar, 1994; Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Risager, 2007). Referring to this relationship, Agar (1994) and Risager (2007, 2008) coined the terms *linguaculture* and *linguaculture*, respectively. Agar explains that "Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture" (1994, p. 28). Agar's *linguaculture* focuses on the semantics and pragmatics of languages, a connection that is suggested by AG's reflection when she points that some words may sound more or less appropriate in "certain moments," which implies that linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic elements index culture: "that is culture for me."

Risager expands Agar's framework by adding the poetic and the identity dimensions to the semantic and pragmatic dimension. By considering the dimension of identity, Risager (2008) stresses the role of the individual in the construction of his/her *linguaculture*. According to this, although "human beings develop their linguistic and cultural resources in social interaction ... these resources are personal though shared with others to a greater or lesser extent" (Risager, 2008, p. 5). This idea, in turn, implies that we develop a personal *linguaculture*, made up of, first, the resources acquired in our sociocultural and linguistic context and, second, our idiolect or subjective construction of how we make meaning. Despite the fact that students did not discuss the idiolectic variability of their *linguaculture*, they did realize that within their own country there were linguistic variations and cultural differences, as expressed in the following:

We come from Buga,³ right? So then eh while here [in Cali] or in Medellin people use “parce” [buddy], we there [in Buga] say “mai” ... the first time I came here, I already knew Sebas, Sebastian; so I said “Entonces qué ‘mai’” [what’s up “mai”]. He said “what?” And he just kept looking at me and I said “mai, mai.” Do you not know what it is? He said “no.” Then I explained. (Focus group, MA, February 12 2016)

Here we can also see like the ways of living of ourselves ... yes, it is different like the ways of living, dressing, acting, the likes, ... for example, we “caleños” like salsa [music] a lot ... most of us ... , so those things [differences] also exist, not only getting out of the country, but here we can also learn from our own culture. (Focus group, NC, February 12 2016)

Risager (2008) rightly pinpoints that in analyzing the development of learners’ lingua-cultures, local and cultural complexities need to be pondered. Through their experience using Livemocha, MA and NC, as well other students in this study, became aware that learning about the forms and rituals of interaction of the speakers of the target language is an important skill for becoming interculturally competent. Nevertheless, they broadened their understanding of the intercultural speaker by realizing that intercultural skills also find application within the boundaries of their own country. The students’ realization of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their own country constitutes a stepping-stone in building an intercultural speaker.

Skills of Interpreting and Relating: Identifying ethnocentric views

With 6%, this skill allowed us to examine when the students were able to reflect about their own and the cultural practices of the outer group. As already shown, in many cases the participants provided interpretations and looked for ways to relate certain features of the target culture to the cultural resources observed in their own social group. Students engaged in reflections about how Colombians’ politeness, communication styles, and ways of dressing compared to outer groups such as Indians. On several occasions, these experiences opened the path for them to question or realize ethnocentric attitudes. CS narrates that while interacting with an Indian, she was asked how she dressed herself. Her response was: “some jeans and a shirt, normal” (Focus group, February 12 2016). After receiving some pictures that her friend sent her, displaying typical outfits in India, she realized that jeans and shirts might not after all be very “normal” in other parts of the world.

Several students discussed why they believed Anglo-American speakers appeared reserved during the exchanges on the chat. The discussion led them to realize that, compared to North American individuals, Colombians were more outgoing:

MA: from the Colombian perspective we are ... well, very ...

JQ: overfamiliar

MA: yes, very overfamiliar, inclined to speaking too much and with them one realizes that one can’t be like that over there ... because they are not like that. They are reserved and they always go straight to what they want to answer ... it is something cultural. (Focus group, February 12 2016)

Traditionally, people from other countries have typified Colombians as happy people or as the students denominate themselves: overfamiliar. Although it is clear that this is not the case for all Colombians, the students identify this as a cultural pattern that is at odds with a

more conservative approach adopted by other cultural groups. They reflect about their experience interacting with North American speakers on the chat and point at what they deem is an interactional pattern: being reserved and going straight to the point. What is interesting to notice is that while, generally, this divergence in communication style between Americans and Colombians has typically been misjudged as coldness and uncooperativeness on the part of the former, these students conclude that rather than cold, Americans are reserved and such a behavior is part of their cultural semiotic repertoire. Although it is true that students failed to analyze several other variables that could explain their interactions with Americans, such as age, gender, educational level, or time on the Livemocha community, their conclusion yields evidence of emergent intercultural skills.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction: Communication on the chat and students' reflections

This component focuses on how interlocutors are able to draw on other elements of ICC such as Attitudes and Knowledge to handle appropriately intercultural exchanges in real-time communication. With a frequency of 2%, this component mainly surfaced in exchanges with transnational members of Livemocha or intraclass chat activities. An examination of the students' logs rendered a list of the several topics that usually emerge during their chat discussions (see [Figure 2](#)).

Some of these topics were embedded in tasks that the instructor assigned students to complete with their Livemocha language partners (e.g., how to write an opinion letter), while some other topics emerged out of students' interest in exploring aspects of their interlocutor's culture (e.g., country of origin, celebrations, experiences learning the foreign language). The task of writing an opinion letter required that students asked their interlocutors about the tone of it. Students also venture to inquire about how their interlocutors would react toward the topic of the letter. The letter needed to address a policy established at a hospital, which consisted of requiring employees to quit smoking as a demand to remain in their jobs. Many students were surprised by the answer they received from their chat partners. For example, JD expressed the following:

Then a discussion arose between the person and myself. I started ... to ask him, because then he did agree that no one should smoke, and then I would tell him: "but it is one's privacy, and one should smoke home." – "Yeah, but at the end, that's going to affect your health and

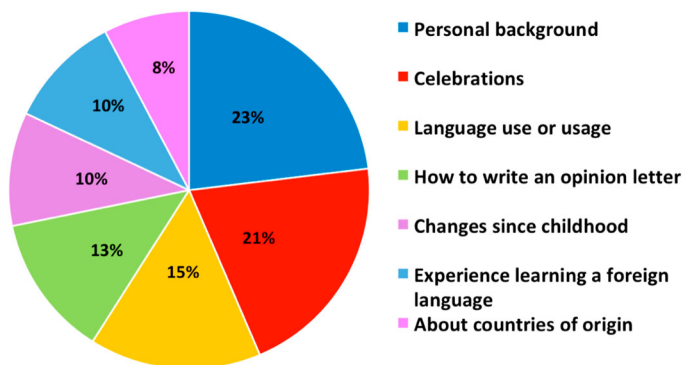


Figure 2. Main topics discussed on chat exchanges.

maybe one of those particles could affect ...” and he gave me a super scientific explanation, that I said “oh well, you are right, because how can I dispute it.” So I saw the process of argumentation, right? They go beyond what you can perceive and inquire about what could happen. Because I would have never given that explanation ... There he got me ... (Focus group, JD, February 12 2016)

This interaction allowed JD to transcend ethnocentric views and discover different ways of looking at a controversial topic. Additionally, it led him to reflect about argumentative strategies used by the English speaker who persuaded him to reshape his opinion. JD’s statement “They go beyond what you can perceive and inquire about what could happen” is perhaps generalization of how speakers of English would address controversial topics. Nonetheless, this mental representation is part of the process of discovery of the patterns of communication and worldviews of members of the target culture. This interaction also invited JD to reflect and possibly ameliorate his communication and argumentative strategies by realizing that he would have never thought of providing such a scientific argument.

Several students also posited that they went through a process of discovery of several aspects about the target culture and their own culture. In an intraclass chat interaction about Christmas Day, several students started the exchange assuming that the way each of them celebrated the holiday was similar. However, they discovered that despite belonging to the same country and region, they would spend their Christmas Day very differently based on the personal value they assigned to it. For many, it represents a special day to spend time with their family. In reflecting about the chat exchange held with MGG, AG expresses that she was surprised to know that for her classmate this celebration was not relevant and that she “stayed locked [locked] in my house” and did not “do anything else” (focus group). For the students, Christmas as a cultural reference bears different meanings which lead to different social behaviors. What we can learn from their discussion is that, even when individuals imagine that the rest of the members of their community or nation share similar cultural resources, it is not always the case. It is common, though, that people assume they share the same cultural practices and values as other members of their community because, as Anderson (1991) explains, nations are socially imagined communities in which members, despite not being immediately tangible and accessible, envision themselves as having similar interests, identities, and cultural practices.

Conclusion

The integration of SNSLLs in language classes has the potential to promote intercultural behaviors and attitudes. This study set out to find out whether students’ work and reflections on their experience using Livemocha would provide evidence of ICC. Drawing on Byram’s (1997) ICC components, we intended to establish which components appeared more frequently in the data set. In short, the most frequent dimensions of ICC were Attitudes and Knowledge, while Skills of Interpreting and Relating and Skills of Discovery and Interaction were less recurrent. The contents and language exercises as well as the interactions in the chat in many cases exposed students to unfamiliar situations and other forms of meaning-making, which prompted the expansion of their cultural semiotic repertoires. Students decentered and opened themselves to examine their own cultural practices, their own meaning-making processes, and those of other learners of Livemocha.

They showed attitudes of openness and were interested in knowing more about the cultural practices and patterns of interaction of their interlocutors. Furthermore, the interactional engagement of the participants with their own classmates and transnational users of the virtual community provided the context for intracultural and intercultural reflection, discovery, and transformation. This latter finding captures the essence of an intercultural approach in that the encounter of representatives from different communities and their cultural semiotic resources (Kress, 2012) should lead to reflection, inquiry, and “a transformational engagement of the learner in the act of learning” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 49).

A qualifying note is important in order to shed light on the absence of one component of ICC – Critical Cultural Awareness – and the low appearance of Skills of Discovery and Interaction. These skills are not prominent in the data partly because of limitations in the nature of the interactions, the technical affordances of Livemocha, and the need for pedagogical adaptation of contents and tasks within the website. The interactions on the chat suffered from shortcomings, mainly that the interface did not show when Livemocha users were online, which hindered students’ chances to find chat partners. On other occasions the website was slow at delivering the messages or chat partners replied several days after the student had attempted to start a conversation. This shortcoming in many cases led to superficial discussions on chat exchanges since very few students developed friendships over time, which reduced the chances of deeper discussions, possible conflict, and intercultural engagement. However, along with improving technical conditions, instructors should also play a more central role in creating or adapting tasks within SNSLLs that foster students’ capabilities of wondering, reflecting, and discovering their own and their interlocutors’ culture.

Critical Cultural Awareness was hardly promoted since Livemocha did not deliver contents or language tasks that potentially led to the discussion of sensitive social or cultural issues. As stated earlier, this limitation was due to the role adopted by the instructor who, only at the end of the process, started to play a more central role in adapting and enriching digital contents to bring forth critical thinking. Further research on SNSLLs needs to bear in mind that no pedagogical material is perfect and that it is teachers who give life to pedagogical materials by modifying them to suit particular curricular orientations. Especially, in language education programs, SNSLLs hold the potential to enhance the development of intercultural skills of future language teachers. As future intercultural mediators, student-teachers could draw on the affordances of participatory online environments to multiply their possibilities to become intercultural speakers.

Finally, it is relevant to note that the components of ICC identified in the data of this study are considered indicators of ongoing development of ICC rather than evidence of a completed process. Assessing the extent to which someone can be considered an intercultural speaker is a challenging task. Byram’s (1997) proposal has become an influential model, although like other models that intend to measure IC (see Humphrey, 2007; Sercu, 2010; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) it faces the limitations of accounting for a phenomenon that undertakes various paths and paces in its development, cannot be captured holistically, and needs to be assessed through time (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010; Sercu, 2004, 2010). Added to this is the challenge posed by the dissection of such a complex phenomenon into intercultural descriptors that constantly crisscross and overlap when used to interpret cultural semiotic work. This report provides partial insight into the

development of ICC of a group of students during a specific period of time. What we present is synchronic indicators of IC development; however, this is not determining evidence of IC achievement since human behaviors such as those described in this study may vary depending on different variables involving contexts, interlocutors, people's emotional states, and personality changes. Intercultural competence is not a static structure and thus, as an emergent, dialogic, contingent, and performative repertoire of semiotic resources, it can go back and forth as individuals enact their experience in social interaction.

Notes

1. This study is part of a broader research project titled “Las Redes Sociales para el Aprendizaje de Lenguas (RESAL): Un Estudio en la Licenciatura de Lenguas y Culturas Extranjeras de la Universidad del Valle” (Social Networking Sites for Language Learning (SNSLL): A study in the BA in Foreign Languages and Cultures at Universidad del Valle) (project code 4347).
2. Samples taken from the focus group have been translated into English. Excerpts produced in English have not been modified, except for cases where a square bracket is used around words to add context. We use students' initials to protect their identity.
3. Buga, Cali, and Medellín are Colombian cities.

Notes on contributors

José Aldemar Álvarez Valencia is a professor at the School of Language Sciences at Universidad del Valle, Colombia. He coordinates the Emphasis in ELT Education in the Interinstitutional Doctoral Program at the same university. He has published in the areas of discourse analysis, teacher education, intercultural communication, and multimodality.

Alejandro Fernández Benavides is an assistant professor at Universidad Santiago de Cali, Colombia and an adjunct professor at Universidad del Valle. He has conducted research in the areas of interculturality, critical pedagogy, and syllabus design.

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Appendix A

Learning log

Date: _____

Time spent on the website: _____

1. What activities did you do on Livemocha today?
2. What do you think you learned new (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) today?
3. Did you communicate with any member of the community during this session?

Yes _____ NO _____

4. What means of communication did you use?

Written Chat _____ Video Chat _____ Email _____

Other? Which ones? _____

5. What themes did you talk about during your exchange?

6. Where those themes interesting or relevant to you? why?

7. What cultural aspects could you identify during the exchange?

8. What languages did you use during the exchange?

Spanish _____ English _____ French _____

Other? Which ones? _____

9. Who did you interact with? (write 1, 2, 3 etc. according to the number of people you interacted with today)

Woman _____ Man _____

10. Mark the nationalities of the members of the community you interacted with:

Colombian _____ American _____ Canadian _____ British _____ French _____

German _____ Australian _____ Italian _____ Algeria _____ Indian _____

Others? Which ones? _____

11. What difficulties did you find during this session:

1. Using the computer and tools needed to access the website _____

Mention the specific difficulty?

How did you solve it?

2. Understanding the navigation and organization of the website _____

Mention the specific difficulty?

How did you solve it?

3. Understanding contents in the lessons _____

Mention the specific difficulty?

How did you solve it?

4. Communicating and interacting with members of the community _____

Mention the specific difficulty?

How did you solve it?

5. Other. Which one?

Thank you for your collaboration!!