Using Telecollaboration to Mitigate Intercultural Misunderstandings: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Sino-American College Students Virtual Exchange

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Abstract:

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, global education has witnessed a paradigm shift toward digital engagement, with virtual exchanges emerging as a pivotal mechanism for fostering intercultural learning. A notable surge in Sino-American virtual exchanges reflects the potential of using telecollaboration to bridge educational and cultural divides between the two countries. Telecollaboration is considered as one of the main tenets of an intercultural turn in language education. It aligns with the intercultural competence model, which comprises three intertwined aspects that generate critical cultural awareness: attitude, knowledge, and skill. Telecollaboration provides opportunities to intercultural communication, yet it also presents challenges: deficiencies in any dimension may cascade into misunderstanding, especially in online communication where paralinguistic cues are limited. Based on the intercultural competence modal, this study utilized multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the use of telecollaboration in mitigating intercultural misunderstandings between Chinese and American college students.

The participants were 25 first-year English majors from a Chinese teachers' college and 20 undergraduate students from a U.S. public university. The Chinese and the American participants were randomly grouped into 5 mixed groups, with 5 Chinese and 4 American students in each group. All the groups engaged in a 16-week telecollaboration project, designed to foster cross-cultural understanding. The project integrated diverse communication activities, including Zoom meetings, Padlet discussions and email exchanges, focusing on culture-related topics chosen by the participants. The data were collected from weekly 1-hour Zoom meetings (15 hours total; 127,260 transcribed words) documenting screen-sharing activities and paralinguistic cues, supplemented by asynchronous Padlet discussions (592 posts, 36,496 words) with emoji usage analysis, three email cycles (116 emails, 44,428 words), and weekly reflective journals (60,750 words) about self-reported cultural challenges and learning experiences. Iterative NVivo coding of attitudinal, knowledge-based, and skill-related dimensions identified recurrent misunderstanding patterns, while AntConc corpus analysis mapped linguistic ambiguities. Discourse analysis results revealed a marked reduction in misunderstandings over time. synchronous multimodal negotiation (e.g., real-time

screen annotations) resolved task-related ambiguities by contextualizing cultural references, whereas asynchronous emoji-text pairings and reflective writing reduced affective mismatches by fostering meta-cultural awareness. Multimodal exchanges, such as video conferencing and Padlet discussions, enabled participants to progressively clarify intentions through nonverbal cues (e.g., emojis, gestures) and explicit verbal explanations, leading to fewer instances of such misunderstandings in later stages.

The findings underscore telecollaboration's efficacy in strategically sequencing

visual, textual, and paralinguistic resources to preempt and repair intercultural misunderstandings, offering pedagogical insights for optimizing virtual exchange designs in higher education. By integrating asynchronous and synchronous platforms, educators can create spaces for iterative dialogue, where students actively reinterpret cultural norms and co-construct shared understanding.

Keywords: telecollaboration, intercultural misunderstanding, multimodal discourse analysis