A Cross-Cultural Collaborative Learning Project: Learning about Cultures and Research Methods

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Abstract

English-speaking students in courses on cross-cultural communication often comment on how little actual contact they have had with people from other cultures. Similarly, students in English for Academic Purposes for nonnative speakers courses relate how hard it is to connect with native English speakers. Despite obvious mutual benefit, there is seldom a close relationship between instructors of regular program courses and English for academic purposes (EAP) instructors. This paper describes a collaborative project which bridges these gaps within a university setting. The challenges and benefits of this collaborative project for all participants are presented, as are suggestions for establishing more institutionalized contacts across disciplines.

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years the numbers of non-native speakers has grown dramatically in English-speaking universities across Canada. At the same time, growing international connectedness and curiosity about other cultures has been attracting native-English speakers (NES) to enroll in courses on cross-cultural communication.

First year can be a difficult time of adjustment for all university students; however, for many immigrant and international students this is their first learning experience in a new linguistic, social and cultural environment, making them prone to the feelings of anxiety, isolation, confusion, and the sense of impotence that culture shock can impose [1]. These affective factors may impede learning, increasing the pedagogical shock, and interfere with socialization with the native-English speakers (NES).

Cheng and Fox [2] conducted studies on non-native students’ academic acculturation and reported that non-native speakers (NNS) find interaction with native speakers of English, i.e., peers, professors and teaching assistants, difficult. Some students talked about being intimidated in groups dominated by NES, and not being taken seriously because they could not express themselves clearly, or felt that their input was not valid because their points of view differed from those of native-English speaking Canadian peers. Occasional impatience or even arrogance of NES students was also reported. Realizing the importance of social interaction with native speakers, some students reported that they needed help in learning how to make friends and interact effectively with “Canadians” [2].

Native speakers, on the other hand, do not seem to seek opportunities to socialize with peers from other parts of the world. According to Wright and Lander, “it appears that university students rarely initiate interaction with members of different cultures” [3, p. 240]. Similarly, Ting-Toomey [4] reports lack of connection with often “otherized” peers. And yet, as Geelhoed, Abe and Talbot [5] note in their work on international peer mentoring, increased interaction, cross-cultural knowledge and openness can enhance academic success, reduce depression, and promote sensitivity and "knowledge and awareness of foreign cultures, traditions and customs" [5, p. 2]. Universities recognize these benefits and many aim to internationalize and make global connections through their student body, but simply having international students on campus does not ensure contact or intercultural learning. Opportunities for interaction must be created, not simply awaited.

New communication technologies create such opportunities as they allow for extending interaction between different groups of learners beyond classroom boundaries. The appreciation of such interaction is based on the assumptions that knowledge is a social construct and cognitive development is a result of social interaction [6].

Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory of cognitive development and Bruner’s constructivist theory [7] have had a major impact on views on teaching and learning in North America. The constructivists maintain that knowledge is constructed by the learner, meaning that it cannot be taught but it must be learned. This notion
of learning caused a shift in instructional design from teacher-centered to learner-centered. In learner-centered models students actively participate in the learning process, sharing ideas and perspectives, and “thinking critically about real learning problems and resources” [8]. Students progress from a lower to a higher level of skills and knowledge under adult or expert guidance or as a result of collaboration with more capable peers [6].

Instructional models, particularly those based on social constructivist theory, incorporate peer collaboration and group learning, with the teacher playing the role of a facilitator-expert. Such models lend themselves to inclusion of educational technologies as they allow creation of rich learning environments that engage learners in authentic project-based tasks where negotiation of meanings and clarification of concepts lead to cognitive growth.

The design of the project described here was based on the assumptions that learning is constructed through social interaction that facilitates critical thinking and cognitive growth; that cooperation between diverse groups creates authentic learning environment essential for meaningful interaction; that project work lends itself to learner-centered activities shifting instructional design from “teaching” to “learning”; and that communication via computer networks can enhance collaborative, project-based instruction in a conventional course delivery.

This cross-cultural survey project involved two groups of first year-students at a medium size university in eastern Canada: native speakers and non-native speakers of English. It aimed to broaden learning opportunities by extending and enhancing class-based instruction for both groups and to increase opportunities for the NNS group to communicate in the target language with NES. Contact between students was entirely by email because the courses did not follow the same weekly schedule. It was expected that the project work would offer benefits similar to those postulated by Roberts [9] including: 1) academic, i.e., development of critical thinking and active involvement of students in the learning process, 2) social, i.e., development of social support system and building diversity understanding among students and creating a positive atmosphere for cooperation, and 3) psychological, i.e., increasing students’ self-esteem.

In section two we describe the courses and the students who participated in the project. Section three gives a detailed description of the project’s objectives, design and process. Instructors’ perspectives on the benefits of this collaboration are presented in section four, and a discussion on collaborative learning from cultural perspectives is given in section five. In concluding remarks we summarize the benefits of this collaborative cross-cultural survey project and give some suggestions for its improvement.

2. Courses and participants

The following section describes the courses’ content and provides demographic information about the participants.

2.1. Content

All participants were first-year students registered in two different courses: a first-year seminar entitled “Cross-Cultural Communicative Competence” (4Cs) and an introductory level of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. First-year seminars are small-class courses offered to students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts Program aimed at supporting students’ acculturation to academic requirements. The EAP courses prepare non-native-speaking students linguistically and academically for university studies in Canada.

The 4Cs was a year-long, three hours per week course. The EAP course ran for one semester, with double the normal course hours (six per week). Both courses were designed to develop study skills and critical thinking. While work in 4Cs involved research methods, the EAP stressed academic language development.

In both courses students studied about cultural differences and communication. The 4Cs focused on anthropological, cultural and linguistic theories; the EAP on differences between Socratic and Confucian cultures, the cultural dimension of power distance and low and high context cultures [4, 10, 11].

The EAP course was designed following the principles of sustained content instruction, where through exploration of one theme students develop not only a deeper understanding of the main concepts related to the theme but also study skills, critical thinking and academic language [12]. Adopting methodology that simulates regular university courses was crucial for collaboration between the two groups. Working on the same or similar cultural themes, presented in the form of readings and lectures, allowed the students in both groups to build similar knowledge schemas and created a foundation for meaningful, informed communication.

2.2. Participants

The 12 4Cs students participating in the project were all Canadian-born. They were native English speakers, educated in English schools and mostly from small communities where contact with non-native speakers
of English is limited. Most 4Cs students spoke only English, with some standard school level French; a few came from so-called "heritage" language backgrounds (see Table 1), without actively speaking these languages.

The EAP students were registered in two sections of the same level course taught by the same instructor. Out of the 28 EAP students who participated in the project almost half spoke Mandarin and Cantonese, the remaining spoke Romanian, Bengali, Farsi, Korean, Arabic, Vietnamese, Croatian and Russian. Notably, the age and levels of education were more diverse than those of the 4Cs students. As part of the admission policy, the students were allowed to take only one more university course so their contact with native-speaking peers was limited.

Table 1. Demographic information about NNS and NES Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>NNS (28)</th>
<th>NES (12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>18 – 45 (23 av.)</td>
<td>17 – 26 (20 av.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>F – 16; M - 12</td>
<td>F – 7; M - 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First language</strong></td>
<td>Chinese (16); Farsi (3); Vietnamese (2); Arabic (1); Bengali (1); Croatian (1); French (1); Romanian (1); Russian (1); Yi (1)</td>
<td>English (8); French (1); Hindi (1); Mandarin (1); Serbian (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time in Canada</strong></td>
<td>1.8 years (aver.)</td>
<td>Since birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High school (last yr.)</strong></td>
<td>China (15); Canada (7); Croatia (1); Iran (3); Mali (1); Romania (1)</td>
<td>English schools in Canada (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major</strong></td>
<td>Varied; all faculties</td>
<td>Varied; humanities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Vygotskian terms, both groups of students were experts in different ways. The English-speaking 4Cs students were proficient in the language required by the task, as well as more socially and pedagogically acculturated. The ESL students, on the other hand, were expert informants about their own cultures. Due to their experiences they were also more attuned to the complexities of communicating across cultures.

3. The Project

Four steps were involved in project design and implementation: 1) establishing similar learning schemas, 2) creating the groups, 3) structuring the learning activities, and 4) monitoring group interaction.

3.1. Process and responsibilities

There were three phases in the project: 1) preparation, 2) collaboration, and 3) follow-up assignments. By design the groups had different responsibilities, with the 4Cs students playing a leadership role.

Figure 1 depicts the project timeline over a period of ten weeks. The preparation phase took six weeks for both groups. In the last week of this phase, the 4Cs students prepared survey questions; the EAP group, being less involved in the research aspect of the project, continued working on cultural themes (power distance). In week 6, while preparing the survey, the 4Cs students sent their introductory email to EAP students. Email exchanges took two weeks, then the 4Cs students produced three types of assignments, which took two weeks to complete and were worth 20% of the total mark, while the EAP students took one week to write their assignments worth 5%.

The preparation phase for the 4Cs students comprised two parts: 1) acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary for the creation of a cross-cultural survey, and 2) creation of the survey. The survey questions drew on the concepts presented in the readings. Students worked in groups, each of which prepared a set of questions; these were then compared, discussed, clarified, and the final version of the survey typed up. Similarly, the EAP students worked on acquiring background knowledge on various aspects of cross-cultural communication; however, they also worked intensively on the development of academic language and skills.

Fig. 1. Project phases and key activities

Student communication was done through email, and seven types of emails can be distinguished (Fig. 1):

1. In week 6, when they were finishing the survey questions every 4Cs student sent personal emails to two EAP students. This email contained a short introduction of the sender and an invitation to participate in the survey project.
2. The EAP students replied accepting the invitation.
3. Then a request to fill in the attached survey form was emailed by 4Cs students (which they also completed themselves).
4. The EAP students responded by email providing answers to the survey questions.
While analyzing the in-coming responses, the 4Cs group were sending requests for clarification.

The EAP students responded providing clarification.

Finally, after collecting, analyzing and verifying information, the 4Cs students distributed the results to all participants.

### 3.2. Survey results: power distance

The survey prepared by 4Cs students had twenty questions: ten focused on the dimension of power distance (PD); the remaining referred to other aspects of culture and cross-cultural communication. Table 2 presents responses to seven questions about PD. We selected these questions because they were well formulated and allowed us to observe differences between the two groups. The remaining questions covered a wide range of topics making it difficult to trace patterns; some were not clear. We decided not to make major changes to the survey so that we could discuss strengths and weaknesses of each question at the end of the project and learn from it.

Table 2 shows differences between NNS and NES on the dimension of power distance (PD). Six questions ask about hierarchy in the family and school; one about teaching pedagogy and one about social distance between politicians and citizens.

The responses of non-native speakers (NNS) indicate steep hierarchy in their families – 96% of the students responded that fathers play the dominant role in the family; children are not involved in the decision regarding school choice; this decision is usually made by both parents (53%) and by fathers (28%); and money matters tend to be controlled by one parent (either mother or father). When it comes to decisions affecting child’s life (like marriage, or studies abroad) only 21% responded that they make these decisions by themselves.

In contrast, responses of native English speakers (NES) indicate a more flat hierarchy in the family – 50% responded that the dominant role in the family is shared by mother and father; decisions where to send a child to school are made by both parents (91%); also, family finances tend to be responsibility of both parents (58%). Finally, major decisions affecting child’s life are often made by the child (41%).

In cultures with large PD students are expected to show respect to people in power, e.g., teachers; 85% of the NNS students, as opposed to 50% of NES, responded that it is unlikely that students would speak to a teacher disrespectfully.

One of the characteristics of teaching pedagogy in large PD countries is promotion of competition among students. Small PD countries tend to promote cooperation. All students in the NNS group said that their teachers promoted competition. Only four students in the NES group answered this question but they all said that their teachers used both cooperation and competition (see section 5).

Another indication of larger PD in countries represented by NNS than in Canada in the social distance between politicians and citizens - 57% of NNS as opposed to 100% of NES said that open disagreement with political leaders is acceptable.

#### Table 2. Survey results: power distance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>NNS: 28</th>
<th>NES: 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Dominant role in the family has</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Decision about children’s school is made by</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Money matters in families are controlled by</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Child’s life-changing decisions are made by</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Speaking to a teacher disrespectfully is</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Teachers encourage students to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compete</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Open disagreement with political leaders is</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not acceptable</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey results confirm Hofstede’s findings which found that Canada has a relatively small power distance, with an index (PDI) of 39. The world average is 55. In contrast, all cultures represented by the NNS in this project (except for Bangladesh and Croatia, for which PDI data is not available) have significantly larger power index: Russia – 93, Romania 90, China - 80, Hong Kong – 68, Arab countries 80 and Iran 58.

### 3.3. Follow up assignments

There were three types of writing practiced in this project: 1) informal, semi-social interaction that required composing emails, 2) formal academic writing, and 3) reflective journal writing. Although writing tasks for each group varied, they were all assigned with the purpose of developing critical thinking and academic language and conventions.
The formal writing tasks assigned to the 4Cs group in the seminar on cross-cultural communication included designing a research instrument in the form of a survey and writing a short formal report. The main purpose for requesting that the students prepare a survey and then categorize and analyze data was to introduce them to research practices typical for social sciences and make them appreciate challenges involved in research. The oral presentation gave the students an opportunity to practise oral communication skills in formal academic settings. The journal was a reflection on the process as a whole in terms of personal and cultural responses and insights attained.

The EAP group had two assignments that required formal academic writing. One was an explanation of the definition and summary of the main concepts related to the dimension of power distance; the other, an analysis of two survey responses from the point of view of power distance. The assignment types were familiar to the students as they had practised summaries and analyzed cultural cases throughout the term. However, the analysis of survey responses was more complex and cognitively more demanding than an analysis of a case from a textbook. Preparation for writing involved clustering survey responses, identifying the ones that elicited information about power distance and selecting two students’ responses for analysis. In their journals the EAP students shared their observations and perceptions of social distances in their own societies and in Canada.

4. Instructors’ perceptions

The overall aim of this project was to enhance the delivery of both courses by creating a richer learning environment.

In Section 2 we mentioned three main categories of benefits expected from this project work, i.e., academic, social and psychological. The evaluation that follows is based on students’ responses to open-ended questions in the survey, oral presentations, journal entries and in-class comments. Based on these we conclude that despite initial difficulties, the project accomplished its goals.

4.1. Learning benefits

One of the most appealing claims regarding computer mediated communication is the development of learning and critical thinking skills and authenticity of interaction which improves motivation. [13]. The project work provided learning experience in an almost authentic setting, namely the requirement to commit to an academic task. Both sets of students were introduced to the process of research and data management, the 4Cs group through designing a research instrument and compiling data for subsequent analysis; and the EAP group through responding to and relating survey questions and answers to the theories of cultures studied, examining the compiled results, and selecting data for a final assignment.

The collaboration improved students’ recall of the content of the readings [9] as well as language. This was particularly visible in the NNS group. In their responses to the survey the students referred to concepts and used vocabulary from the readings to explain and interpret differences between Canadian culture and their own.

For example, some EAP students referred to the fact that they come from a high context culture [11] and unlike Canadians they keep distance when they meet somebody for the first time. They said this is because in their cultures they communicate mostly with family and friends and that is why, they explained, they have difficulty talking with strangers, i.e., Canadians. They talked about the role of teachers and students in large and small power distance [10] and its ramifications for classroom dynamics.

From the EAP students’ responses the 4Cs group learned about barriers in communication resulting from cultural differences. Receiving cultural information directly from students from other cultures and implementing ideas previously only discussed through readings helped all the students consolidate their understanding of the topics. This contradicts findings reported by Paulus [14] that “when computer-mediated environments are specifically designed to connect course knowledge to experience through interactions, deep connections are not made as frequently as opinions are exchanged and social acknowledgments made” (p. 103). Finally, in their final assignments all students gave evidence of knowing how to select, synthesize and analyze information, skills referred to as higher order thinking.

4.2. Social benefits

In terms of social benefits, both the 4Cs and EAP students reported feeling a great deal of satisfaction in gaining some measure of understanding about different cultural norms and beliefs. In their responses to the survey some EAP students expressed willingness to provide clarification over email or in person. All students projected a spirit of cross-cultural courtesy despite occasional language confusion. We can conclude that the project helped to build diversity understanding among students and created a positive atmosphere for cooperation.

However, once the 4Cs students distributed com-
piled data, to the best of the instructors’ knowledge, the contacts stopped. Importantly, despite the cessation of contact with the EAP collaborators, many 4Cs students expressed strong regret in their course post-report reflections at not having taken more active steps to establish personal contact with students from other cultures that this project would have provided.

4.3. Psychological benefits

Psychological benefits, i.e., increasing self-esteem, might be the most difficult aspect of the project to comment on. However, there are indications that the project work did contribute to building self-esteem for students in both groups.

Because of the differences in their backgrounds and different roles in the project psychological benefits manifested themselves differently for each group. The 4Cs students were assigned the role of researchers and “project managers” (as well as informants), so they were aware of the importance of their contribution.

The EAP students were primarily informants. But it was this group that demonstrated change in their behavior. Initially reluctant to respond, they eventually became outspoken and much more expansive and frank in their answers than the 4Cs respondents who answered the same survey questions. Their desire for individual visibility was depicted in detailed responses, and the answers to the open-ended questions in the survey indicate that the EAP students found the survey an opportunity to have their voices heard. Many commented that they liked answering the questions, called the survey “cool”, offered to explain their answers again if the explanations were not clear because of their language use, and even offered to meet in person if the 4Cs partner felt that he/she needed more information.

In Vygotsky’s terms this social discourse between students gave rise to the growth of an inner voice which provided them with a sense of control, an essential condition for language learning [13]. The responses to the survey demonstrated that despite background differences the students shared similar feelings, academic expectations, hopes, and anxieties. The very fact that they were given an opportunity to share these feelings had a beneficial psychological effect.

5. Collaborative learning, technology and culture

Collaboration by email involving research was a new experience for all participants and this may explain why initially not all students appreciated the time constraints on connecting and providing feedback through emailed responses. In some cases, questionnaires were not sent as scheduled or responses not received till just before the assignment deadlines, which required re-calculating and reformulating the input and re-assessing the overall findings.

The inertia was particularly evident in the EAP group, and it was not until the students received a request to cc. their email correspondence to the instructor that everybody became involved. Furthermore, Stockwell's [15] report on how native speaker and non-native speakers’ email exchanges depended on the level of conversation thread maintenance resonated within our own project in that not all EAP students picked up on the English-speaking students’ signals inviting more specific information. Also, not all students cooperated equally in the project and did not always effectively share data that others required.

One of the tenets of cooperative learning that distinguishes it from other learning settings is the possibility to create opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to interact [16]. Students, however, must also share interests and/or goals to be motivated to cooperate. In our case both groups of students showed interest in studying theories of cultural differences. As mentioned earlier, there was an overlap of course contents, which helped develop shared knowledge and language that enabled the participants to talk about cultural issues. Also, students in both groups expressed interest when the instructors announced the project and its objectives. When it came to practice, however, the problems began. Contrary to Stockwell’s findings [15] in which he reported high enthusiasm at the beginning of email interactions and drop-off as time progressed, the students involved in this project showed a reversed interaction pattern: inertia at the beginning, satisfactory increase in communication after instructors’ intervention and finally enthusiasm and even regrets, in some cases, that closer friendly links were not established independent of the project.

The factors that affected the project at the beginning could be divided into those that apply to all the students, and those specific to the EAP group. In other words, the initial inertia could be explained by two factors, 1) the general lack of appreciation of the first-year university students of the benefits of collaborative learning, particularly over email, and 2) linguistic, cultural and psychological factors that may have caused a delay in response by the EAP group.

It has been documented in literature that despite its acclaimed benefits the collaborative model is not a commonly embraced pedagogical strategy in face-to-face interaction [17]. Computer technologies with their benefits of asynchronous, cross-boundary communication may be challenging for teachers as they add to concerns about losing control over monitoring students’
work and progress [18]. If not many teachers are enthusiastic about the benefits of collaborative strategies, it is not surprising then that students themselves are not always comfortable or positive about the purported benefits of this style of learning [3]. Klemm [17] maintains that “many students have been conditioned by formal education to be passive learners” (p.177).

Learning from peers rather than depending primarily on the authority of teacher and texts may not be an internalized value for many students, both native and non-native speakers. Although in both courses students had prior experiences with face-to-face group work, moving interaction to the electronic medium without teacher’s direct supervision changed the dynamics. It became clear that for many students in this project taking responsibility for engaging in the process and completing the task was a new experience. It required initiative, personal commitment and time management and these were lacking at the very beginning. As indicated earlier, the initial inertia was more apparent in the EAP group.

There could be two broad explanations: 1) challenges related to self-perceived language proficiency and its impact on participation [2], and 2) cultural factors that may have caused more hesitation to join in.

In terms of limited language proficiency, an effort was made to minimize the effect of linguistic “shyness” by explaining to the EAP group the importance of their input to the 4Cs students and making sure that all students shared the status of anonymity. However, an element of wariness about exposing linguistic deficiencies to fluent English speakers may have accounted for the EAP students’ hesitation to be equally engaged.

The tendency of non-native speakers to defer to native speakers is often attributed not only to linguistic but also cultural factors. Wright [3], for instance, found that SE Asian students took a submissive role when working with Australian peers and awaited direction and leadership from the Australian students as a perceived authority. Our experience confirmed their findings in the initial stages of the project. However, after EAP instructor’s intervention, the NNS became very involved in collaboration.

The survey results indicate that due to their Canadian educational background native English speakers were more familiar with project and group work than the EAP group were. For the EAP group, any cooperation among students as a way of learning was a new concept. To the question asking for comments on “teachers and classroom activities” the EAP students consistently (25 out of 25 valid answers) replied that teachers in their countries favor competition among students. They cited frequent exams, tests and quizzes as teaching tools and explained that collaboration or group work are not typically part of instruction. They elaborated on the topic by saying that their teachers believe that competition increases motivation, that it is a fair practice as it benefits those who work hard, that through competition teachers can identify good students as well as the weak ones, and that competition encourages students to put more effort into studying.

The EAP students mentioned strategies such as public display of student ranking on classroom walls or in the form of public announcements. One student from a Confucian tradition (albeit not Chinese) explained that in her country there is a fear that sharing ideas may lead to stealing ideas among students so group work or peer help are not a typical part of classroom pedagogy.

All international and immigrant students face pedagogical shock to a certain degree. However, this shock may be bigger for Asian students coming from the Confucian tradition of teaching and learning, which promotes the effortful acquisition of “essential knowledge” from respected individuals such as teachers. Transmission of essential knowledge is the pedagogical model, and memorization of works of recognized scholars and authority figures one of the encouraged learning strategies. This is in straight contrast with the view of the Western Socratic tradition which promotes questioning oneself and others, including teachers and other authority figures, as a method of learning [19]. In our project, students who described themselves as coming from hierarchical cultures expressed a feeling of being lost and a desire for more structure.

One other benefit of collaborative learning documented in literature is its potential to contribute to the development of critical thinking [9]. Critical thinking “conceptualizes learning as a constantly evolving process of discovering, questioning and reformulating hypotheses” [20, p. 15]. To some researchers it means skepticism, to others a socio-cultural practice that is not easily defined.

Critical thinking reflects a Western, Socratic ideal of learning, one that values questioning accepted knowledge, evaluating beliefs and generating one’s own hypotheses [19]. It is a new term for many students but especially difficult for many NNS to conceptualize, particularly those educated in the Confucian tradition. As one Chinese student explained in a conversation with the instructor, she had great difficulties summarizing the part of an assigned reading that dealt with the Socratic method as she could not conceptualize this approach. Since the summary of the Confucian approach (in the same reading) did not cause her difficulties she arrived at the conclusion that it is not only the language but the culturally influenced thinking patterns that contribute to difficulties with understanding language.

In answers to open-ended survey questions, a Chinese student explained that one of the barriers for NNS
students to overcome is a different study style and assignments. In her words this requires changes in students’ mindsets. These comments indicate that the project work engaged students in critical thinking.

Another interesting finding was that the majority of EAP students quoted both language and culture as the major barrier in communication: out of 25 respondents six said “language”, five said “culture”, five “language and culture” and four “social life”. This realization of the importance of cultural aspects of communication may be at least partly attributed to the course contents as well as to interaction with the native speakers group and the reflections that the survey prepared by the 4Cs students must have stimulated.

For the NES students this project provided a focus for both intrinsic and instrumental motivation towards developing cross-cultural communicative competence, while for the NNS a more integrative acculturative orientation seemed to be at play [21].

5. Conclusions and reflections

This collaborative cross-cultural project benefited all students by facilitating the development of knowledge and skills necessary for academic success. More specifically it:

- contributed to development of critical thinking through recall of texts, interaction, clarification of meanings, data analysis and writing;
- introduced research methods and gave hands-on experience of creating a research instrument and data analysis;
- promoted students’ responsibility for completion of learning tasks;
- enriched the learning environment by adding peers as sources of information;
- created a comfortable environment for learning and helped develop mutual understanding by showing that collaboration is possible and beneficial;
- promoted interaction, cross-cultural knowledge, openness and sensitivity;
- contributed to raising self-esteem; and
- showed how communication technology can be used to attain the above benefits.

This was a pilot project and a learning experience not only for the students but also for the instructors. Below are a few suggestions that we think would help improve the project design and delivery:

- Using project management software (for example, www.onstage.com) instead of email. The software would keep track of message exchanges and help students as well as instructors monitor progress.
- Collaboration between the two groups could begin much earlier in the course. For example, if instructors decided on the same readings (at least at the beginning of the term), then they could pair up NES and NNS to work on summaries of these readings.
- EAP students are interested in Canadian culture so they should prepare their own survey and ask NES to respond. In other words, there would be two surveys, one prepared by NES for NNS and the other by NNS for NES. This would make involvement of each group in the project more equal.
- The weighing of the assignments should be higher than 5% for the EAP students. For example, the email correspondence alone could be allocated 3-5% (part of the mark could be “promptness of response”, another, “length of response”).
- The interaction should be extended to 4Cs students helping EAP students with editing final assignments (also for marks or bonus points) in order to build a social support system for the EAP students and to help 4Cs students understand the difficulties nonnative speakers face when communicating in English. As Geelhoed, Abe and Talbot [5] point out, it is important for initial contact efforts to be sustained for longer term benefits to accrue.

Similar projects could benefit a variety of programs that aim to prepare graduates for work in areas where intercultural contact is likely or desirable. Teacher training programs, not least for teaching English as a Second Language, constitute one obvious arena where specific cross-cultural courses are often lacking [22]. Anthropology, international business, interdisciplinary or foreign affairs studies, and social work, for example, are other areas where the cross-cultural element is sometimes under-represented or lacking altogether, especially in opportunities for direct contact. We hope that the collaborative project described above may provide some encouragement for initiating these necessary connections.

6. References

[3] S. Wright and D. Lander, "Collaborative group interactions of students from two ethnic backgrounds," *Higher Education Research and Development* vol. 22,


