

Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Portuguese through Skype and Facebook

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Abstract: This article describes a foreign language pedagogical activity by the application of interactive technology with intermediate students of Portuguese at Northwestern University. Our students were paired up with Brazilian college students from São Paulo and interacted with them during the fall quarter in Portuguese, through Skype and in a closed group on Facebook. This opportunity to enhance their intercultural communicative competence in the language motivated them to discuss their views, share their thoughts, and to learn more from their peers. Every other week, they reported about their online interaction through a self-assessment worksheet, where they could evaluate the interaction and their own linguistic and intercultural development.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, foreign language teaching and learning, social media, interactive technology

1. Introduction

A concept of language that can be at the base of intercultural communicative competence is “Language is perhaps the most important sign system within a culture. This is because language arises from everyday life. It is grounded in the experiences of the social self. It is grounded in the intersubjectivity with interacting with others in public. It enables one to integrate these sundry experiences into a meaningful whole. Language refers to the paramount reality of a culture, its mainstream of public life” (St. Clair, 2006, p. 96). Language represents how human beings participate in a social world, how they categorize it, and experience it. Language teachers, who perceive this concept, will always offer their students experiences in the real social world. In this way, language learners will better understand the connection between language and its functioning. More than experiences in the learners’ own world, experiences in the foreign language world enrich students’ views both in the new language as well as their own.

In the present time, technology has shortened distances and it has served to better equip the foreign language practice with native speakers in the classroom.

A few decades ago, a foreign language instructor would be confronted with significant challenges just to offer their students “live interactions” with a native speaker of distant regions. The most reliable means to interact with someone overseas were either by mail or placing a scheduled phone call. Instructors of foreign languages possessing a broader worldview would encourage their students to correspond with foreign pen pals. However, standard courier posts would often require prolonged periods of time, between sending and receiving correspondence. The telephone could also be used in a classroom activity, if desired. Nevertheless, it was certainly

a very unusual pedagogical tool, especially because of the costly price of international calls.

Means of communication have significantly evolved and have influenced how we approach a native speaker in another country. The Internet has modified the way we acquire and process knowledge, and has radically changed how we communicate. Computers turned out to be an extension of us. Modern technological resources have brought a new dimension to communication, and the establishment of online social media has imposed a new approach for teaching a foreign language in a classroom setting.

This new access to information Internet technology, by the end of the 20th century, motivated the establishment of learning projects based on computer-mediated-communication (Dunken, 1991; O'Dowd, 2003; Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2004; St. Clair & Masolo, 2004). These projects gave rise to a more efficient way to understand cultural perspectives from students in both sides of the computer connection.

One such example is reported in the "Cultura Project" (Bauer, Bennett et al., 2006). It was originally created in 1997 as an online exchange between American and French students, offered through a French language class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Today, it has expanded and connects foreign language learners in the USA with students living in France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and Russia through a shared website, along with asynchronous web-based forums. The online asynchronous written form of communication allows students to prepare and to answer published questions without the constraints of different time zones.

As videoconferencing emerged, telecollaborative projects gained a new dimension in language learning. This technology permitted online synchronous face-to-face communication, shifting the focus from a writing skill set to a broader range of foreign language skills to address oral and visual communication. Through the use of novel software, available technical support, improved network connection, resolution enhancements, and improved sound quality, the computer monitor became as much of a true window to the habitat of the native speaker almost as sharing a seat in his own country.

Motivated by the ease of access and availability of the global Internet, language teachers and linguists have emphasized the value and necessity of adapting new communication tools to the language classroom. Many studies demonstrate the opportunity to achieve greater cultural awareness and improve language skills through online interactions with native speakers (Thorne, 2005; Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001; Whittaker, 2001).

Nevertheless, just the use of new technology in our daily courses is not sufficient for good outcomes. It rather depends on clear pedagogical goals with appropriately applied strategies.

I have been applying interactive technology to my Portuguese Intermediate classes at Northwestern University. To clarify "interactive technology", I mean the use of technical resources that facilitate the online interaction with other users of the same resources. My main goal with interactive technology is to provide the opportunity for my students to enhance their **intercultural communicative competence** in Portuguese, as they have the opportunity to expand their knowledge about language and what it represents. To illustrate this, I will share the application of Skype in my class implemented by exchanges carried out on Facebook, in interactions between my students and college students from Brazil. However, before that, it is essential to revise the concept of *competence* in the language classroom setting.

2. Competence in Language Learning

The first notion of competence comes from Chomsky (1965) who coined the term *linguistic competence* to explain the speaker's knowledge of the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological characteristics of the language, as well as the ability to use these characteristics to produce words and sentences, according to rules of usage. This concept does not consider social factors. Hymes (1972), reacting against this notion, proposed the term *sociolinguistic competence*, since it was only through the social environment that one could account for language use and acquisition. He argued that language utterances should be interpreted according to the social context of linguistic varieties, and the appropriate social meaning in the communicative situation.

Canale & Swain (1980) applied the concept of sociolinguistic competence suggested by Hymes to the core of a communicative foreign language teaching approach. The goal of the *communicative approach* is the acquisition of necessary skills to interact both socially and culturally according to language functions in a given social context.

Within the framework of the communicative teaching approach, the concept of *communicative competence* ramified. Canale and Swain added a new element to the model proposed by Hymes: the *strategic competence*, which is the ability to compensate for problems or deficit in communication. Later, in 1983, Canale furthered the model, adding to it the *discourse competence*, which is the ability to produce and interpret language beyond the sentence level.

In 1995, Celce-Murcia et al. proposed a new branch: the *actional competence*, which is the ability to comprehend and produce all significant speech act sets. They also reframed the way they perceived the types of competence. The model was no longer seen as a ramification, but as an interrelation.

Later, in 2007, Celce-Murcia proposed a new model of communicative competence that introduced the *formulaic competence*, which refers to fixed and prefabricated chunks of language that native speakers commonly use in everyday interactions. In this new perspective, Celce-Murcia suggests a new type of competence: the *interactional competence*, which comprises the *actional competence*, the *conversational competence* and the *non-verbal/ paralinguistic competence*.

Celce-Murcia sustains that all these types of competence, which define and integrate the conception of "communicative competence", should be combined with **cultural and cross-cultural instruction**. The reason for this is the high importance of the sociocultural context of language uses that should be taken into consideration in a teaching-learning environment.

The **communicative competence framework** became more complex as it tried to incorporate social and cultural aspects of the interactions. Nevertheless, there is a problem with the application of this model into language teaching.

As many authors (Byram, 1997; Aguilar 2007; Alptekin, 2002) point out, the communicative approach is based on the "native speaker model", which reinforces that it would be possible to 'become' a native speaker. The reality is that learners of a foreign language will never become a native speaker of this language. Even if they master the language with proficiency, their world view and experience cannot be the same as the foreigner; neither will they have the same perspective. Interpretations and filters from their own language and culture will be in place as they learn a new language. Alptekin (op. cit.) stresses that the communicative teaching approach

is “utopian, unrealistic and constraining”. He sustains that the model of the native speaker is a myth, especially when a language becomes “international” or *lingua franca*. Speakers might use a language to communicate with other speakers in the world without either one being a “native speaker”.

Therefore, a switch is necessary: the goal of learning a new language is to become a “proficient user”, not to “behave as a native speaker”. Both the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) as well as the *Proficiency Guidelines* of the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* (ACTFL) suggest that a proficient user of a language is able to manage his abilities in a foreign language in a meaningful way, in different settings and various conditions, engaging in language activities that demonstrate the efficiency and usefulness of his communicative competences. Regarding proficiency, it is important to note that the CEFR (2001, p. 1), emphasizes the importance of the ‘other’ in language education. The relationship with the other – through a new language and culture – “promotes the development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity”. Proficiency in a foreign language contributes then to a new dimension in human development, as it helps understand the other as one understands the self.

Thus, the “proficient language user” is someone whose language skills go far beyond pure linguistic and cultural knowledge: he is able to **mediate** different cultures and languages while **interpreting** and **connecting** two different ways of understanding the world. The proficient language user would be able to take into account the various *social scripts* that constitute the background for verbal discourse (St. Clair, Thomé-Williams & Su, 2005). He would also fit into the *framework of cultural space*, where interpretation and connection undoubtedly support the social construction of reality, in mediation of space and time (St. Clair & Thomé-Williams, 2008).

The “proficient user” of a foreign language is a successful “intercultural mediator”. According to Byram, Nichols and Stevens (2001, p. 5), the intercultural mediator is the “intercultural speaker” who, as they state, “has an ability to interact with ‘others’, to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, and to be conscious of their evaluations of difference”. The intercultural speaker is someone who has developed an *intercultural communicative competence*.

There is a difference between **communicative competence** and **intercultural communicative competence** in foreign language education, as demonstrated in the table below.

Table 1. Development of communicative and intercultural communicative competence. Now, there is another contrast to make: the difference between Intercultural Competence (IC) and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).

	Communicative Competence	Intercultural Communicative Competence
Main Goal	Target language and target culture	Relationship between language and cultures
Model to Follow	The Native Speaker	The Intercultural Speaker
Development of Linguistic and Communicative Abilities:	How to use language in the foreign language context	Beyond foreign language context – attitudes, discoveries, critical awareness
Perspective	The other	Self in relation to the other

2.1. Intercultural Competence (IC)

According to Byram, Nichols & Stevens (op. cit., pp. 4-7), the Intercultural Competence (IC) is based on components such as: intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills, and shared values in a given society. The foundation is on the **attitudes** of the intercultural speaker. Byram refers to these components as “savoirs”, the “know how”, that will guide the attitudes of a foreign language learner. I will briefly describe these components, as they are important for the acquisition of the Intercultural Communicative Competence.

a) *Intercultural attitudes (savoir être)*

Intercultural attitudes refer to curiosity, openness, readiness, beliefs and behaviors of the interlocutors. One should be able to perceive the other and the self with open eyes, with eagerness to consider new values, beliefs and behaviors.

b) *Knowledge/ Knowledge (savoirs)*

Knowledge refers to understanding how social groups and social identities function, including one’s own groups and identities. Further, *Knowledge (savoirs)* denotes the products and the practices of these social groups.

c) *Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)*

Skills of interpreting and relating designate the ability to interpret and explain a document or an event from one culture to another.

d) *Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/ faire)*

Skills of discovery and interaction refer to the ability to acquire and operate newly acquired knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time interaction.

e) *Critical cultural awareness (savoir s’engager)*

Critical cultural awareness is the ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and products in one’s own culture as well as another’s culture. This evaluation operates on the basis of explicit criteria.

These components are essential to those who would like to play the role of intercultural mediators. And they should be the groundwork of foreign language *teaching* within an intercultural approach.

2.2. Intercultural Communicative Competence

The intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is attained in the context of language learning and the accurate way to perform in the language. As Byram, Kribkova & Starkey (2002, pp. 9-10) mention “language teaching in an intercultural dimension continues to help learners to acquire the linguistic competence needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/ write in correct and appropriate ways”.

Students learn linguistic, communicative and intercultural abilities in order to effectively communicate and appropriately relate content in a variety of cross-cultural situations. Their cultural values, worldviews and attitudes are important to build an interrelationship with communities where the foreign language is spoken.

It is vital that the instructor offers students a solid ground for interrelationships and substantial opportunities for them to develop their intercultural communicative competence. Activities should be well planned to instigate meaningful participation from the students.

Based on the principle that language and communication are at the heart of human experience, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has developed the *National Standards for Foreign Language Education*. The Standards propose that all students should be “linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in the American society and abroad”. The Standards are based on 5 goal areas, known as the 5 Cs. These areas can be seen as ‘strategies’ for teachers who wish to prompt their students to be proficient and interculturally competent in the foreign language.

The 5 Cs to be applied in the foreign language classroom are:

1. *Communication* – Students engage in conversations in a language other than English, exchange opinions in this language, interpret written and spoken discourse, present information and ideas for listeners or readers on different topics.
2. *Cultures* – Students demonstrate an understanding of practices, products and perspectives of the culture studied.
3. *Connections* – The study of a foreign language and culture becomes a bridge to the content of other disciplines. Students recognize different viewpoints and perspectives in order to further their knowledge in various fields.
4. *Comparisons* – Comparisons with other languages and cultures in many layers enhance the development of insights into the new language and culture.
5. *Communities* – Participation in multilingual communities at home and around the world enrich the language learning experience and serves to build relationships.

It is clear to identify the Intercultural Communication components described above in the ACTFL Foreign Language Standards. They reveal the importance of developing and maintaining an intercultural setting at school.

We should offer opportunities for our students to become proficient Intercultural Speakers as often as possible. How can we develop that in our Foreign Language courses, especially when most of the time, the only agent from a foreign language and culture is the instructor? A way of doing this is applying interactive technology, such as Skype and Facebook to the foreign language class.

3. Starting an Intercultural Communication Project in the Portuguese Classroom with Skype and Facebook

Skype is a free software application that allows instant communication through text, audio or video messaging through the Internet. Skype was released in 2003 and started to become one of the most popular tools for video interaction in real time. Because of its features and accessibility, Skype has been applied into foreign language teaching/ learning across the world, and one of its greatest advantages is that it facilitates *tandem* learning. “Tandem” is a method of learning a new language that involves a pair of speakers of different languages:

one learns the language of the other. Brammerts (1996) mentions the characteristics of *tandem learning*:

Learning in tandem can be defined as a form of open learning, whereby two people with different native languages work together in pairs in order to learn more about one another's character and culture; to help one another improve their language skills; and often also to exchange additional knowledge, for example, about their professional life.

With Skype, the learners could enjoy the experience of tandem from anywhere in the world. In 2006, I had joined a group of researchers from the State University of São Paulo, who had the purpose to connect their students, learners of foreign languages in Brazil, with learners of Portuguese from colleges around the world. The project, named "Teletandem Brasil: Foreign Languages for all/ Línguas Estrangeiras para todos"¹ has since then expanded and reached many universities across the world. The main purpose of this project was to offer Brazilian college students in the countryside of São Paulo the opportunity to interact in real time, through Skype or another application, with native speakers of the foreign language they are learning. New technology would offer these students the opportunity to meet foreigners without leaving the country. Students from other nations learning Portuguese would also take the advantage of meeting Brazilians, native speakers of the language. Through Teletandem, students from Brazil and another country are partnered and the schedule for their interactions is set up by the partners. Or, as it occurs when the whole class is involved, the students in the project meet their partners from the computer labs of their universities at the same time. The partners have autonomy to decide upon their choice of topic for conversation. They should help one another with their linguistic and cultural uncertainties in the language. The native speaker is a conversational partner as well as a 'teacher' to the foreign language learner. They can even give each other homework so both can better prepare for the following meeting. *Teletandem Brasil* is a pioneer project in Brazil in this regard and have generated outstanding outcomes as reported in the book "Telet@andem, um contexto virtual, autônomo e colaborativo para a aprendizagem de línguas estrangeiras no século XXI" organized by João Telles (2009) (*Teletandem, a virtual, autonomous and collaborative context for foreign language learning in the 21st century*). At NU, Intermediate students from the Portuguese program were paired up with UNESP students from Assis in three different occasions. They interacted once a week for 50 minutes, during class time: 25 minutes in Portuguese, to the benefit of our Portuguese learners, and 25 minutes in English, to the benefit of the Brazilian students, English learners. Participants from both sides were always excited about their scheduled meetings. Even though I could expand upon the evident rich interactions that emerged, it is not the focus at this time. What is significant here is to convey how this project served to propel our students on a personal level. They were so inspired through this project that they suggest the advent of a new enterprise of application.

¹ <http://www.teletandembrasil.org/>

3.3. A Project between Portuguese Learners from Northwestern University and Brazilian College Students from the University of São Paulo

A student from Northwestern went to São Paulo in a summer program. There, he met students from the University of São Paulo (USP). He had participated in the Teletandem project and asked me if it was possible to develop a Skype activity with students from that university. A few months later, when I attended a conference at USP, a colleague from USP introduced me to students who would be interested in joining us in this activity.

I then approached those students who expressed an interest and inquired if they would volunteer their time to meet students from Northwestern University by Skype during the upcoming fall quarter. The only commitment that I asked was 50 minutes of their time once a week, during class time, in order to speak Portuguese with my intermediate students. The compensation would be: NU students would *also* volunteer 50 minutes of their time per week, in order for Brazilian students to practice English. Students from Brazil, joining this activity, would also receive a certificate of participation. The goal was to engage students in *tandem* practice. Both groups could benefit by developing competences in the language, in meeting once a week. However, my main focus was exclusively on the Portuguese learners in the USA. The arranged time and theme for the students' conversation in English would be decided by the pair, independently.

I had approached the Brazilian students a few months before the onset of the new school year. I was uncertain of the number of students to be enrolled in our intermediate course of Portuguese, but I knew I would need at least more than 10 students from Brazil in order to assure all my students would have a partner.

I was very satisfied to realize that 15 students volunteered from Brazil, and we had 7 students enrolled in our Portuguese course. This was a very favorable ratio, as we had some USP students who were unavailable on the days of some scheduled appointments, which permitted the rearrangement for partners on occasion with a different listed colleague. After initiating the interactions, 2 USP students had to quit the activity. Throughout the semester, 13 students from USP and 7 from NU participated.

Out of the 13 students from USP, 11 were students from the Department of Modern Languages, and 2 from the Polytechnic Institute of Engineering. Among the students from Modern Languages, 2 were graduates, 9 undergraduates. All of them had an intermediate to mid-advanced level of proficiency in English. The 7 students from NU had an intermediate level of Portuguese. They came from different Departments or Schools: 1 from the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, 1 from History, 1 from Biology, 1 from Engineering, 2 from Political Science, and 1 from Radio/ TV.

Our students at Northwestern choose to learn Portuguese for different reasons: some are just curious about this Romance language. Many of our students are fluent or have a degree of fluency in Spanish; some have been to Brazil or have friends from Brazil; some have professional or personal goals that involve Brazil or Portugal, a few are heritage speakers. Despite their individual reasons for learning Portuguese, after they accomplish the first phase of language study, students can remain in the program and take courses in the intermediate level, by taking 200 level courses. Portuguese courses in this level count for the Minor degree in Portuguese.

Portuguese 201 emphasizes the skills of *reading* and *speaking*. The oral discussions are based on readings of literary '*cronicas*' and simple short stories by Brazilian well-known writers, as well as current events in periodicals and the Internet. Videos are also added as to complement the readings.

The students enrolled in *Port 201 – reading and speaking in Portuguese* in Fall 2012 were to read the proposed material on a specific theme, discuss the material in class, share their thoughts and ideas related to the topic, revise structures of language use in Portuguese, and then, they were to initiate a dialogue about the theme, or any other theme of their interest, ask questions, interact, compare, etc., with a student from Brazil.

For the interactions to flow well, I decided to add a new online interactive platform to the course: Facebook.

Facebook is a popular and one of the most utilized network media in the world. Due to the accessibility and ease of operation, it is likely frequented by students in both hemispheres involved in the social network. Just by applying this application as a tool for language learning makes Facebook a valuable tool to stimulate and engage conversation among participants. Through an option for closed group membership, students from both the USA and Brazil were invited to join. Class materials were made available for the Facebook group community, so participants from Brazil would have access to them.

The use of Facebook would be beneficial in four main aspects: 1) students from both countries could be online in different time zones and be able to interact asynchronously in the written form. This would give them the chance to have a written feedback from another perspective (rather than the classroom environment); 2) they could share any media they wished with the group: from links to pictures, videos, etc.; 3) The Facebook initiative would break the ice before their first Skype interaction, but it would also provide a ready means to contact their Brazilian counterparts between the Skype conversations; 4) Through Facebook, the whole group would know each other and interact socially, not only in a one-to-one basis as with Skype.

3.4. Planning the Curriculum

After having a suitable number of Brazilian students to interact with my students on Skype, and after creating a closed Facebook group, it would be necessary to revise the curriculum aligned with the goal of this social media project for Portuguese 201.

Based on the development of intercultural skills (*saviors: attitudes, knowledge, interpreting, relating, discovery, interaction and cultural awareness*) and the 5 Cs (*communications, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities*), I thought of a plan that would involve both the instructor and the students in the construction of the learners' intercultural communicative competence. I had to take into account the class schedule: the 50-minute class sessions would happen for 10 weeks, 3 times per week.

In an intercultural approach, both sides of instruction need to be integrated. The goal of the teacher is to center the instruction on the learner; and the learner's motivations, attitudes and accomplishments will fuel the teacher's pedagogical actions. Mendes (2009, p. 155) focuses on the roles that teacher and student perform within an intercultural approach. Both are active

agents in the process, and together: they facilitate activities in the foreign language; contribute to the negotiation of meanings; promote autonomy in the language; foster creativity; further a rationale for changes; implement intercultural exchanges; and contribute to the maintenance of a harmonious, positive, and effective environment for learning.

Teacher and student, in an intercultural setting, target the same goal in the language: an intercultural learning experience. It is fundamental that the student be completely integrated to the process. Materials that are offered need to consider students' motivations, cultural sensitivity, ways and forms that will instigate their curiosity and enable their interactions and discoveries in the language.

A step-by-step framework can be followed to provoke students' intercultural motivations and critical cultural awareness, as the one provided by Tomlinson & Masuhara (2013, pp. 47-48) as well as the one suggested by Oliveira (2012). But a less structured approach can be applied too, granted there is a great deal of reflection about one's own culture while their partners' culture is explored through activities and projects, as Kuber-Kriegler, Lázár & Strange (2005, p. 12) propose.

Mendes remarks (op. cit., p. 150) that a rigid sequence does not need to be followed when the teacher gives voice to the students, to their curiosities, and to their willingness to interact. In fact, when students are engaged, and culturally awakened, class activities are guided by *meaningfulness*, and not by a rigid sequence. Students, when prompted to interact, will inquire, ask, tell, react in various ways, and this enterprise will give the teacher clues on how to promote cultural and linguistic knowledge. The intercultural teacher will use students' curiosities to trace the roadmap for autonomy achievement in the language.

In preparing the schedule for the course, I decided to arrange the students the Skype encounters for every other week. The students were encouraged to engage in 5 substantial interactions on Skype during class time, and to participate as possible on Facebook during the 10 weeks of the course.

Five themes for class discussion and peer interaction were chosen: Brazilians, who are they?; São Paulo and Chicago today; Why pets?; Students' life and career; and Consumerism.

These themes were not chosen by chance, they were inspired from previous conversations with students who were going to take the course. My intention was to give the intermediate students of Portuguese the opportunity to develop their intercultural communicative competence by exploring and exchanging topics of their interest.

I prepared materials for each theme while taking into account the diverse perspectives that such themes would generate. All the materials, from readings to videos, that were proposed on the class web platform were made available to the Brazilian students on Facebook.

The choice of themes encouraged intercultural dialogue and sensibility toward attitudes and cultural values. They are described below:

Theme 1: Brazilians: Who Are They?

The main focus about this topic was a comparison between perspectives, contrasting and connecting the common points between the students' own cultural roots and Brazilians' cultural backgrounds. Some of my students were second or third generation of immigrants to the USA. They could also apply the discussion into their own identity

and verify the common and the uncommon traits between “what is considered to be Brazilian” and “what is considered to be their nationality”.

Theme 2: São Paulo and Chicago Today

São Paulo and Chicago have many common aspects. Because these are big, well-known industrialized cities in the Western world, they have many traits in common: some negative, like those related to transportation, urban violence, cost of living; and some positive, as those related to history, modernization, cultural events and tourism. So, the comparison between the cities, which are familiar to the students, promoted an interdisciplinary base for the conversation, where cultural values and worldviews were intertwined.

Theme 3: Why Pets?

The theme about “pets” would bring up memories, and often led to issues regarding family relations, traditions and celebrations and the reasons why a person would have pets. This theme also facilitated the discussion of health and society observing the “role” that a pet can “accomplish” in the context of a family, as well as the costs, sometimes very high, to obtain a pet and to care for it.

Theme 4: Students’ Life and Career

The theme of student life in Brazil and in the USA brought together ways of understanding education, family, youth, government politics and prospect careers in both countries. This topic led to the discussion about careers and economy: “the cost to study in the country you live and your professional choices”.

Theme 5: Consumerism

The dangers of spending without planning and the impact it can have in the student’s life and career was the last theme of the course discussion. Consumerism also affects the relationship between men and the environment, so issues about recycling, sustainability, and nature preservation were also discussed.

Every week students would comment about these themes on Facebook and every other week, the students would talk about these themes, and any other theme of their choice with colleagues from the University of São Paulo.

It is important to note that every Skype conversation was recorded for further review. The conversations were registered from the Multimedia Learning Center at Northwestern and were kept in a password protected online folder. Both the students from NU or USP had to sign an informed consent before initiating the interactions, which permitted the exchanges by Skype or on Facebook to be recorded/ analyzed.

After reviewing their own interactions, students from Northwestern provided an assessment about their performance (see appendix). They evaluated their fluency, in language use, and indicated what they had *learned* or *taught* about language and culture. They could also make suggestions for improving the Skype session (length, topic, relationship with the peer, etc.).

Below I present some of their feedback regarding Brazilian culture and their own culture, from their comments in this chart, and from the Facebook interactions.

4. Perceiving Brazilian Culture and USA Students' Own Culture

4.1. From the Skype Interactions

The students provided self-assessments about their performance. Two of the inquiries are fundamental regarding the intercultural perspective: “What interesting facts of Brazilian culture have you learned today?” and “What interesting facts of your own culture have you taught today?”. They wrote about what they considered most relevant. For the purpose of this paper, I am regrouping their answers with samples of 5 main categories: relationships; student life; food and shopping; weather; and celebrations. The conversations occurred in Portuguese, but the comments were written in English.

4.1.1. Relationships

In their comments, students reveal that from the conversations with their partners, they consider Brazilians to be people who enjoy more family relations and social engagement than Americans. Americans seem to prefer individuality and isolation, as observed in these statements:

I learned a lot about how Brazilian (and Latin American cultures in general) lend themselves to being open and creating instant friends. We talked about how personal dynamics are very different in the US, and coming in as an outsider myself, I noticed that there is a lot more individualism and personal goal achievement in American culture, rather than in Brazilian culture. D. and I talked about how Brazilians are truly open, kind and warm people, and even though she's from São Paulo, where they're a bit more reserved than the “typical Brazilian” she was by far more open than the “typical American”.

Family life is very close knit. Many Brazilian students still live at home while they are studying at university.

Going off more on the individualism and goal achievement that exists in American culture, it's very easy to become isolated. I was trying to explain personal space and your personal space bubble to my partner, something that I wasn't raised with myself, and D. seemed at a bit of a loss. It interested me to see just how clear the lines are between each individual in American Culture.

My partner invited me to go to her house in the first meeting! As she was in her house, she showed me her family and at the end of the conversation she said “beijos”, which means “kisses”. Brazilians are really warm, people in the USA don't invite you to their home on the first Skype meeting and definitely they don't give you kisses.

4.1.2. Student Life

The comments about student life mainly focused on what is probably the most dissimilar college situation: students commute to the university in Brazil, they don't live where they study.

I learned that J. lives 2 hours from school, at home with her parents and that many Brazilian students make this kind of commute.

Much like in Mexico, D. mentioned that students don't live on campus and rather commute to their university. As such, they spend most of their day there, in the libraries and such, so that they don't have to fight with the annoying city traffic.

4.1.3. Food and Shopping

Observations about food and where you purchase food were the most important fact in relation to this topic, as noted in the examples below:

I learned about Brazilian pizzas. There are more than 30 types. How many in the US? Maybe 5?

I learned about how shopping malls have inexpensive food that is enjoyed by all but sell mostly expensive clothes that only wealthier people can buy.

We spoke about different dining habits of Brazilians versus Americans. F. spoke about how Brazilians usually eat rice and beans as the main course, that they go out to restaurants usually on the weekends.

4.1.4. Weather

Brazilians do not know what it is to have intense winters with snow. They often seem eager to experience a snowstorm. The fact that most Brazilians have not experienced the snow at all was mostly unknown to the students, as seen in comments like:

I tried to explain to her what snow is like since she has never experienced it before.

I learned how to explain 'snow' in Chicago. My partner asked me about snow and he was surprised when I described it. She would like to live where it snows, I would rather live at the beach in Brazil.

4.1.5. Celebrations

Celebrations that do not exist in Brazil, like Thanksgiving, intrigued Brazilians, and this was noted by their USA counterparts. Different ways to celebrate Christmas was also observed:

Thanksgiving Day is a very special day. This is a very “American” day and I asked her if there was in Brazil a day similar to Thanksgiving and she said ‘no’.

She also said how Christmas (Natal) became more centered on consumption than on religion.

I told F. about how Thanksgiving isn’t really a day of thanks as much as a day of consumption. I also told her a lot about Russian dining habits and Yuletide celebrations.

I talked about the “Christmas Culture” in the US, and how it dominates all of December! It was a bit difficult to express, but I think she got the main ideas.

People in Brazil also have Christmas trees and their own version of Santa Claus, but tend to celebrate Christmas a bit differently than we do here in the US. The most important day for them is Christmas Eve, when they open presents.

4.2. From Facebook Interactions

The interactions on Facebook proved to be extremely enriching. Students from both sides would initiate conversations, ask about more information on topics that would interest them or they were learning in class, talk about their weekends, sports, general activities, etc. On Facebook, partnerships were able to schedule upcoming Skype interactions. It became the common contact point to relate with others for all the negotiations between both groups.

Facebook interactions were initiated prior to Skype conversations. Students were able to make their first contact with each through Facebook. Students were encouraged to introduce themselves, by adding a photograph sharing some of their interests. Initially, I had to motivate them to ask things, to answer a question. Later, after students became more acquainted with their partners, they started to take their own initiative to engage, to show pictures, share links, etc.

Students enjoyed sharing images of their universities, their favorite buildings and places on campus. It was fall in the USA and spring in Brazil, so students from both sides took pleasure in showing the season transformations. They enjoyed talking about sports, parties, and their weekend adventures. They illustrated their stories with pictures and links of places they had been.

Some of the events NU students discussed regarding the fall in the USA: Homecoming, unknown to Brazilian students; Halloween; and Thanksgiving. Such events were discussed with enthusiasm and encouraged dialogue. Pictures were often shared, events were well commented, activities were explained, students talked about what they did, where they went, the food they prepared and ate, etc. Brazilian students shared about their spring related events, in the national special holidays that take place during this time: one in October (October 12th, Day of Our Lady of Aparecida) and two in November (November 2nd, Dia de Finados [All Souls’ Day] and November 15th (Proclamation of the Republic). They shared pictures of their trips to the beach and other places, emphasizing that the most important point of these dates was the opportunity to travel and to connect with family and friends.

A popular topic that stirred much interest was about pets, one of the themes in the course.

So, as we talked about the reasons to have a pet and the relationship with a pet, students from both sides started to share stories, pictures and videos of their own pets. And this evolved into a different perspective: they were motivated to share idioms both in Portuguese and in English concerning animals, some like “trabalhar feito um cachorro” (work like a dog), “it’s raining cats and dogs”, “bom pra burro” (“burro” means “donkey”, but “pra burro” is an idiom that marks the “intensity”. “Bom pra burro” means “extremely good”), “curiosity killed the cat”, etc. They tried to explain the meaning of these idioms and how to use them.

I would like to relate one interaction observed on Facebook, in order to exemplify the involved dialogue. A NU student took the initiative to say what he did on the weekend: he watched a football game in support for the University’s football team.

That is how the dialogue happened on Facebook:

GS and HC are NU students. KM and BN are students from USP.

GS Este fim de semana no sábado a NU teve um jogo de futebol americano. Jogamos contra o Nebraska e estávamos ganhando no último período mas ao final perdemos 29-28. Nosso time sempre perde no último momento e os estudantes sempre ficam tristes. Eu coloco uma foto de três de nossos jogadores durante o jogo.

(GS This weekend on Saturday, NU had a football game. We played against Nebraska we were winning in the last period, but at the end we lost 29-28. Our team always loses in the last moment and the students become sad. I put a picture of three of our players during the game) (a picture of three players embracing each other at the end of the game is displayed).

KM Aqui no Brasil não temos essa tradição esportiva forte nas universidades. Temos alguns eventos esportivos, campeonatos interuniversitários mas não acho que seja algo tão popular como nos EUA!

(KM Here in Brazil we don’t have this strong sports tradition at the universities. We have some sports events, intercollegiate championships, but I don’t think this is as popular as it is in the USA!)

GS Sim, em muitas universidades os esportes são mais importantes do que as aulas

(GS Yes, in many universities, sports are more important than classes)

(KM and BN like this comment)

HC Isso é o verdade. Muitas pessoas nos estados unidos escolham uma universidade baseado no sucesso do time de futebol da universidade. É um pouco estranho, aliás é real.

(HC This is true. Many people in the United States choose a university based on the success of the university’s football team. This is a little strange, by the way, but it is real)

(BN likes this comment)

BN Bem como vemos em alguns filmes...

(BN Exactly as we see in some movies...)

This dialogue confirms the tradition of football games in the USA, commonly depicted in movies, and now, commented in real life. The Brazilian students had the chance to explore and become more informed about this sport. Facebook creates real opportunities for meaningful exchanging, as cultural aspects of the students' lives are frequently emphasized.

4.3. Students' Evaluation of the Project

At the end of the quarter, students were asked to evaluate the intercultural exchange project by answering 5 questions:

- I) What is your general opinion about the project?
- II) What do you think about the Skype interactions?
- III) What do you think about the interaction through Facebook?
- IV) Has this project improved your linguistic and cultural knowledge?
- V) Would you have any suggestions for this project's improvement?

Students reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet and share openly with Brazilian students of their age. They believed this helped improve their Portuguese by revealing areas in their language skills requiring more attention. Further, they reported more meaningfulness by learning about their partners and the conditions of living in Brazil.

Regarding the structure, students felt that the project was more dynamic and rewarding than the standard classroom setting. The vibrant and interactive association with Brazilian students within the class environment served to entice rather than hinder participation. In fact, one student shared if it was an added requirement outside the classroom it would "[make] it a bit less enthusiastic than something fun to do in class". The monitoring and recording of sessions were not considered restricting to our students. In fact, they enjoyed the chance to review their dialogues and learn how to improve in their language skills. Students also expressed that the topics of conversation, were "helpful" in raising awareness of the intercultural exchange.

Most students felt that the use of Facebook encouraged more participation. They believed it was a common social interface that served to strengthen the relationships on a more familiar plane. As one student shared "[Facebook made it] a more social and dynamic way to communicate with the USP students than the Skype sessions" as well as providing an opportunity to learn about some of the "Portuguese slang" commonly expressed.

Beyond the request for extended discussion time, all students believed that the class required no additional modification for improving the course. Having with less structure was considered an important aspect for dynamic exchange. A guide to help the student initiate conversation was necessary, but only until confidence and personal investment of interests stirred self initiated dialogue.

Students reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet to converse openly with a Brazilian student of their age. They mentioned that the project really helped them understand the areas that needed to be improved in terms of speaking Portuguese, and also that it was very enjoyable to participate with students from USP, they loved speaking with them, and learning about their lives in Brazil.

About the structure, they also seemed to have enjoyed it. A student mentioned that he would much rather have it be a part of classtime than something done out of class. He said that if they had done it out of class then it would have seemed more like a homework assignment, “making it a bit less enthusiastic than something fun to do in class”. They liked to record all the interactions and enjoyed listening to them/watching a second time, because it helped them improve their pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. They also mentioned the topics of conversation, which were helpful “in raising awareness of the cultural issues that were going on in Brazil” and it made them “situate those issues against the ones that were experienced on a daily basis in the US”.

Students also enjoyed facebook interactions. Only one student said she did not like very much to mix her “Facebook” space with “study”, because it seemed an intrusion to her personal space. Nevertheless, the same student was one of the most active on Facebook, sharing photos, stories and engaging a lot with the participants, her interactions did not seem like a “study”. A student mentioned that the Facebook interactions were “really excellent”, he enjoyed the connection with USP students, and to post and to read everyone’s posts. Another student said that the Facebook page provided a “more social and dynamic way to communicate with the USP students than the Skype sessions” and it also helped to get some exposure to written Portuguese slang.

Suggestions for improvement were only a few, students wanted more interactions with the Brazilian peers, but all in all, they preferred things to stay as they were, with less structure. A student mentioned how much he enjoyed the “free-flowing conversations”. And how he very much wanted to be in close contact with his Skype partners, as a way of “improving his knowledge of the language and of the world, including the awareness of his own language and culture.”

5. Conclusion

This paper had the aim to describe an activity applied to a whole course where interactive technology could help students develop their *intercultural communicative competence*. Today, foreign language teachers should take the advantage of interactive technology and apply it meaningfully to a language course. With social media applications through the Internet, native speakers can be easily at reach and participate in class projects, as they greatly contribute to the enhancement of learners’ language and cultural skills.

In this intermediate course of Portuguese at Northwestern University, the use of Skype in conjunction with Facebook was a way to assist students to become proficient users of a language. A proficient language user is able to use his competences to communicate verbally and even non-verbally with speakers of a language in a society.

The online interactions demonstrated that both sides were excited to meet their partners and share about their daily lives. According to students’ reactions to this practice they were pleased to consider their perceptions about the other and the self through new lens.

This practice reveals that learners are interested in communicating with the other speaker in a way that helps them not only develop their linguistic skills, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, but also enhance their intercultural communication skills. Now, as they see

themselves in a new culture, they think about their own culture, and share values, experiences, in a much deeper plan. As suggested by Kramsch (2006), as they share “embodied experiences, emotional resonances and moral imaginings” they are sharing “symbolic goods” and so, developing a *symbolic competence*. I do believe that *intercultural communicative competence* will propel the symbolic competence and guide them through the world we live in today.

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Appendix**FOLLOW-UP CHART TO BE FILLED AFTER VIEWING THE SKYPE INTERACTIONS**

Date: ___/___/___
Time: From ___
to ___

Session number:	EVALUATION OF YOUR PERFORMANCE To answer the questions, use the scale below:
	1 – Excellent 2 – Very Good 3- Good 4- Fair 5- Poor
Your name:	
	How do you evaluate YOUR OWN overall performance in this session in the Portuguese language: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 Why?
	How do you evaluate: a) The flow of communication between you and your partner:1-2-3-4-5 b) The relevance of the topics discussed: 1-2-3-4-5 Comments:
	How do you evaluate your Portuguese language use regarding: c) Pronunciation: 1-2-3-4-5 d) Grammar:1-2-3-4-5 e) Vocabulary:1-2-3-4-5 f) Discussion of cultural and linguistic aspects: 1-2-3-4-5 Comments:
	What interesting facts of Brazilian culture have you learned today?
	What interesting facts of your own culture have you taught today?
	What both of you could improve in order to make your meeting sessions more efficient regarding language learning? 1 – Choice of topics 2 – Length/ frequency of interaction 3 – Tolerance toward the other 4 – Other: 5 – ALL 6 – None. It is perfect as is. Comments:
	Use this space for suggestions or other comments you might have: