International Students' Tutoring Experiences and Cultural Awareness in the Digital Learning Companion Project[φ]

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Abstract

This study explored international students' experiences in online tutoring of remote learners from four elementary and junior high schools in Taiwan. A second objective of the study was to investigate whether online tutoring cultural exchange between the international students and the remote learners could promote cultural awareness. 39 international students from a Taiwanese university were paired with 39 Taiwanese remote school learners. The international students reflected on their tutoring experiences and cultural awareness using both videos and essays after participating in the online tutoring program for a period of ten weeks. The results indicated that by participating in the program, the international students gained some skills in teaching, learned a new language, received encouragement from their peers, and helped the tutees to gain confidence to communicate using English more. The international students also appreciated the opportunity that the project gave them to exchange their culture with the students of Taiwan. Although some of them faced a language barrier challenge, they were able to learn about some aspects of the culture of Taiwan from the tutees. Thus, being a more cost effective option for learning a culture than for instance visiting a country to learn a culture, learning institutions could provide opportunities and encourage students to participate in such cultural exchange programs.

Keywords: *Online tutoring, Online tutoring experience, Cultural exchange, Cultural awareness*

Introduction

The use of digital technologies to support live teaching and learning can extend the reach of traditional teaching and learning space to provide the learners

with ubiquitous learning opportunities and massive benefits (Higgins, 2004). Such a learning platform is online tutoring, which offers opportunities and possibilities to reach remote individuals with diverse socio-economic status (Bruning, 2011) through the use of interactive communication technology provided for by the Internet and Web 2.0. This way, students with learning difficulties in rural areas can always be identified and supported. Corrigan (2012) defines online tutoring as provision of a personalized learning support to a single or small group of learners by the teacher, also called a tutor, through the Internet.

While traditional tutoring relies on a one-on-one meeting and has been used to provide remediation to students on subjects that they are weak in, online tutoring has leveraged the advancements in technology and network connectivity such as Web 2.0 that supports synchronized and real time communication to create virtual classes where the tutors and tutees can meet and learn (Peacock et al., 2012). In addition, the ability of online tutoring to combine effective elements of conventional tutoring programs, such as well-trained and competent tutors, project and problem based learning curricular coupled with active learning resources etc. gives the online tutoring a cutting-edge advantage. For instance, online tutoring is able to provide synchronous one-to-one and real time services to reach learners in both busy urban areas and rural remote schools (Chappell, Arnold, Nunnery, & Grant, 2015).

Through the use of telecommunication technologies, online tutoring provides authentic experiences to tutors which can help them to increase their capabilities such as provision of individualized instruction, improving language and communication skills, and cultural exchange (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001). In addition, from the experience of tutoring, college students are provided with an opportunity to obtain practical knowledge on issues such as time management, preparation of tasks, problem solving, and teaching activities (ChanLin, 2016).

With advancement in technology, people are now able to learn and interact with different cultures and languages without necessarily attending a formal traditional class learning setup by leveraging digital opportunities such as tele-collaboration that enables for instance, language learners to converse with the native speakers of the language remotely—i.e., without the need to meet them physically (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018). This is because people can now take advantage of advancement in technology and easy access to the Internet from the computing personal devices to interact with people across cultures that has led to intercultural interactions and exchanges based on tele-collaboration (Shadiev, Wu, Sun, & Huang, 2018). This has broken the boundaries and increased global interconnectedness and intercultural interactions. For instance, through virtual exchange programs, students can explore cultural practices to prepare them to

live in a culturally diverse society, whether at home or when interacting with the culture abroad (Schenker, 2013).

Cultural awareness is one of the key competencies for individuals to interact in the 21st century due to globalization (Schenker, 2013). This is because globalization has led to global challenges which can only be solved by building new links between countries and cultures (Talalakina, 2010). Notably, an increased awareness helps individuals appreciate a target culture. This helps them challenge stereotypes they could be having about that culture (Hertel, 2003). Individuals may learn culture through various ways including direct and indirect contact with people from other countries, visiting other countries, watching foreign movies, and use of computer mediated communication (CMC)—text based tools such as online discussion boards and video conferencing (Angelova & Zhao, 2015; Cardon, 2010).

Online tutoring supports the learning of students in rural areas since these students have limited learning resources and support (ChanLin, 2016). The need for this project arose due to two reasons. First, due to geographical limitations, rural school children in Taiwan have few or no opportunities to interact with foreigners to engage in discussions and exchange cultural viewpoints. Second, international students in Taiwan come from various countries of the world and for most of them this could be their first time in a foreign country. Thus, for most of them adjusting to the culture of Taiwan could be a challenge due to cultural shock they may experience, and stress as they try to adjust to a new culture and learn a new language (Yang, Webster, & Prosser, 2011). Moreover, being miles away from home, they may lose friendships and networks they had established hence the need to form new social support networks. Therefore, it is necessary to provide them with effective means that can help them to interact with the locals to be able to gain some useful information that could assist them live in a society which is culturally different from what they are used to. With the aid of modern information and communication technologies, online exchange is considered as an effective means for the local and international students to interact and exchange their cultures. This interaction also provides an opportunity for the children to practice their English speaking skills in an authentic learning environment.

This opportunity to exchange cultural viewpoints is beneficial to both the Taiwanese and the international students beyond the educational setting since the world is increasingly becoming multicultural as a result of globalization. Therefore, the students need to be provided with opportunities that can prepare them to live and work in a multicultural society, for instance, in the professional world (Czerwionka, Artamonova, & Barbosa, 2015). Moreover, an increased cultural awareness makes individuals more tolerant to people from cultures

different from theirs (Tomlinson & Musuhara, 2004). This is because with increased cultural awareness people from different cultures are able to understand their cultural differences resulting to peaceful relationships (Shadiev et al., 2018).

Through this online tutoring project, referred to as "Digital Learning Companion" and hereafter referred to as "DLC" project, the rural students are partnered with international digital companions (international students) from various countries in the world thereby providing the students with greater educational opportunities and overcoming geographical limitations (Cheng, Liu, Ko, & Lin, 2007). The purpose of the project was majorly for cultural exchange and not for English language learning although it provided an opportunity for the tutees to practice their English speaking skills.   The international students provided one-to-one tutoring to online tutees from remote areas of Taiwan through an online tutoring platform. Through assigned topics, the tutors and tutees exchanged cultural knowledge. We partnered the international students with the rural students so as to provide the rural students with opportunities that they may not be able to have like their counterparts in the city. Compared to college students or elementary school students in the city, rural school children are more disadvantaged. For instance, rural students not just in Taiwan, but worldwide face challenges such as insufficient and ill-developed infrastructure like inconvenient transport, inadequate learning resources such as few qualified teachers and facilities, and economic challenges such as limited financial support. Therefore, we hope that this project can have a social impact on the rural community as the international students could provide support to the rural students. For the Taiwanese students, this project provides them with an opportunity to interact with foreigners and to engage in discussions and to exchange culture since they have limited educational resources due to time, space, and geographical limitations (Cheng et al., 2007). Although the rural students speak mostly Chinese, they could speak basic English since they start to learn English from the first grade according to the curriculum enforced by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (Lin & Ivinson, 2012). However, they needed to be encouraged to use English since they were shy to speak in English because rural school children in Taiwan do not consider English as a relevant and an important subject, and they also lack opportunities to practice speaking English (Lin & Ivinson, 2012).

Similar online tutoring programs have been conducted but their focus has been on offering tuition to rural students in Taiwan to improve performance in areas such as Mathematics, English, and Chinese (ChanLin, 2016; ChanLin, Lin, & Lu, 2016; Huang & Liu, 2015). These studies also used Taiwanese college students as tutors. As such, there is need to investigate the possibility of leveraging online tutoring for cultural exchange and general exposure to other

ways of life. This was the focus of this study. Thus, this research investigates the online teaching and learning experiences of international students at a university in Taiwan to identify some cultural learning aspects, benefits, and challenges linked with the cultural exchange project. Since it was the first time for the international students to participate in the project, through studying their experiences, we could be able to understand how they interacted with the local students. This knowledge could be useful for evaluating the project and for improving future similar projects that would be conducted.

The specific objective is to provide evidence for whether participating in online tutoring by international students in Taiwan with students from Taiwan increases their cultural awareness about Taiwan in aspects such as food, clothing, among others. This article attempts to answer the following research questions based on preliminary findings obtained from the data collected during the study:

1. What are the experiences—benefits, likes, dislikes, and challenges—of international students in the DLC project?
2. Does the DLC project facilitate cultural awareness?

Research Method

Study Context

The DLC project was implemented for a semester. International students at a university in Northern Taiwan were paired with junior high school or elementary school students from different rural areas in Taiwan. Four schools participated in the project. The international students were recruited at the beginning of the spring semester of 2018 based on how passionate they were about teaching the tutees and their skills and motivations for taking part in the project.

The recruited tutors were oriented on how to use the JoinNet system—the online learning platform that was used in this study—by the project support team. They were also trained on how to prepare the teaching materials like the lesson plan and the teaching slides by experienced members of the project support team who were experienced student teachers. They were guided on some of the activities they needed to include in their teaching materials. This was to ensure that the materials prepared by the tutors were standard across all the tutors. The tutors were also given some background information about the project, for instance, some information about the rural students. The project lasted ten weeks. The tutors and tutees were expected to exchange cultural information, apart from a general discussion, about their countries based on the following topics: food, clothing, transportation, housing, entertainment, and famous scenery. In general, based on each topic, tutors gave brief introduction of their countries of origin then asked the tutees to talk about their countries. Figure 1 shows some screenshots

of the contents of the teaching materials prepared by the tutors. Each topic was discussed once a week except for food, entertainment, and famous scenery which were discussed for two weeks. Each tutor prepared his/her own teaching material and content based on the given topics every week. They were also at liberty to use teaching strategies that they found to be effective for them and their tutees. To ensure that the teaching materials prepared by the tutors were effective, the tutors were required to upload all their teaching materials to the project website prior to conducting their sessions. These were reviewed by the support team to help moderate the materials prepared by the tutors. To assess the progress of the tutoring sessions and address any problems arising, all the teaching sessions were also videotaped and reviewed on a regular basis by the project support team members. Figure 2 displays a screenshot of the JoinNet platform during a tutoring session. On the whiteboard, both tutors and tutees could be able to write and make notes or browse the Internet, and they could be able to interact freely.
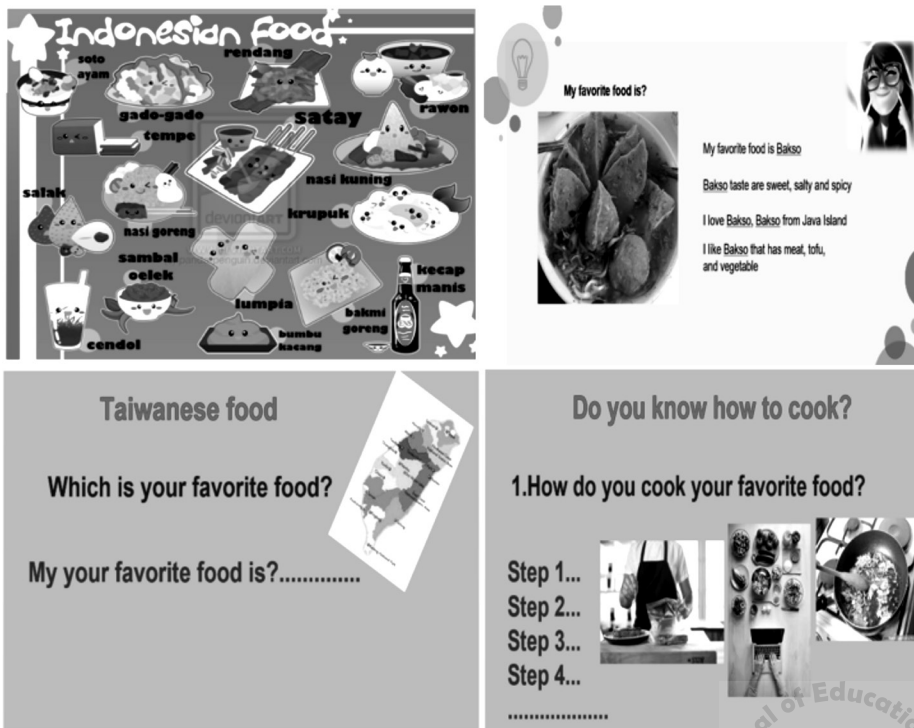

Figure 1　Sample Teaching Materials

Each tutor and tutee was provided with a PC with internet connection, headset with a microphone, and a webcam. All the tutors conducted their tutoring sessions from a central point, the university's computer centre. There were four tutoring sessions every week for ten weeks. Each session lasted one and a half

hours. However, each tutor was assigned only one session per week. One session was conducted on Mondays from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. Other sessions were conducted from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. In other words, tutors conducted a tutoring session once every week, that is, either Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday, or Thursday according to the day they were assigned. Each tutee was assigned to only one tutor for the duration of the program. Therefore, a tutee attended only one tutoring session per week lasting one and a half hours, for the ten weeks, on the same day of the week, with the same tutor. After each tutoring session, the tutors were required to write their reflection about the session in an online diary system. They also shared their experiences among themselves after the tutoring sessions starting from the fifth week of the project. Every week from the fifth week, three to four tutors shared their tutoring experiences with other tutors.

During the last two weeks of the project, the tutors were required to complete a reflection task. They were required to reflect on their tutoring experience and also reflect on what they learned about Taiwan culture through their tutees using self-created videos. The tutors were also required to reflect on their tutoring experience using a 150-word essay. The purpose of the reflections was to know about the tutors' experiences during the project and to know about how much they had learnt about the culture of Taiwan, and their perceptions on the benefits and challenges gained, from the interaction with the students from Taiwan.
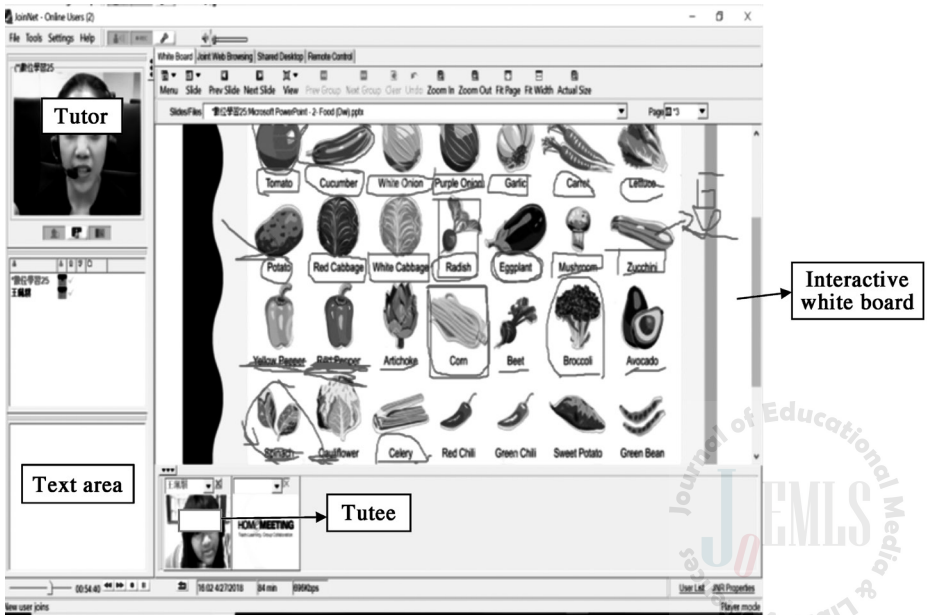

Figure 2   Screenshot of the JoinNet Platform During a Tutoring Session

Participants

The participants in this study were 39 international students from various departments at a university in Taiwan. They were paired with 39 students from some rural schools in Taiwan. Among these tutors, 18 were male, and 21 were female. The tutors were from various countries. They ranged in age from 21 to 40 years (Table 1). Since the participants are international students, the communication with the tutees was done in English.

Table 1   Demographic Information

Item	Category	No.	%	Item	Category	No.	%
Gender	Male	18	46.2	Major	Applied science	1	2.6
	Female	21	53.8		Engineering (various)	13	33.3
Education level	Master	35	89.7		Applied foreign languages	6	15.4
	Ph.D.	4	10.3		Industrial management	3	7.7
Nationality	Indonesia	24	61.5		Digital learning and education	5	12.8
	Vietnam	11	28.2		Finance	2	5.1
	Burkina Faso	1	2.6		Material science	1	2.6
	Thailand	1	2.6		Architecture	2	5.1
	India	1	2.6		Information management	3	7.7
	The Gambia	1	2.6		Business administration	3	7.7

Data Collection and Analysis

Although this study involved both tutors and tutees, the focus of this study was on the tutors only. Therefore, the analysis of tutees data is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we are in the process of formulating the second phase of this study that intends to illustrate the impact of such a project to the tutees. The data was collected using qualitative methods. The reflective videos, written reflections, sharing experiences forum discussions, and online journal entries served as sources of the qualitative data. The reflection questions for online experiences and cultural awareness were adapted from previous studies (ChanLin, 2016; Hertel, 2003; Hung, 2011; Schenker 2013)

Of the 39 tutors who participated in the project, complete data was available for only 27 tutors. Some tutors participated in all the tutoring sessions but they did not complete all the reflection tasks. To achieve data triangulation, the different qualitative data types (reflective videos, written reflections, sharing experiences forum discussions, and online journal entries) were analyzed using content analysis (Angelova & Zhao, 2015). The data from the video reflections were transcribed verbatim first before coding. Two independent researchers reviewed all the written data and generated codes to identify patterns in the tutors' reflections that represented their tutoring experiences and cultural learning which were the focus of this research. Coding consistency was analyzed between the researchers. The inter-rater reliability, 0.91, was evaluated by using Cohen's

kappa. Few differences that were obtained between the researchers after coding were discussed and resolved.

Results

The qualitative data analysis of the contents of the online tutors' video reflections, written reflections, online journal entries and sharing experiences forums yielded the following themes characterizing the experiences of the international students during the online tutoring project: general tutoring experiences and cultural awareness. The general tutoring experiences are discussed under the following sub-themes; benefits and achievements of online tutoring—i.e., acquisition and improvement of teaching skills, language learning, cultural exchange, peer encouragement, helping tutees boost their confidence to speak English, and developing friendships and relationships—likes and dislikes of the program, challenges of online tutoring, and overall experience.

General Tutoring Experiences

Benefits of and achievements from online tutoring

From the reflections of the tutors, it was found that the online tutoring benefited them in a number of ways. These benefits and achievements are discussed under the following categories: acquisition and improvement of teaching skills (both online and teaching in general), opportunity for language learning, peer encouragement, opportunity for cultural exchange, helping tutees boost their confidence to speak English, and developing friendships and relationships.

Acquisition and improvement of teaching skills

For most of the tutors, this was their first time to teach students. Some tutors had ever taught face to face before taking part in this project, but they had no experience about online tutoring. Among the ways in which the online tutoring helped the tutors acquire and enhance their teaching skills based on the tutors' reflections include learning to: adjust teaching strategies according to individual learners needs, use technology to teach, prepare teaching materials, manage students, do online tutoring and work with children.

Through this online tutoring, the tutors learned how to be flexible and adjust their teaching strategies according to the needs of their students for instance try to use both English and Chinese after realizing their tutees were not able to communicate fluently in English. For example, a tutor stated that:

> So overall I think I understand something new here. I get many experience. The first one I cannot fix in one thing because when the situation change like my student cannot speak English, I have to change the strategy, I have to try use Chinese to approach him. (T25, video reflection)

Other strategies like use of games and inclusion of pictures were also used by the tutors to enhance the tutees' understanding. For instance, one tutor stated:

> My student is not good at English as well as my Chinese. I had tried a lot I found that speaking less and adding attractive games and pictures is good methods for my student. I also employed google translate to help in explaining the meaning of new words to my student, that was good too. (T10, sharing forum)

Other tutors changed the teaching and learning activities and used both languages to prepare the PowerPoint slides. For instance, a tutor stated:

> I am shocked that my student cannot say anything in English except "yes", "no", and "I don't understand". I change my PPT to be bilingual, English and Mandarin version so I provide two sentence form, first line is English and second line is Mandarin, and changing the activities to be reading more. (T15, video reflection)

The online tutoring helped the tutors to improve on how to prepare teaching materials and deliver the teaching content. For instance, a tutor indicated that "Having this opportunity has helped me improve how I prepare in various aspects such as material preparation, teaching delivery, immediate problem solving skills, and ways to manage with the student" (T02, written reflection). One tutor mentioned that "I can learn how to make best PPT (such as topic, forms, etc.) based on my student characteristics and encountered-problems" (T15, written reflection). Another tutor, further indicated that " ... I get an experience to teach to the other student from another city from Taitung. I also get the experience to teach English especially for elementary since this is also my first time to teach English for the elementary" (T32, video reflection). Apart from general teaching experience, the tutors also acquired some skills for online teaching. For instance, a tutor stated that "After that I feel like I have learned a lot from the program like online tutoring experience..." (T29, video reflection). Tutor T11 mentioned that "I really like this program a lot because it's not only the students who can gain experience and benefits but I also gain benefits as well. That I can learn how to do distance learning..." (T11, video reflection).

Apart from gaining a teaching experience, the tutors also learned ways of managing their students for instance, through preparing the teaching content in ways such that the attention of the tutee could be maintained for a longer time. Some tutors' reactions include:

> My student I would say is very easily distracted. Even if I leave her for 20 seconds without something, without a video, without a puzzle, she will look around here, here, find something or go to her friend. She will do all types of things. So I need to put a video like in each slide because I

> have noticed that sometimes she is not interested if I do not because I have
> notice that my student is very new to English. (T06, sharing forum)

A tutor mentioned about learning to manage the students' emotion "Eventually, I got valuable experiences from this project, not only pedagogic strategies, but also how to maintain and deal with student's emotion when she had been so tired of her classes at school before joining my online class each week" (T08, written reflection).

Some tutors appreciated the opportunity which helped them to learn how to work with children. For instance, a tutor mentioned that "I felt that I could learn many things. I knew how to work with children more. I think participating in DLC not a bad choice. I think DLC is very interactive. Every week is a new fun for us" (T18, video reflection). Another tutor further indicated that "After that I feel like I have learned a lot from the program like online tutoring experience, how to work well with children who cannot speak my native language" (T29, video reflection).

In terms of using technology to teach, a tutor mentioned that "It is great to utilize technology so I got the valuable experience and I know how to do in the future if I have same chance, same related-problems, etc." (T15, video reflection).

The tutors' comments indicate that they learned not only how to teach, but also how to teach online and using technology which most of them had no experience in. The tutors also learned how to provide individualized instruction based on learners' needs. Therefore, the project was useful for acquiring skills and experience necessary for their professional development. The tutors' creativity also improved through preparation of the teaching materials like PowerPoint slides.

Language learning

In their reflections most tutors indicated that most of the tutees were not able to speak good English. As a result, language barrier affected their communication. To be able to communicate effectively, most of the tutors opted to use both Chinese and English to communicate with the tutees but this was a challenge to the tutors as they could not speak Chinese. Therefore some of the tutors had to learn some Chinese words from the tutees who insisted on speaking in Chinese. Other tutors had to use google translate to be able to understand their tutees. In an indirect way, they were able to learn and improve their Chinese. These are some of the tutors' reactions:

> From the online tutoring, what I learn is, I learn some Chinese words from
> the student because she use much Chinese words because she did not know
> the English. And also I learned from the other tutor besides me, because
> she is a local student here and sometimes when I don't understand what

my student say, I will ask her and she will help me to translate it. (T23, video reflection)

"Sometimes, I had some problem to explain something completely in English, because its 100% English, and I have to pick up some words in Chinese. Thanks to google translate which helped me a lot..." (T14, sharing forum). "Not only that this program has allowed me to learn about Taiwanese culture, but it also gives me the opportunity to improve my Chinese (thanks to Mary [not her real name] for teaching me Chinese)" (T16, written reflection).

During the tutoring process, I also learn a lot. I mean, this tutoring process is not a one way learning process. It's two-way. It means I learn and also my student also learns. So I teach her about a lot of English vocabulary, about general knowledge... and she also teach me some Chinese vocabulary.... (T13, video reflection)

Another tutor mentioned that:

... So I try to put more Chinese letter on the screen and I told him that we can share together like I will learn Chinese, he will learn English. So we can share together. He can check my Chinese and I can check his English. This may help him to feel like he is talking to a friend not just learning. I think that he is much more interested in the lesson.... (T29, video reflection)

Essentially, as indicated by the tutors' comments, participating in the project gave them motivation to learn Chinese language which could have not happened had they not taken part in the project. Therefore, they could be able to communicate with the local community in their day to day interactions.

Cultural exchange

The tutors indicated that the online tutoring gave them a chance to learn about the culture of Taiwan from the tutees and teach the tutees about their own culture. For instance, a tutor stated "... help me to learn a lot of culture in Taiwan and I teach her also about the culture in Indonesia and we exchanged the culture. So she knows more about Indonesia and I know more about Taiwan" (T05, video reflection). Another tutor indicated that:

... and the next we get the culture exchange between Indonesia and Taiwan to my students and in this part I also get to meet him because not only need support for vocabulary and grammar in English but I also can share the culture between Taiwan and Indonesia. (T32, video reflection)

Evidently, the online tutoring project facilitated cultural exchange between the tutors and the tutees. By learning about some culture of Taiwan, they could more easily fit in and have harmonious interactions with the people of Taiwan even though they are foreigners.

Peer encouragement

Through sharing about their experiences with each other in the sharing forums which were conducted from the fifth week where tutors were selected to talk about their experiences, the tutors were able to learn from and encourage each other, for instance, on how to improve on the way they teach their tutees, how to solve some of the challenges they experienced, and how to prepare teaching materials. Some comments from the tutors include: "And then from my peers, from other tutors I can learn how they taught their students" (T11, video reflection). "I was also inspired by my friends. Like my friends, my Taiwanese friends they always well prepare with everything they have very fabulous, PowerPoint, they always introduce in a good way, they interact with students well" (T14, video reflection).

> There is one colleague he is using a lot pictures and also using math or something to get more attention from the student. I like the idea of using the pictures or the math or something because the student can understand it. (T17, written reflection)

"I just get some inspiration from my friends. I talk to them and I just like, yeah, what happened to your student and how has been going and we talked and helped one another some problem" (T02, written reflection). Therefore, by sharing their experiences, the tutors gained different perspectives from their peers to help them make improvements in their teaching.

Helping tutees boost their confidence to speak English

During the first weeks of the tutoring sessions, most of the tutors mentioned in their self-reflections that their tutees were shy and afraid to express themselves in English. Through the tutoring sessions, the tutors encouraged them to speak more and gave them advice on how to improve their English speaking skills. This involved use of varied teaching strategies like using more questions, use of google translate, chatting, speaking Chinese among others. As time progressed, as reflected in the tutors' comments, many tutees built their confidence and were able to have conversations with their tutors. For instance, a tutor stated that:

> However, on the very first meeting, I was so surprised to know that she couldn't understand me at all. At first, I thought that maybe she can still understand a little bit of English but maybe she is just too shy to speak English but then it was totally different than what I was expecting because she kept saying I don't understand... And changing the way I presented my materials have actually made a significant change in the way that I am interacting with Mary [not her real name]. She make a lot of improvements because she was so brave to speak English and she became very active during the class. (T16, video reflection)

Another tutor mentioned that:

> So my first experience is that it is so difficult for me to teach the Taiwanese children English because they don't want to speak English too much.... After 15 weeks I found that my Taiwanese children is not really difficult as the first week I imagine. [Pause] for the last week I play games and I talk too much to my student that English is not really difficult and if you want to speak English just try to explore more. Define what you want to learn and go to school or make friends with foreigners. You can find some new words that you don't know. Just write down and use google translate to learn. You can improve your English. (T10, video reflection)

Another tutor indicated further that:

> At the beginning of the online tutoring my student seems nervous and she didn't want to talk with me and she did not want to reply my words so she just remain silent. So I try to talk with them with Chinese and then she wanted to reply but it is only word by words. In the middle of the term she changed a lot, she get more excited in the tutoring and she can smile with me and talk many things also with me. At the end of the term she could understand well what I was talking about and she could reply well also. (T37, video reflection)

The tutors were happy to see the progress of the tutees as time went by. It can be implied that the tutees being from the rural area lack much needed adult role models who could teach them how to solve communication problems. The role models not only need to teach the content but also need to model how to do it. This problem can be solved using technology. Although the tutees were not the focus of this study, the comments from the tutors indicated that the tutees also benefitted and learned from the online interaction with the tutors. Moreover, all the learning experiences were recorded and as evidenced from the videos, the tutees made some progress. For instance, we randomly selected five tutoring session videos and observed aspects like interaction between the tutors and tutees, tutee participation, attention, and facial expression from the first week to the last week. As observed in some of the videos, we noticed that during the first weeks, tutees appeared shy and unwilling to talk to the tutors. The tutors asked questions but some tutees simply answered "yes" and "no". In some cases, the tutees kept calling their resident teachers to ask them what they should answer. In other cases, the tutees answered in Chinese. Some portrayed negative facial expressions most of the time and appeared not to be engaged in the session. For instance, in one video during the first week, a tutee was observed to be distracted yet it was around 30th minute in the session. The tutee was out of his seat and looking around. The tutor kept calling on the tutee to pay attention but it took a while before the tutee could settle down. Moreover, in the first weeks, it was

observed that communication between the tutors and tutees was mostly through text, not much of talking from the tutees side. However, as time progressed, in the last weeks, the tutees were noticed to be comfortable and felt much at ease. With time, they started to talk freely with their tutors and no longer seemed to depend on their resident teachers. In addition, they responded in English most of the time, they were more enthusiastic and participated actively during the sessions, payed more attention, and portrayed positive facial expressions (as shown in Figure 3). Thus with time, based on the observed videos, the interaction between tutees and tutors increased, and tutee participation and attention also improved. They were observed to be more on-task with the tutors than off-task as seen in the videos during the first weeks, and also more talkative. This implies that the project was not only of benefit to the international students but also benefitted the rural children. In fact, the tutees' resident teachers reported that the children were willing to participate in the project the following semester.

**Figure 3   Screen Shot Showing Tutee's Facial Expression
During the First, Second, and Seventh Weeks**

Developing friendships and relationships

Through the online tutoring process, the tutors developed friendships and relationships with their tutees which went beyond tutor-tutee relationship. They shared about their hobbies, likes, daily life, and school issues. Some even maintained the friendships after the tutoring project. Some comments from the tutors include:

> And then after more meetings, the online meetings, the student become more comfortable and then she can talk more. She even talk about her daily life. How she don't like some subjects in her school. How she loves her younger sister which in the same school with her and she also talk about her interest in kebab and some of her pet mouse. She has two mice as her pets.... From the online tutoring I felt like I get new friends, new sister. My student we still in contact via Facebook. Last week she just told me about her vacation in United States. (T23, video reflection)

> After a few weeks joining this program, I know better my student, I know what her hobby is, I know what her favourite food is, I know her favourite song because she always sing a Chinese song for me so like 10 minutes before the end of the class, she sang a song, and also I teach her an English

> song and she also could sing about that. I don't have a good voice but I could teach her how to sing well. (T14, video reflection)

> At the beginning I was wondering that whether I am suitable for this program or not because I had not ever been an online tutor. But now I can say that I love this program very much. It gave us a good chance to have many nice Taiwanese friends consisting my student Alan, other Taiwan tutor, professor and supporters together with interesting international students. We have many unforgettable memories, from strangers to friends. (T10, written reflection)

Thus, through the tutoring project, the tutees made lifetime friends who being adults could provide them with advice and guidance on various aspects of their daily life.

Likes about the program

The tutors also reflected on what they liked about the program and what they disliked about the program. According to their reflections, they liked the fact that they were able to make friends with the tutees and the project support team who were students from Taiwan. They also liked the fact that the project gave them a chance to get more teaching experience. Others liked the discussion sessions that were arranged for them to share their experiences amongst themselves. Some comments from the tutor reflections include: "About our program, the most interesting I like that we can make friends with online tutor supporter and also Taiwanese children... I think that is really great" (T10, video reflection). "And what I like, [pause], I can get more experience, yeah, that's the thing because am a teacher anyway" (T02, video reflection).

> And also my most favourite part is, after teaching, we have a small discussion. So the group will be divided into two and we can share what we have learnt, what we have talked with students and if any challenges we found we can share so we can solve the problem together. (T14, video reflection)

One tutor liked the fact that there were different topics for discussion each week. "What I like from this program is I like how it was arranged with various topics each week so we can talk about different topics each week and we can communicate about that" (T23, video reflection).

From the online tutoring, the tutors acquired new friends from a foreign country. This gave them a stronger sense of belonging. They also had an opportunity to learn from their peers and improve on their own skills.

Dislikes about the program

Most of the tutors disliked the technical challenges they experienced and some did not like the fact that their students had basic English skills as this made

them to take more time to prepare the teaching materials. Some reactions from the tutors include: "And, [pause] I think if I have to say something I dislike about the online tutoring maybe it's just some technical problems only" (T01, video reflection). Tutor T23 "Something I don't like from this program is maybe because it is an online tutoring sometimes we have a problem with the connection but it is not really a problem (T23, video reflection)".

> I think the part that I get a student that cannot speak English at all. Because of the problem I need to prepare my presentation slides like I need to take a lot of time to prepare it sometimes two days is not enough because yeah I need to take the idea then to translate it and write down itself is like almost a lot of time wasted. (T17, video reflection)

From the tutors' reactions, the major challenges faced were technical challenges like poor internet connection which inconvenienced their interaction with the tutees sometimes.

Challenges of online tutoring

From the tutors' reflections, various challenges were identified including: technical difficulties, language barrier, inattentive tutees, and tutee absenteeism.

For the technical challenges, most tutors indicated that they faced problems with the Internet speed and poor connection which resulted to frequent interruptions in the video connection. As a result, they had to rely on using the chatting feature to communicate with the tutee. Other tutors had problems with the Internet breakdown which made it impossible for the tutoring session to be held sometimes. Most tutors indicated that the poor Internet connection was mostly from the tutees side. The tutors expressed frustration that due to the Internet problem, they wasted time waiting for the problem to be solved and they were never sure whether they would have the tutoring session or not. One tutee commented that:

> During the middle of the term, because of the connection error and sometimes because of the Internet breakdown, so we could not meet much. This is a pity because I wanted to meet my student every week to talk with her and to help her... so to me is a challenge because you are not always so sure about what is going to happen during the tutoring session. (T09, video reflection)

Language barrier was a challenge because some tutors could only understand English, although some could understand basic Chinese, and the tutees insisted on speaking in Chinese although they had basic levels of English. As a result of the language barrier, there were problems in effective communication, interaction, and understanding between the tutors and tutees. Other challenges included inattentive tutees who were easily distracted and bored during the tutoring

sessions and tutees who missed to attend some tutoring sessions. These occurred majorly due to the tutees lack of confidence in speaking in English. One tutor mentioned "My student also really easy to get distracted, for example, I put a picture he will pay more attention to the picture rather than the material itself. And he likes to draw on the screen" (T04, video reflection). Another tutor stated "sometimes my student is distractive and I know that I have to make my lessons more interesting and attractive" (T10, written reflection). Tutor T17 "... because I cannot interact with her sometimes when she gets bored I cannot ask her to focus onto the class..." (T17, video reflection). A tutor mentioned "My student ever escape from class once. I think because I ask her in English every time and her English speaking ability is poor" (T15, written reflection).

The technical problems and language barrier could have contributed to a not so effective exchange for some tutors and tutees as they contributed to ineffective use of time. Also, since the tutees are not used to communicating using English and not used to online learning, for most of them they felt like the online tutoring environment was threatening to them.

Overall experience

Overall, the tutors expressed that they had a good experience during the online tutoring, they learnt especially how to teach online, and teach children, had fun, and expressed that the opportunity to teach online helped them enhance their job skills. They also obtained valuable communication skills. For instance, a tutor stated that:

> I think it's fun it's really good experience for me because actually I never teach someone before. This is my first time teaching children. Jane [not her real name] is my first student ever. And from this program I think it is really fun. Every week is really fun. I can teach her and sometimes I get more knowledge from her, I can learn from her and it also make me get more skills for communicating with others... overall it is really fun experience. (T22, written reflection)

Tutor T02 mentioned that "Overall, I had a novel, good, exciting experience in teaching digitally. This will be definitely beneficial to my career" (T02, written reflection).

Based on the responses of the tutors, the DLC project was beneficial to the tutors since it provided them with an opportunity to acquire job experience and skills such as online teaching skills which could make them competitive in their job search. They also acquired more intercultural communication skills.

Cultural Awareness

The project helped the tutors to develop cultural awareness about Taiwan by exchanging their country's culture with the tutees as they learnt about the culture

of Taiwan from them. The tutors appreciated the opportunity that the project gave them to learn more about Taiwan. The objective of cultural exchange was fulfilled by having the tutors and tutees share information about their countries with each other about the following topics; food, housing, clothing, entertainment, famous scenery, and transportation. For instance, a tutor mentioned that:

> So I teach her about a lot of English vocabulary, about general knowledge and more importantly about the culture. Like my culture and also the culture around the world and she also teach me some Chinese vocabulary and about the culture in Taiwan. So this program is really useful for everyone. (T13, video reflection)

Another tutor stated:

> With my lessons, [pause] we have learnt a lot from each other. I have learnt a lot from Taiwanese student. Special thing consisting of first traditional, cultural, and something like that and I teach Alan a lot of special thing in Vietnam. (T10, video reflection)

Some of the cultural aspects learned are discussed below.

Similarities and differences in cultures, and way of life

The tutors also learnt about the similarities and differences in their culture and that of Taiwan. For instance, a tutor indicated that:

> And with joining this program, I can learn also about the Taiwanese people, Taiwanese culture and even there is some difference in our culture between Taiwanese culture and Indonesian culture such as housing, clothing, transportation, and also about the taste of the food is a little bit different but in general is a lot of common thing, the same between Taiwanese and Indonesian culture. And everything in this experience is enrichment my awareness about Taiwanese culture about the different culture between Taiwan culture and also Indonesian culture. (T27, video reflection)

Other reactions from tutors are: "From this program I found that we have many similar culture between Vietnam and Taiwan but also different" (T10, video reflection). "I have myself learnt a lot of things about what are the similarities and differences about both the cultures and about the places and about the clothes" (T06, video reflection).

Some tutors and tutees shared about their personal lives through the cultural exchange. For instance, Tutor T02 mentioned that:

> ... and for me it was about the culture awareness. I learn about how they like to eat in the morning. Like the student they don't like any international food at all. They just like local ones like noodles, rice, and other things they don't like.... (T02, written reflection)

Thus, the DLC project helped the tutors to increase their awareness about

their similarities and differences between their cultures and the culture of Taiwan and the people of Taiwan. Their knowledge of Taiwan culture also increased.

Challenging of stereotypes

Through the cultural exchange, some tutors changed their negative perceptions and conclusions they had formed about issues like food in Taiwan. For instance, a tutor mentioned that:

> [Pause] about the culture. Ah... honestly before the online tutoring everything about Taiwan, Taiwanese people or Taiwanese culture, I just look the people, the Taiwanese people. The action they do around the NTUST campus only. But now with the online tutoring, of course, I have chance to know the people, the culture from other area of Taiwan. ... Ah... of course the difference, from Vietnam my country and Taiwan of course have some difference. The food as well, ah... honestly when I come here, I can't familiar with the food here. It's too sweet and a lot of oil and I don't like it and sometime I think like, yeah, it's very hard to eat. But my friend, my Taiwanese friend already recommend me a lot of famous food here and I think that a lot of food I never taste so I need to taste more before I come to the final conclusion about food in Taiwan. (T1, video reflection)

Through the online tutoring, the tutors could become more open-minded toward the culture of Taiwan.

Other cultural aspects

Apart from exchanging culture based on the topics provided, some tutors also observed some cultural differences in education between their country and Taiwan. For instance, a tutor stated that:

> Students are also very respectful to the teacher, [pause] oh but one thing, I feel that my student is sometimes more active than the student in my country because sometimes we have small talk about her daily life. She spent part of her week playing some sport. I don't think it's really common for Vietnamese student. That's a good point for Taiwanese student. To develop themselves in terms of mentality and physicality. (T03, video reflection)

Another tutor also made a similar comment:

> So in the cultural aspect, I think Indonesia and Taiwan have slightly different culture especially education. Here in Taiwan I see that the student do many things in the school and in the evening time but Indonesia we go back from school way sooner than in Taiwan. (T25, video reflection)

Although language barrier was a hindrance to effective cultural exchange, some tutors tried to overcome the language barrier by learning some Chinese words to be able to communicate with their tutee. As one tutor stated:

> One interesting thing that I learned from this online tutoring program is

> that this program has actually helped me to make me realize that you can actually still share your country's culture and learn about other country's culture even though there is a language barrier. So, I think that the language barrier has brought us closer actually because she realized that I am very confident enough to talk in Chinese even my Chinese is poor and with that in mind I think it helps her to build her confidence too so that she can [pause] briefly speak English even though she knows that she will make some mistakes most importantly in the pronunciations. But, [pause] she knows that both of us are still trying to learn a new language and it's hard and so it's okay to make mistakes. And that actually what makes her feeling more comfortable and more confident to talk English in front of me. (T16, video reflection)

Since none of the international students was a native speaker of English, or could speak Chinese fluently yet communicated in both languages confidently, this encouraged the tutees to speak up more.

The DLC project was useful in facilitating cultural exchange as evidenced by comments from the participants. Some of the comments show that through the cultural exchange, the stereotypes the some of the tutors had about Taiwan were challenged. Some tutors were more willing to self-disclose information about their personal lives. This could have been easier because of using the online environment. They even observed cultural differences beyond the topics assigned meaning they appreciated the usefulness of the project.

Discussion

Tutoring Experiences

This study describes international students' experiences in an online tutoring project, and effectiveness of the online tutoring program for the development of cultural awareness. The findings indicate that the international students learnt not only how to teach generally but also how to teach online despite the fact that most of them were not training to be teachers. The results showed that the tutors considered the online tutoring project beneficial for acquiring and improving on teaching skills (both online and teaching in general), language learning, peer encouragement, cultural exchange, helping tutees make boost their confidence to speak English and developing friendships and relationships with the tutees, with other tutors and with the project support team who were students from Taiwan. In Cifuentes and Shih's (2001) study, similar results were obtained after an e-mail correspondence partnership was conducted between American preservice teachers and Taiwanese university students to prepare the preservice teachers for online teaching and learning. The online teaching experiences provided the preservice teachers with online teaching experience, time for individualized instruction,

authentic language learning and cultural exchange (Cifuentes & Shih, 2001). Our results also confirm ChanLin, Lin, and Lu's (2012) conclusion that the online tutoring experience provided the university students with an opportunity to build friendships with the learners in remote areas. The students were also more willing to make adjustments according to their learners' needs since the tutoring provided them with an opportunity to have an experience in a socio-cultural diverse setting (ChanLin et al., 2012).

Although some of the tutors in this program were not trainee teachers, the focus of the project was cultural exchange and not formal teaching, and thus their lack of pedagogical skills could not impede their engagement with the tutees in terms of sharing culture. Hence the approach taken in this project can be scaled and replicated as deemed appropriate. Since some of the tutors were not training to be teachers, we provided them with some basic training on knowledge sharing such as preparation for the lesson prior to them engaging with the tutees. As this project was founded, organized, and administered by a teacher training centre, we have the knowledge and background on how to train trainee teachers. Therefore, based on the findings, this model could be effective for future cultural exchange programs. This is a social action project which aims to create a social impact to the community. As a start, we provide some opportunities to the international students with the hope that with time, they will encourage others to join. By including other students, we try to attract many participants so that we can encourage more potential people to this field and also increase their awareness of social responsibility. To overcome the digital divide and some of the challenges experienced by the rural students such as having few qualified teachers, we also recommend the use of online teaching for formal learning but so as not to compromise the quality of online teaching for the rural school children, we suggest that Taiwanese trainee teachers are paired with the rural elementary school children.

While this research focussed on the experiences of tutors, we appreciate that tutee experiences could as well have been worth exploration in relation to evaluating the success of the project. As this has already been explored in the recent past by studies such as Cheng et al., (2007), we dedicated this paper to the experience of tutors. In the follow-up study, we hope to investigate tutees' experience among other parameters for the sake of informing design of tutee centric online tutoring platform that facilitates cultural awareness and cultural exchange from the tutees perspective.

Cultural Awareness

The results indicated that the DLC project provided an opportunity for the international students to learn about the culture of Taiwan. In their reflections,

the tutors indicated that the project was useful for them since it gave them an opportunity to learn about the people of Taiwan and their culture. This in turn made them to appreciate their own culture more, which some of them had ignored. The project was also useful for the rural children to learn about and be exposed to other cultures since they have few opportunities to experience other cultures. Through the exchange, the tutors learnt about the similarities between their cultures and the culture of Taiwan based on the given topics. This confirms Angelova and Zhao's (2015) claim that learning about other cultures provokes awareness of one's own culture and conclusion that computer-mediated communication tools are useful for learning about a target culture. Most of the tutors mentioned that they would like to participate in the DLC project again in future. However, they indicated that they would like to be paired with students who could be able to communicate in English. This result also confirms Zeiss and Isabelli-García's (2005) suggestion that the Internet can be suitably employed to implement culture-based activities.

Effectiveness of Technology Use

Although most tutors indicated that they faced the challenge of language barrier since their tutees were either shy to speak in English or had low English speaking ability, through the use of technology, they were able to navigate through this challenge. By the end of the program, they mentioned in their reflections that they employed various strategies such as use of google translate to be able to communicate with their tutees. Some even mentioned that their tutees got motivated to speak in English when they realized their tutors were trying to use Chinese even though they did not know any Chinese before taking part in the project. This implies that language barrier is not a challenge to effective online tutoring and cultural exchange. Through application of technology, some of the challenges faced in traditional tutoring settings may be overcome. As ChanLin et al. (2012) concluded, through interacting with students who had a different culture from theirs, the tutors learnt to deal with real-life problems such as the language barrier issue which could hamper effective communication and interaction. None of the tutors dropped out of the project due to the language issue instead as noted earlier, they looked for ways to overcome this problem using technology.

Recommendations for Future Projects

Based on statements made by the tutors and our own observations, the following suggestions are recommended for similar projects in future:

1. Try as much as possible to avoid technical challenges due to Internet speed and connection to ensure a smooth interaction between the tutors and tutees hence avoid frustration. Although this may not be possible because it a limitation

in the rural area. Therefore, we recommend that the tutors be made aware of the problem and prepare for the challenge.

2. Pair tutors with tutees who could speak English for effective communication and interaction so that tutors do not feel overburdened when preparing teaching materials and tutees do not become uncomfortable since they feel they cannot communicate. Since most tutees levels of English are low, we recommend providing tutors with adequate background information about the tutees they will be interacting with, for instance, their English speaking ability so that they do not get frustrated when they face challenges like communication problems during the tutoring sessions. We also recommend that special training be provided to the tutors regarding how to communicate with people who have low communication abilities.

3. Communication from the tutee's side in advance in the event that a tutee will be absent for a given session so as to avoid causing frustration for tutors who take time to prepare for a session only for the student not to show up. Therefore, we recommend that the teachers from the tutees side be more proactive.

4. Teachers of the tutees should encourage them to be active participants in the tutoring sessions, for instance, ask questions and respond to questions raised by their tutors, actively participate in other activities conducted during the tutoring sessions and use this rare opportunity to practice their English speaking skills in order to improve.

5. Alternatively, to encourage tutee active participation, make the exchange to account for a part of their grade.

Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to the emerging literature on online teaching and learning experiences and on the use of online tutoring to facilitate cultural exchange. The findings indicated that participants enjoyed the tutoring experience and gained some skills on how to tutor online. They also gained some benefits such as being able to make friends with the tutees, learn some Chinese from the tutees, and learn about the culture of Taiwan from the tutees. Since they also shared about their culture to the tutees, they were able to appreciate their culture more. Our study demonstrates that although we have other ways of learning about culture, we could leverage the advantages of the Internet and technology to shorten distance and costs to learn about the culture of a people.

One limitation of the study is the small number of participants ($n = 39$) and they all came from one university. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to larger populations and to international students in other universities. Future studies may benefit from having more participants and including international

students from various universities in Taiwan. A second limitation is that the study was conducted for only one semester. In future, we recommend that longitudinal studies be conducted to clearly assess and understand the role of online tutoring in facilitating cultural learning. A third limitation is that the tutors used in this project were not training to be teachers therefore their experiences may only be generalized to participants with similar backgrounds. Future studies may benefit from using trainee teachers as participants so that the results could be used to improve on the growth of the teachers in online teaching and learning settings. A fourth limitation is that only tutor experiences and cultural awareness were assessed. Future studies could assess both tutor and tutee experiences and cultural awareness to evaluate if the project is effective for the tutees too. We also recommend further research to assess whether such programs could be useful and effective beyond the educational setting.

A pedagogical implication of the study is that because the international students appreciated the opportunity given by the project to learn culture, universities and schools could incorporate such online tutoring projects especially for new international students to help them learn about and get exposed to the culture of the country they are studying in so that they can easily adapt to the culture. They could also use such projects for learning the local language. For the local schools, the students could use this opportunity to get an exposure to other cultures around the world in the comfort of their country. A second pedagogical implication is that, although the findings are applicable only to the situation the study examined, they may be used to improve on other similar situations which involve interaction of people from different cultures in an online teaching setting.

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