AN INTERCULTURAL EMAIL PROJECT FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Abstract

This Study explores the overall outcomes of an intercultural communication email project between Palestinian English major students and American native speakers. Using qualitative content analysis, the study investigates how email exchange with native speakers may develop students' cultural awareness, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and language skills. Analyzing data from participants' email discussions over a whole spring semester and final reflective papers, the study revealed that both groups gained knowledge about a foreign/target culture and reflected on native culture. The email exchange project was regarded as a positive experience.

The study also unveiled that both groups involved in the intercultural email exchange project reported development in their attitudes towards the "*Other*" and destabilizing stereotypes, biases, and prejudices. Palestinian participants described their American email partners as being friendly, supportive, and helpful. The Palestinian learners showed some progress in language and intercultural communication skills. However, students in both groups illuminated that their intercultural telecommunication experience was never easy.

Keywords: email, cultural awareness, intercultural communicative competence, language skills, teaching English as a foreign language, native speakers

1   INTRODUCTION

Rapid evolution of communication technologies has apparently changed language pedagogy and language use, enabling new forms of discourse (Kern, 2006) and creating online opportunities for EFL teachers to maximize learners' language skills, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and intercultural awareness. Amongst the various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in language teaching is the electronic mail (email), which has been so far one of most prevalent and useful tools for foreign language teachers (see Chen, 1998; Itakura, 2004; Liao, 2000; Liao & Johnson, 2001; Muller-Hartmann, 2000a; O'Dowd, 2003; Shang, 2007; Singhal, 1998). Therefore, foreign language learners in the expanding circle (Crystal, 2003), can communicate directly, inexpensively, and conveniently with native speakers of the target language 24 hours a day (Hoffman, 1994; Shang, 2007).

Despite the plethora of descriptive research about email projects, little appears to be known about what learners' actually learn from their peers in other culture (Kern, 1995; Muller-Hartmann, 2000a). Research regarding the applicability of email exchange within the English as a foreign language context in Palestine seems to be scarce. The present study probes into the overall impact of email exchange between Palestinian English major students and American native speakers on the development of intercultural awareness, ICC, and language skills.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of scholarly literature in the field of EFL has paid due attention to exploring how access to authentic materials and real people can develop and promote social relationships within and across classrooms, leading to collaborative meaningful human interactions generated in cyberspace (Liu et al., 2003). The intercultural learning is often assumed to be an automatic benefit of email exchanges; however, little research anchors on whether online intercultural collaboration does actually embark learners' understanding of the cultural practices and world views (O'Dowd, 2003). This process is also known as tele-collaboration, which signals the use of online communication tools to connect language learners in different countries in order to develop collaborative projects and intercultural exchange (ibid). This field apparently covers a wide range of activities of online

communication tools including email, web-based messages board, and video conferencing. However, this project, specifically, examines the use of email in intercultural communication between two groups of Palestinian and American university students. Allright (2005) maintains that involvement in a project-based collaboration between foreign language learners and native speakers can, inarguably, be rich in learning opportunities including intercultural learning and the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Further, communication asynchronous allows each participant to compose messages at their own time and pace (Warschauer & Healy, 1998). An overarching emphasis has been placed on the significance of integrating language skills and technology in order to combine authentic language, learners' autonomy, and communication (Belz, 2004; Liaw, 2006).

Conversely, the belief that contact between cultures automatically leads to intercultural learning and to the development of positive attitude towards the target culture has been challenged by many scholars (Coleman, 1998; Fischer, 1998). For example, Richter (1998) argues that the Internet brings about the contact of cultures, but this does not automatically entail cultural understanding (as cited in O'Dowd, 2003). This study explores the overall development of intercultural awareness, ICC, and language skills in an email discussion project between Palestinian university students of English and American native speakers.

3   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study has in essence an educational disciplinary orientation, and therefore the concepts, vocabulary, and theory address the field of English as a foreign language (EFL). Intercultural communication theories have proved to be effective means for intercultural learning (Belz & Throne, 2006; Corbett, 2003, Byram, Nichols & Steven, 2001; Furstenberg et al., 2001), particularly for helping students to promote their linguistic and intercultural competence by active interaction with native speakers.

This study draws on Byram's (1997) model of ICC and intercultural awareness. Intercultural awareness is a slippery and contested concept; nevertheless, in this study it involves awareness of native culture and a target culture. It basically signifies the ability of standing back from own point of view and becoming aware of own cultural values and perceptions as well as those of other cultures (Baker, 2012). Cultural awareness lies at the heart of intercultural communication when someone communicates with people from other cultures (ibid).

Intercultural Communicative Competence

There are several intercultural competence models; nonetheless, Byram's (1997) model seems to be the most generally accepted and widely used in foreign language education (Deardorff, 2006; Liaw, 2006). ICC emphasizes explicitly the ability to change one's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors so as to be open and flexible to other cultures (Alred & Byram, 2002). In a multicultural world, ICC has become a key issue in the globalized society of the 21st century. It highlights fundamentally "the meeting between people from different cultures and languages across the political boundaries at nation-states (Kramsch, 1998, p.128). According to Byram and Zarate (1997) the concept of ICC encompasses the following:

- Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about

  other cultures and belief about one's own.

- Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's

  own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of

  societal and individual interaction.

- Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event

  from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's

  own.

- Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a

  culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge,

  attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

- Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate

  critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and

  products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Byram, 2000, p.10).

Byram (1997) argues that intercultural competence implies ability to interact effectively with people from another country in a foreign language. This means to be able to overcome stereotypes, prejudices, and pre-conceptions. This study uses qualitative content analysis to investigate the overall development of intercultural awareness, ICC, and language skills in an email discussion project between Palestinian university students of English and American native speakers.

4   RESEARCH QUESTION

The study attempted to answer the following general question:
1. How would an intercultural email exchange project between Palestinian University students of English and American native speakers impact the Palestinian students' overall intercultural awareness, intercultural communicative competence, and language skills?

5   METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative content analysis method to analyze participants' email discussions and final reflective papers. Specifically, it wanted to gain insights into how such email exchanges between Palestinian EFL learners and American native speakers might develop learners' overall intercultural awareness, ICC, and language skills. The focus was on Gaza participants as the primary learners under observation for language skills and both for evidence of cultural learning.

5.1 Participants

Participants in this study were 13 pairs of Palestinian English major freshmen and American under graduate and graduate students. The Palestinian group was comprised of 7 female and 6 male students enrolled in an intermediate academic reading class at a major university in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, while the American students were enrolled in an intercultural communication class at a north eastern university in Massachusetts, USA. All the names used in this research are pseudonyms.

5.2 Data gathering

The study, primarily, used data from students' email discussions over a whole spring semester and final reflected papers. Students were expected to send at least one email per week, and they were free to choose any of the enlisted topics. However, they discussed many topics, for example, life experience, university life, foreign language experience, politics, food, marriage, values, traditions, polygamy, funerals, divorce, clothes and fashion, travel, family, religion, gay marriage, cultural differences, intercultural communication, tolerance, and many other cultural issues. At the end of the semester, all participants were required to write reflective papers summarizing their intercultural experience. It is worthy to note that students' emails and reflective papers were part of credited assignments for both groups.

5.3 *Analytic procedures*

5.3.1 Organizing data

The analysis process was ongoing and overlapping, and it started on day one after receiving each forwarded email. Note cards were used to organize and clean up the data gathered from emails and reflective papers. This process was very helpful in stimulating the researcher's analytic thinking through writing down hunches and analytic ideas throughout the study. The data were grouped and organized into categories based on the theoretical framework constructs, e.g., cultural knowledge, attitudes, skills, cultural awareness, etc.

5.3.2 Familiarity with data

After reading all emails and reflective papers many times and analyzing all the notes, the researcher started familiarizing himself with the data through reading and rereading over again. During that process, he felt as if the data were speaking to him and this led to more data analysis, insights, and analytic thinking. He reflected on his data for possible categories and themes all the time.

5.3.3 Generating categories and themes

The study started with some preliminary categories to focus data gathering and analysis. These categories depended mainly on grouping data based on the theoretical framework constructs. After gaining deep familiarity with the data, themes started to emerge from the different categories. Those themes were expressed overtly by the participants themselves, and the study discovered them through inductive analysis of the participants' email discussions and reflective papers.

5.3.4 Searching for alternative understanding/perception

To search for other possible explanations and sound interpretations, the study asked participants, a critical friend, and community of practice whether they agreed with the study interpretations or had different understandings. The researcher's critical friend and community of practice played significant roles at different phases and helped in identifying the *blind spots* and suggesting various ways of seeing the data. The analyses conducted in this study are by all means exploratory. It is hoped that the research results can help Palestinian educators as well as teachers of English in general to better understand the impact of the email applications in foreign language classes and more effectively plan their classroom activities.

6   RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Through analyzing students' emails and reflective papers, the following themes emerged:

6.1   Learners gained knowledge about the target culture and reflected on native culture.

Several participants from both groups indicated that they gained cultural knowledge about the target culture and own native culture. For example, Omar noted that he learned many cultural facts about the target culture "I learned a lot about the American culture, for instance, college system, fireworks, camp fire, Halloween, Christmas, Easter, Independence Day, marriage, gay marriage, divorce, food… etc". Palestinian participants illuminated that during email discussions, they realized that cultural differences exist and impact intercultural communication. Besides learning about the target culture, Palestinian participants talked passionately about their political/cultural beliefs and interests.

6.1.1   Email exchange allowed Palestinian learners to convey their passion about political/cultural beliefs and experiences.

Due to the severe siege on the Gaza Strip and lack of opportunities to meet with native speakers face to face, many Palestinian participants found the email as a window to the outside world to reflect on their political situation and daily suffering under the Israeli occupation. For example, Zeina pointed out that although she learned many new facts about the American daily life and major cultural events, she introduced her email partner to many aspects of the Palestinian culture as well as historical facts about the prolonged struggle against the Zionist occupation "the process of exchanging knowledge about our cultures was not from her side, but also from my side. I told her about our national and Islamic events like 'Eid Al Fitter', 'Ramadan', and the disaster of 1948.etc.

On the other hand, Jacqi, an American student, indicated that she learned about Islamic religion and its role in Muslim lives "religion is a very important part of Islamic life and "Ameera" stressed this during our communication. She explained to me that Islam is a way of life; the Quran helps Islamic followers to know the difference between right and wrong and governs daily activities".

Further, Alice in Boston was overwhelmingly impressed by the information she learned about Palestine and Palestinians, especially their struggle with the Israeli occupation "I was almost a little overwhelmed by 'Nada's passion, especially when she ended her emails with sentences like "We will fight till we get our freedom. We will sacrifice our lives for Palestine, Freedom costs blood!!!" It is interesting to note that while American students wanted to talk about daily routine and fun activities, Palestinian students seemed to have different interests such as politics and the role of religion. Cultural awareness becomes central when we have to interact with people from other cultures. Cultural awareness involves the ability of standing back from ourselves and becoming aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions (Baker, 2012).

6.1.2 Email exchange encouraged the Palestinian and US learners to reflect on their cultural artifacts and beliefs.

Many participants noted that involvement in email exchange project helped them to learn and reflect on their own native culture. Ameera, a Palestinian student, argued that the email project helped her to conduct research to learn more about her own native culture "I learned about my own culture, for example, talking about heritage was interesting, and it gave me a push to know about my heritage to see the old tools and get introduced to the styles of wearing in the old times". Haneen, another Palestinian student, showed similar ideas about learning about her native culture:

Because when my pen pal asked me about my own culture and I didn't know the answer, I used to search about my culture and benefited a lot. When she asked me about the conflict in Palestine, I felt scared of misrepresenting my people; it was a great responsibility, but with the help of my dad, who is a good spectator of news, I succeeded to present my case and made her sympathize with my people.

On the other hand, Alice, an American student, expressed certain feelings towards her culture which was fostered through her email discussions with her Palestinian email partner:

One thing that I already knew about my culture, but definitely instilled my belief is that we are known to be a little larger in America, and definitely less "healthy" than most other countries…It was a wonderful experience being able to not only learn about her culture but also reflect on my own culture as well.

It is clear that intercultural email project helped students to learn about a target or foreign culture and reflect on their own native cultures. I think before communicating with their email partners, students in both groups took all these cultural aspects for granted, and presupposed that all people behave in the same way.

It is worth noting that through email discussions, many Palestinian participants noted cultural differences in many cultural aspects and daily routine, especially in family, religion, marriage, dating, living on campus, cuisine, role of religion, and personal interests. Parra (2011) argues that one of the goals of using intercultural email projects is to help students recognize cultural differences and realize that most behavior is culturally conditioned. This resonates with Greenfield's (2003) ideas about exposing students to international email communication. He asserts that participants become better informed about each other's culture. Participants tend to be more open in sharing information which widens their cultural knowledge and promotes their intercultural awareness (Muller-Hartmann, 2000a). Furcsa (2009) concords with the above findings in that intercultural email based university projects promote development in cultural knowledge and development in cultural awareness in the target as well as native culture. To sum up, it can be noted that the intercultural email project helped students to gain knowledge about the target/foreign culture and reflect on their own culture.

6.2 Email interaction promoted positive attitudes towards the "Other" and destabilized stereotypes and biases.

Several Palestinian and American participants involved in the intercultural email project expressed change in their attitudes towards each other. They highlighted explicitly the idea of destabilizing preexisting negative stereotypical images. The following excerpts may serve as illustration:

Although whenever I picture the Middle East, I often envision deserts and camels. I was surprised when I saw pictures of Gaza city skyline. It was a city similar to Boston with skyscrapers and bustling business. Occidental views of Western world that may have had were broken immediately by speaking to my email partner realizing she was a person like me (Nina).

These e-mails taught me a lot about the Palestinian culture that I had been once someone obvious to 'Nada' "de-stabilized" the stereotypical Middle East person and showed that they truly are good people from every decent (Carol).

My email partner and I discussed different aspects of Palestinian and American cultures. I learned a lot about the American culture, and I changed some false stereotypical images, ideas, and concepts about it. For example, I was expecting that all American people are against the Palestinians, but I discovered that many people are pro-Palestinians (Ameera).

I used to have specific stereotypes about Americans that they are terrorists, they don't like Palestinians, they consider us as uncivilized, savage and extreme people, but after I have known my email partner, I changed this image especially when I told him about Palestine and the conflict in Palestine. He sympathized with us (Abedallah).

The sentiments of the participants comport with similar observations of scholars. Hartmann (2000a), for instance, argues that email interaction across cultures can promote multiculturalism awareness of the other cultures, the development of tolerance and better intercultural awareness, as well as the reduction of stereotypes and prejudices. Further, many intercultural email exchange projects adopt objectives targeting the development of tolerance, better intercultural awareness, as well as reduction of stereotypes and prejudices (Meagher & Castanis, 1996; Sakar, 2001). For example, Itakura's (2004) study showed that the intercultural email project was effective in promoting more sensitive and complex views of the target culture in modifying existing stereotypes as well as encouraging the learners to conduct their own research on cultural phenomena.

6.2.1 Palestinian learners described their American email partners as being friendly, helpful and supportive.

A notable number of Palestinian participants asserted that their native- speaker- email partners were friendly, helpful, and supportive. Because they were worried about making syntactic and semantic mistakes, many Palestinian participants were delighted to receive supportive and encouraging remarks:

Don't worry at all about writing mistakes. I have spent more than three years in Europe and South America, some of which was spent in teaching English. As such, I am familiar with both the challenges of learning a new language and difficult parts of English grammar. I will help you the best I can…Your hard work and high grade point are paying off! Your written English is excellent (Jeff).

Similarly, Lina, a Palestinian student, expressed similar ideas about her American email partner.

My partner is very friendly. I don't remember that she made me feel strange at all. She used to tell me about herself, her friends, her family, and her college…. I remember when she told me about her journey to Italy and Florida…She is very sweet! She isn't only friendly, but also supportive and willing to help. I asked her to teach me English in the summer and she agreed immediately and encouraged me. I remember at the beginning when she told me, "I am impressed by your English; it is very difficult to learn a new language". She gave me a push up!

I think to overcome negative emotions towards cultural differences, students are required to recognize that these differences exist first, and then make it a positive feeling, i.e., to tolerate cultural diversity, develop interest in other cultures, and try different ways of doing things.

6.3 The interaction developed Palestinian learners' intercultural communication and language Skills.

Many Palestinian participants indicated that their intercultural communication as well as language skills improved during email discussions with American native speakers. Wafaa', a Palestinian student, found out that in order to avoid intercultural misunderstandings and communication failure, discussions about religion and political situations should be avoided as much as possible:

We talked also about the impact of differences between cultures in intercultural communication. Therefore, I noticed that there are some issues that are sensitive to Americans to talk about such as religion and political situations; that was something new for me. She said, "It's hard talking politics or religion with people, just because it is one thing that a lot of people feel strongly about. Conversations get heated and it can potentially ruin relationships. I know it's hard to talk about".

One of the Palestinian students articulated certain aspects of successful intercultural communication such as respect, open-mindedness, tolerating cultural differences, and using expressions to show that:

I noticed some development in my intercultural communication skills. For example, I learned that my pen pal and I have different cultures; however, we should respect each other's opinions and cultures. I started using expression that shows respect and "open-mindedness", e.g., "thank you for sharing your culture", "it is interesting to know", and "I'm impressed by all these cultural facts (Sanaa').

Sally, an American student, gave her Palestinian email partner some tips in order to have

more successful intercultural communication with the 'Other', such as tolerating cultural differences and not expecting others to act in the same way "You should act like yourself. But just be mindful that not everyone else is going to act the same as you". Sally learned that respecting cultural difference and other cultural values can be a key to effective intercultural communication.

Furthermore, several Palestinian participants indicated that the intercultural email project developed noticeably their vocabulary and writing skills. This was fundamentally achieved by imitating the writing style of native speakers and practicing writing in email discussions:

I have learned a group of new vocabularies. These words are: hired, cheerleading, barrier, gypsies, immersion, comfy, moccasins, fleece, and haunted…another thing that I have learned is related to the sentence structure. I was facing some problems of how to begin a sentence, or what are the appropriate expressions to use, so it was my opportunity to check my mistakes in writing and to enrich my knowledge. Moreover, some of the vocabularies I used were from the dictionary and the Internet. Generally, I learned lots of things from her including writing skills and culture (Ameera).

In some email discussions, Palestinian participants asked their American email partners to comment on their writing and give them some tips. Although the feedback they received was not professional, the Palestinian students pointed out that it was helpful. Monica advised her email partner to use punctuation and capitalization properly in her writing "I believe it is a good idea to use the proper punctuation and capitalization even in emails. It keeps the message very clear for the reader…Your English writing is very good and flows naturally".

Through analyzing Palestinian participants' emails and reflective papers to examine development in writing (compared to their early emails), the study noticed some progress in their writing in general and the use of new vocabulary and speaking expressions in particular. For instance, learners used expressions to make compliments about major and family, making and accepting apologies, extending condolences. Some of these expressions were: I totally understand how busy you are!, don't worry about being late, I hope you enjoyed your spring break, I hope you've done well so far in your project, I am sure you'll do a wonderful job, thank you for commending my family, get better soon, good for you, talk to you soon, and I wish you the best!. Moreover, the study noticed the use of signal words such as first, second, moreover, however, additionally.etc.

Although the study noticed development in the Palestinian participants' writing, it couldn't confirm that the progress was due, exclusively, to the intercultural email project because they were taking simultaneous courses during the spring semester, including reading and writing. Likewise, Warschauer's (1995) study showed resembling results about learners' use of formal and more lexically and syntactically complex language in electronic discussions than in face-to-face communication. Belisle (2002) argues that in email discussions, shy students can express their opinions more openly without fear; therefore, this can give them self-confidence and eventually develop their writing ability. Online email communication has become essential as it allows learners to have meaningful and authentic conversations with others in the target language (Liu et al., 2003).

Learners can also master language output and reflect on what others say. Kupelian (2001) maintains that email discussions represent authentic communication with a delay which allows students to think and compose a message. This delay, however, can reduce anxiety that students may feel in other forms of communication, thus can be face saving (Beauvois, 1994; Hoffman, 1994; Kupelian, 2001). Email has been a commonly used tool to teach L2 writing and to encourage language and cultural learning across national borders (Barson, Frommer & Schwartz, 1993; Leahy, 2001; Liaw, 1998; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Stockwell & Levy, 2001; Tella, 1991; Warschauer, 1995). In a similar study conducted by Leppene and Kalaja (1995), results showed that email partners gave each other a great deal of different kinds of feedback and demonstrated a reasonable sense of responsibility.

6.4 The intercultural telecommunication experience was never easy.

Intercultural email projects are prone to many major problems. Besides organizational problems, one key problem is non-responses (Kupelian, 2001). It is noteworthy that a notable number of Palestinian and American participants expressed frustration due to the interruption of emails and discussions. This was essentially due to students' busy life in both groups and power crisis in the Gaza Strip. Kareema, a Palestinian student, indicated that her native speaker email partner did not respond promptly to her emails "She had a busy semester and didn't have plenty of time to reply to my messages quickly, while I am in my first year and I am enthusiastic to know everything about her culture". While analyzing students' emails, the study noticed many expressions of apology from both groups for not responding promptly. For example, "Sorry for not responding to your email earlier, it was a very busy two weeks! I have a lot of homework and examinations coming up".

Further, during the email exchange project, the Gaza Strip had faced acute fuel shortage due to the Israeli siege; therefore, many regions in the enclave suffered from frequent power outages. Hassan said, "The problems that we faced as Palestinian students were the power outages which often stood as an obstacle in the way of our inter-cultural communication".

In their reflective papers, many Palestinian participants suggested using synchronous tools of communication, especially with video and audio facilities such as skype, MSN, oovoo, facebook, etc. They believed that face-to-face communication with native speakers could improve speaking and pronunciation skills:

I believe that using other audio/video programs would have been more effective on many levels. First of all, having a live conversation with the pen pal would help to make a continuous flow of ideas which would bring out much more topics to discuss. Second, having a vocal conversation would widely improve our listening and speaking skills by listening and talking directly and actively to a native speaker, which in its turn will upgrade our pronunciation skills. Although I know that this may be hard to apply because of different time zones, I hope that this idea would be taken in consideration for the improvement of the project (Reem).

Despite the benefits of email that allow people to exchange knowledge, thoughts and ideas with each other, I think video and audio programmers if used, they will do better job than email. By using video you can see your friend face to face. You can listen to her and she can hear you, and this will help you to improve your language as a student studying English. You can listen to her pronunciation as a native speaker of English, and also she can listen to your English and correct you where necessary (Nada).

These comments make us believe that many Palestinian participants preferred synchronous communication tools because they thought it might help them to develop not only writing and cultural knowledge but also speaking and pronunciation skills as well. Poncini (2004) articulates a strong relationship between face-to-face communication and socializing progress. However, some scholars disagree with Poncini. The use of email in collaborative email projects represents authentic communication with a delay which allows students time to think and compose a message (Kupelian, 2001; Warschauer & Healy, 1998). In my opinion, using video/audio communication tools can be promising; however, it can be inhibiting to some learners with less speaking fluency. Moreover, besides time difference between the USA and Palestine, it requires endless organization effort, and learners in some cases may end up in frustration and demotivation.

6.5 Learners enjoyed the experience of intercultural email project.

It is interesting to note that several Palestinian and American participants expressed positive feelings towards the intercultural experience and described it as an enriching learning opportunity:

Overall, the experience of emailing with a Palestinian college student was very positive. My email partner was very nice and inquisitive about American culture. We talked about literature, music, sports, marriage, funerals, and traditional food; the basics of any culture. I learned quite a lot from her about Palestine culture (Cathy).

Due to the situations that we have here in Palestine in general and in Gaza in particular, we do not have the chance to go to other countries and meet with native speakers of English face

to face, so using the email to have an inter-cultural communication with native speakers was definitely efficient to evolve our linguistic and other language skills especially that we used written forms. That surely helped to make an advanced progress of our language as non-native speakers of English (Abeer).

Mona, a Palestinian freshman, expressed similar sentiments towards her intercultural experience "Absolutely, I was so enthusiastic to communicate with a native speaker. All my friends are Palestinians and Arabs… However, my email partner added a lot to my personality and knowledge about her culture, life experience, and ambitions". Some participants noted that involvement in the project added new dimensions to their lives in terms of knowledge, personality, and way of thinking "I think that email is a good way to develop ourselves, the way we think, the way we write, and the way we communicate with others.

Nada was further sentimental in her experience as having a profound impact on life experience and linguistic proficiency "I spent a wonderful time with my American pen pal, and I was eager to know more and more about her culture. The project sharpened my life experience, helped me to learn new words, developed my intercultural communication skills, and helped me to spend special and enjoyable time". Similarly, many native speakers voiced similar feelings. Sharon, a graduate American student, noted "I enjoyed writing back to her and it almost lost the feeling of an assignment and became keeping in contact with a friend".

Many Palestinian and American participants agreed to keep in touch after the email project. For example, Maurine invited her Palestinian email partner to continue writing to each other "Would you like to keep in touch and continue talking about our countries and writing to each other to keep practicing your English, feel free to write to me! I would love to continue writing to each other". Shang (2007) concords with the above findings in that learners who participate in intercultural email projects enjoy the email activity because it provides more practices in writing, communication, vocabulary learning, and self-monitoring.

7   PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study highlighted the use of email as an educational tool to develop students' intercultural awareness, ICC, and language skills. It was surprising to find out that both Palestinian and American groups were reluctant at the beginning to communicate with each other; however, after destabilizing stereotypes and biases some of them decided to continue their communication after the end of the project.

To better conduct and control intercultural telecommunication email projects, teachers may choose participants enrolled in their classes, and project's assignments should contribute to those classes. Although all Palestinian participants showed extreme enthusiasm at the beginning of the project, 4 senior students stopped at a certain point and withdrew completely before the end of the project. However, freshmen participants enrolled in the researcher's academic reading class reflected more commitment and interest in the project.

The study would recommend email as a useful learning tool to develop students' intercultural awareness and ICC. Further, teachers may emphasize the importance of ICC and intercultural awareness as new objectives in foreign language education (Corbett, 2003; Guilherme, 2007; Sercu, 2006). Nowadays, the focus is not on whether to integrate technology in foreign language classes; rather it is well-centered on how to effectively maximize its use in EFL education (Liu et al., 2003). Based on the observations of the study, many participants from both cultural groups developed cultural awareness/knowledge, positive attitudes, and destabilized stereotypes and biases. Further, Palestinian students showed some development in their writing as well as vocabulary skills. In the future, the researcher may modify his syllabi for the oral communication and writing classes to encompass intercultural email projects in order to develop students' authentic cultural knowledge and language skills. This can also help learners to acquire genuine speaking expressions such as phrasing apologies, condolences, requests, compliments, salutations, etc.

Further, the researcher would invade on the spontaneity of learners' email exchange by further planning and careful guidance to achieve specific objectives. The present study had exploratory generic goals such as exploring impacts of email exchange on cultural awareness, ICC, and language skills. However, teachers may design a whole intercultural telecommunication email project to investigate a certain skill such as writing, reading, or speaking. Teachers may also need to use email projects with junior and senior students. Although Palestinian freshman participants did very

well in the project, some of them found it rather challenging to talk about certain cultural and national issues. Moreover, the Palestinian participants expressed concern about age differences with their email partners. For example, some American participants were graduate students in their forties while Palestinian participants were only 18 or 19 years old.

Several Palestinian and American participants recommended other social media such as MSN and skype for future intercultural telecommunication projects, especially for conversation and pronunciation classes. However, this can be used with great caution in pronunciation and speaking classes. Such media tools require enormous organization due to time differences and technical complexities. The teacher might also have less control on such social media tools, and this might result in cultural misunderstandings.

Through teacher's full control and guidance, participants can avoid cultural misunderstandings. One striking cultural misunderstanding took place when an American participant thought that her email partner was a male student. She didn't feel comfortable as her email partner at certain point addressed her as "oh my dear". Then the researcher explained to her that her email partner was a girl and not a boy!

8   STUDY LIMITATIONS

Although the findings of the study are to a large extent positive, many limitations should be addressed here. The participants of the study were 13 pairs of Palestinian English major freshmen and American graduate and undergraduate students. The findings are limited to the participants and the two university contexts, and therefore the study cannot make generalization about the use of email in different EFL classes. The study also understands that it cannot claim any generalizability or conclusiveness based on its findings (Marshall & Roseman, 1999). Moreover, that limitation derives from the conceptual framework and design of the study. However, it can be useful to give inspiring insights about other contexts.

In future research, it can be suggested that the intercultural telecommunication email project should be carried out involving specific writing, reading, or conversation tasks. Different variables such as learners' language proficiency levels and individual differences such as attitudes, age, and gender can also be taken into consideration in future research in foreign language classes. Additionally, the use of synchronous social media tools such as Skype, MSN, and Facebook can also be investigated to unveil their potential impact on the development of pronunciation and conversation skills. The present study was about the overall outcomes of email intercultural telecommunication email projects on students' cultural awareness, ICC, and language skills.

9   CONCLUSION

Within the context of globalization and sophisticated technology of communications, foreign language educators constantly seek to connect their students with target language native speakers to enrich and solidify their language skills, ICC, and intercultural awareness. The purpose of the study was to explore the overall impact of the email in an intercultural email project between Palestinian university students and American native speakers. The study used qualitative content analysis to analyze participants' email discussions and final reflective papers. The participants were 13 pairs of Palestinian freshmen in a major university in the Gaza Strip, Palestine and American graduate and undergraduate students from a north eastern university.

The study revealed that both groups developed intercultural knowledge of the target/foreign culture and reflected on own native culture. The participants in both groups enjoyed the email-exchange project, which was regarded as a positive experience. The participants, further, reported development in their attitudes towards each other and destabilizing stereotypes, biases, and prejudices. Additionally, email exchange allowed Palestinian students to convey their passion about political/cultural beliefs and experiences. The study also unveiled that Palestinian learners showed some progress in language and communication skills. Nevertheless, both groups complained about some problems related to peers' non-responses, and power outages in the Palestinian context. It can be concluded from the study that email communication creates an intercultural space in which pairs of people or groups of people interact. Email also originates a context in cyberspace in which human relationships can unfold in many aspects of life, namely, personal experience, intercultural awareness, acquisition of ICC, and foreign language learning.

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