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## Engagement beyond a tour guide approach: Korean and US elementary school students' intercultural telecollaboration



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### Abstract

This paper reports findings from a case study of intercultural telecollaboration between elementary school students in South Korea and the United States via the social networking service *Classting*. The goal was to provide an opportunity for Korean students with limited exposure to authentic English language communication to interact with native speakers of English and for the US students to experience online intercultural activity in class with the hope of promoting intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in both student groups. The study applies Byram's (1997) model of ICC to analyze patterns of engagement within the communication between students. Findings indicate that although both student groups endeavored to create common ground in their intercultural encounters, there was a tendency to relate to each other by enacting a *Tour Guide Approach* towards their own culture and a *Tourist Approach* (Byram, 1997) towards the other culture. Findings also show, however, that students went beyond such approaches during "off task" interactional moments, drawing on shared small cultures to initiate more authentic interpersonal engagement and opportunities for knowledge exchange.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence, telecollaboration, English language learning

### Introduction

As demonstrated especially acutely during the current Covid-19 crisis, technology now plays a significant role in enabling humans to disseminate ideas and to work towards constructive intercultural dialogue, including within internationalized education environments. Learning technologies in particular are facilitating the globalization of teaching and learning and opening up opportunities for intercultural learning (Albert, 2015). Within the context of English language education in Korea, there is increased recognition of the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and there is much interest in exploring technological possibilities for promoting intercultural

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within this paper.

learning at different levels within the school system (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2020). English language study is currently compulsory within the elementary school curriculum in South Korea, but teachers often find it challenging to create opportunities for students to engage with the language for genuine communicative purposes and to understand the cultural meanings that shape language use. Parents who realize this limitation and have the financial means supplement their children's English language education through private tutoring or attendance at private academies, which are often able to offer more advanced and authentic learning opportunities. Consequently, English becomes a form of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 2001) or *a proxy for success* for the privileged in Korean society, and it reproduces unjust societal stratification in Korea (Park, 2009; Seo, 2010). The need for greater accessibility to authentic English language learning environments is an issue of increasing importance in Korea for this reason.

An important starting point in developing ICC amongst elementary school students is to provide opportunities for direct engagement with same-aged peers from a different linguistic and cultural background. This paper reports on an intercultural telecollaboration initiative to foster communication between students in a relatively disadvantaged elementary school in Korea and an elementary school in the United States via the social networking service *Classting*. The goal of the exchange from the Korean side was to provide an opportunity for Korean students with limited access to the English language to interact with same-aged English-speaking peers with the aim of promoting ICC (Byram, 1997). Specifically, the class objectives were established as: (1) Korean students will be able to read and write in English as they interact with American students online, and (2) Korean and US students will be able to communicate competently with linguistically and culturally different peers as they exchange cultural ideas online.

This paper will present snapshots of learners' communicative engagement during the project, focusing on how learners negotiated knowledge and constructed common ground. The next section presents the theoretical context of the paper and then goes on to introduce the empirical focus in more detail.

### **Theoretical framework and related literature**

Since the 6<sup>th</sup> National Curriculum was enacted in 1992, English language education in Korea has tended to be directed by the assumption that the goal of learning is to develop the communicative competence of native speakers (Chang, 2019; Yu, 1999). However, there is now increasing recognition of the importance of taking into account learners' own identity and the need to situate the goals of English language education within the framework of intercultural communicative competence. As argued by Byram (1997), native-speaker centered models of communicative competence tend to engender a predominant focus on the culture/s associated with the target language over the learner's culture, which leads to marginalization of learners' existing linguistic knowledge and cultural identities. Byram's model of ICC, based on the idea of "the intercultural speaker," empowers learners to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are conducive to mutual understanding. That is, at the heart of ICC is the idea that learners not only need to develop knowledge about others, but also increase their own self-awareness and become able to reflect on language and culture from a more conscious and informed position (Byram, 1997, 2012). Such ideas are expressed through the ICC model with five *savoirs*: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

One useful way of understanding intercultural engagement for the development of ICC is through Byram's (1997) distinction between "tourists" and "sojourners." On the one hand, *tourists* explore the foreign world with the hope that new experiences will enrich their own lives, while neither fundamentally changing them through the encounter nor trying to challenge their counterpart's life in

turn. In contrast, *sojourners* are those who seek out deeper meanings in foreign societies and languages whilst also aiming to decenter from their own assumptions and beliefs. Clearly, for the foreign language learner it is preferable to become able to move beyond a tourist mindset to develop deep curiosity and analytical ability in relation to self and others and to enter into dialogue that contributes to mutual understanding.

Since the majority of work on ICC to this point has been carried out in higher education settings (e.g., Belz, 2003; Lloyd *et al.*, 2018; O'Dowd *et al.*, 2020), questions might arise as to whether Byram's model of ICC can be applied in the elementary context. However, Byram (1997) suggests his model is still applicable with young population if the curriculum is systematically sequenced with consideration for learners' developmental stages, for example, "[young] learners need to work from concrete to abstract" (p. 83). This relies on Piaget's (1954) theory of cognitive development of learners, which categorizes most elementary school students at concrete, and some at formal, operational stages. At the concrete operational stage, learners start to use inductive reasoning to find general ideas from dealing with specific information, and they become able to learn the existence of different perspectives as their egocentrism begins to disappear. Therefore, young students' development of ICC can be facilitated by tangible intercultural interaction. In this vein, the applicability of Byram's ICC model in the younger population is also outlined by Moseley (2018) in her work using a story for primary school students, showing the importance of using concrete materials selected in an age-appropriate way. An additional consideration is that young learners are often more open to engaging with cultural diversity in non-judgmental ways, which means that early intercultural interactions become crucial, and particularly beneficial for students from monolingual regions (Gajek, 2018). This is of relevance in the Korean context, where the objectives for English education at elementary school level within the National Curriculum of Korea stipulate that affective factors, basic communicative competence, and cultural understanding of foreign countries should be achieved with even emphasis (Ministry of Education, 2020).

### **ICC within the context of telecollaboration**

Telecollaboration is an approach to promoting intercultural learning that has gained in popularity amongst language teachers and has also been the focus of a significant amount of research (e.g., Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2018b; Thorne, 2010). It represents a partnership between students, typically in an institutionalized setting, for carrying out cooperative tasks for foreign language learning, such as class-to-class cultural exchanges or joint projects. Telecollaboration 2.0 is defined when it is utilized with Web 2.0 technology, user-generated websites such as social networking services (Guth & Helm, 2010), which is the form of communication that this research addresses. Lee and Markey (2014) show that students' positive perceptions of Web 2.0 facilitates intercultural exchange because it provides a superb venue for intercultural communication with native speakers. Similarly, Lin *et al.* (2016) report that students feel more confident engaging with native speakers in language learning through social networking services than in face-to-face interaction.

Godwin-Jones (2019) examines different approaches to telecollaboration for developing ICC in the last twenty years. Although there have been concerns expressed towards telecollaboration, such as questioning its ineffectiveness (Lin *et al.*, 2016), when set up with care, it is a powerful and effective tool for the development of ICC and second language learning (O'Neil, 2007). In particular, informal L2 resources from social media or online community sites which are easy to access for anyone can be great opportunities for students to experience "intercultural communication in the wild" (Thorne, 2010, p. 144).

Since the 2009 revised National Curriculum of Korea placed a focus on understanding of foreign

customs and culture in English education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2011), there have been attempts at examining the application of telecollaboration for ICC development in Korea. In 2013, Korean Education & Research Information Service (KERIS) conducted a project called Tele-Collaborative International Exchanges for Learning, in which seven elementary and two middle schools participated in telecollaboration with Australian and American schools. Its outcomes show that telecollaboration was helpful for developing students' intercultural understanding or motivation for English language learning (Lee *et al.*, 2014). However, only limited research has been conducted in the Korean context, and mainly published in the Korean language so far (Jeon & Lim, 2013; Ku, 2016; Yang *et al.*, 2018). Jeon & Lim (2013) analyzed Korean elementary school students' telecollaboration with Taiwanese students using Fantini's (2007) assessment questionnaire reconstructed by Lee (2011) for the Korean context. Furthermore, Ku (2016) adopted Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Bennett (2017) to illuminate Korean students' development stages of ICC in a telecollaborative project with students from Australia. In addition, there have been efforts to develop a more practical model for class application of telecollaboration in Korean elementary schools to promote ICC. Yang *et al.* (2018) developed an online international exchange learning cycle model, which is reportedly successful in promoting all components of ICC.

As above, there has been limited research to this point on the development of ICC through telecollaboration between young populations in general (Okumura, 2020), and even fewer examinations have specifically addressed Korean elementary school students. With this perspective in mind, this paper aims to contribute to English language education in Korea and other countries seeking to implement a new educational activity in language and culture learning classes by looking closely at patterns of engagement in telecollaborative interaction.

## Methodology

### Research overview

This study documents patterns of engagement amongst students in two fifth-grade classrooms in South Korea and the US during a semester-long project utilizing online intercultural telecollaboration. Specifically, this study examines the following research questions:

1. How do students engage with elements of their own and other cultures within the process of establishing connections with others during intercultural telecollaboration?
2. What elements of intercultural communicative competence are displayed by students during the interaction?

The study utilizes Byram's (1997) framework of ICC for analyzing how the students engage with cultural ideas, drawing attention to how they negotiate cultural knowledge in the process of establishing connections and how they demonstrate knowledge, skills and attitudes conducive to developing ICC. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, aiming to establish an in-depth and context-sensitive description of students' intercultural engagement (Creswell, 2007). The primary data sources are observations of students' online interaction, teacher's field notes, and teacher interviews. The following sections include a discussion of research participants, data collection procedures and analysis of data generated.

### Research context and participants

A class from an elementary school in Korea and a class in the US were recruited to participate in an

intercultural telecollaboration project proposed by the researcher. Its main objectives were (1) to help Korean students develop their English language skills by practicing the language in authentic situations communicating with native speakers online, and (2) to encourage the development of Korean and US students' ICC as they encounter culturally different peers within educational online exchange activities.

The Korean class is from Dongsan elementary school<sup>i</sup>, a public school located in a low-income urban area in Jeongeup, Jeollabukdo, Korea. The school receives the Kyoyuk Bokji Woosun Jiwon Saup [Education Welfare Priority Project], which is supervised by the Korean Educational Development Institute, to support underprivileged students. The class is a fifth-grade co-ed class with 25 students from various SES backgrounds, where one student lives in an orphanage and three students currently participate in an educational welfare program supported by the government. Twenty-one students gave consent and parental permission for their comments and pictures to be collected during the project for research purposes<sup>ii</sup>. Students' English achievement levels also vary in that ten students show over-achievement at a fourth-grade level of English competence, five students show average achievement, and ten students are under-achieving. Every student in the class speaks Korean as their mother tongue, and none of the students has ever had any personal relationship with people from outside of Korea, especially with same-aged peers who speak other languages. Ms. Jang, the Korean teacher, who led the online interaction sessions has five years of teaching experience. She graduated from a university of education with a specialization in English and is currently enrolled in a master's degree program. As an active advocate for a more just education, she decided to participate in this study and conduct the interaction sessions as part of her regular English class.

The US class is a group of fifth-grade students at St. Samuel Catholic School, a private school located in the Greater Boston area. The fifth-grade co-ed class, with eighteen students, has an ethnically diverse student population; there are nine students from multi-ethnic backgrounds; the other nine students in the class are white. All of the students gave consent and parental permission to be observed during the project. Ms. Cole, the US teacher who conducted the online interaction activity, is a graduate of a religiously affiliated university with an elementary education and human development major. Also as an enthusiastic advocate of social justice education joined this study to provide a new educational experience for her students. She is the homeroom teacher of the class, and she conducted the interaction sessions during her regular classes<sup>iii</sup>.

### **Data collection and analysis**

To gain and retain a holistic view of the dynamic aspects of intercultural communication through a telecollaborative approach, multilevel data collection was conducted from three data sources: observations of students' online interactions, field notes provided by the Korean teacher, and teacher interviews. What follows is an explanation of each of these data sources.

Students' telecollaboration was observed by the researcher; students wrote comments or inserted pictures as they responded to each teacher's biweekly cultural prompts and other students' postings during the semester via the educational social networking service *Classting* ([www.classting.com](http://www.classting.com)). The reason for choosing Classting is that it is believed Korean students would feel familiar with the platform as it is already widely used on a daily basis in many Korean classrooms. It is designed to share school content and posts from students who can share information in a variety of formats, including files, photos, videos, links and text. Students were requested to use pseudonyms and to choose profile images which did not include their face in order to protect privacy. Korean students tended to choose random English words or names of sports stars while the US students chose random English names. In total, 14 weeks of interaction occurred throughout the ten cultural questions,

including various topics such as food, family members, or hobbies on both their class pages and the *Ting* page in *Classting*.

The Korean teacher's weekly field notes were provided to the researcher electronically (seven in total). The notes were written in Korean with her own observations and interpretations thoughtfully reflecting on her teaching and the interaction sessions. The Korean teacher participated in a 70-minute video interview after the project ended, and another 30-minute follow up video interview was conducted when she carried out a post-project survey for her class to clarify researcher's questions. Because the primary focus of this study was on the Korean students' experiences, more emphasis was placed on the Korean teacher's interviews. Teacher interview method was preferred to direct student interview, because the researcher was concerned about being unable to build enough rapport with Korean students due to the region difference that they might answer everything was just okay as Korean students in general tend to feel uncomfortable to express their opinions straightforward to adults. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Korean then translated into English. The US teacher's interview was conducted in English as a chat-interview for 30 minutes.

In an attempt to "search for patterns in data" (Neuman, 1997, p. 426), the raw data sources were analyzed step-by-step following qualitative content analysis procedures (Mayring, 2000). The data generated was summarized first, explicated by divided portions with an examination within the whole context, and then assigned different categories with emergent themes from the coding process.

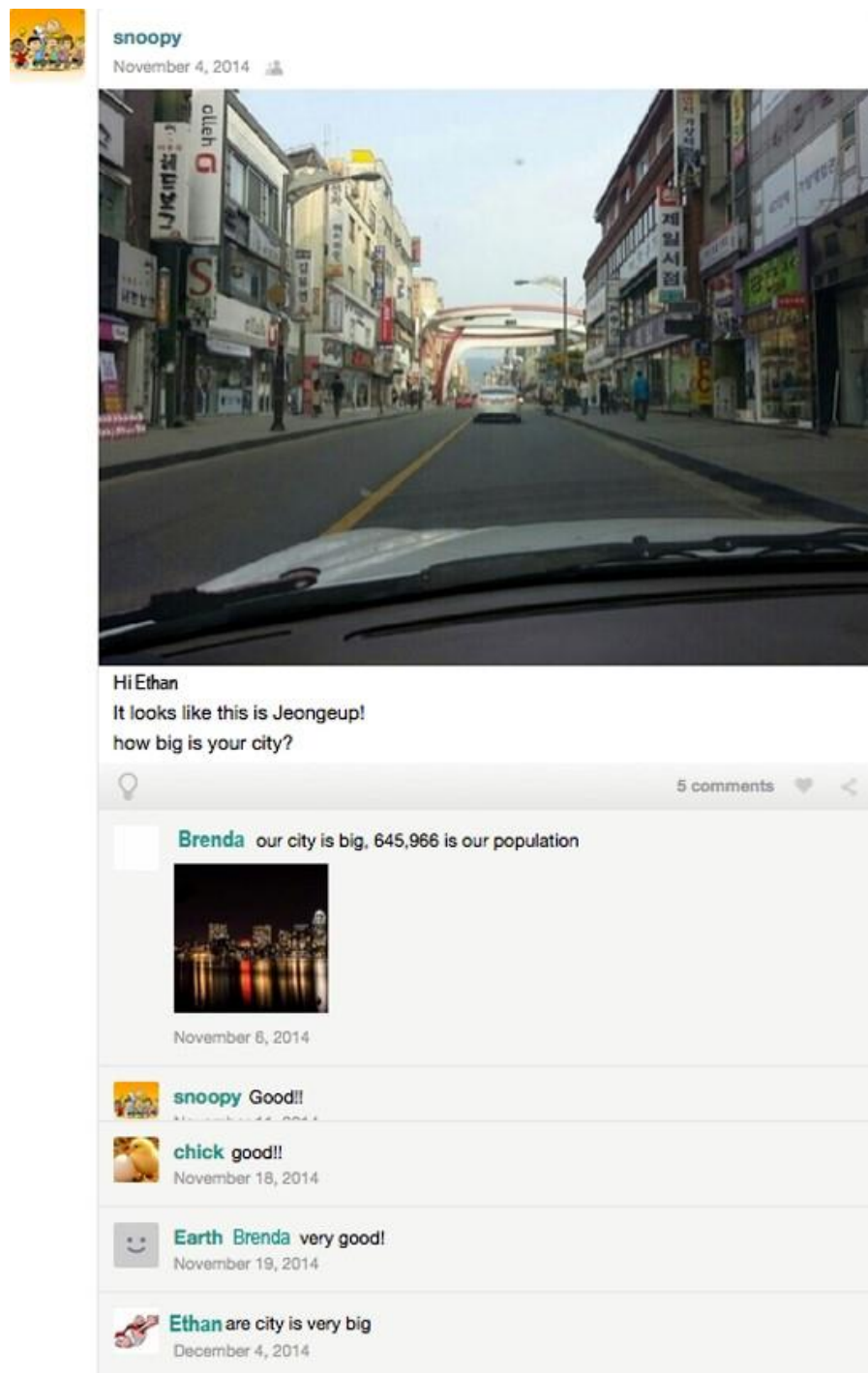
The observations of students' interactions were analyzed into weekly research memos with the purpose of describing *what is going on in* the interactive setting (Charmaz, 1995). The data generated 15 initial categories, which were compared and confirmed by the themes emerging from teacher interviews. An open coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to analyze the semi-structured teacher interviews. While coding the transcripts, various codes emerged from the data itself, such as proud, power, reaction, soccer, translation, tourist approach, and representative pressure. These inductive codes led the researcher to divide the data into different conceptual chunks for interpretation, which were representative pressure, reaction, language, off-task, and power. After repeated data reduction and data complication processes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), the conceptual chunks were categorized into three major themes that constitute this paper: representing one's own culture, responding to other culture, and students' shared small cultures. The themes were re-examined with other data sources to confirm the researcher's interpretation to refine understanding of the findings.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings are presented in three sections, focusing on the three themes identified in the previous section. The first section deals with how students from both countries represented their national culture in interactions. The second section looks at students' engagement with aspects of US culture. The third section focuses on students' off-task behavior as a way of sharing their small cultures.

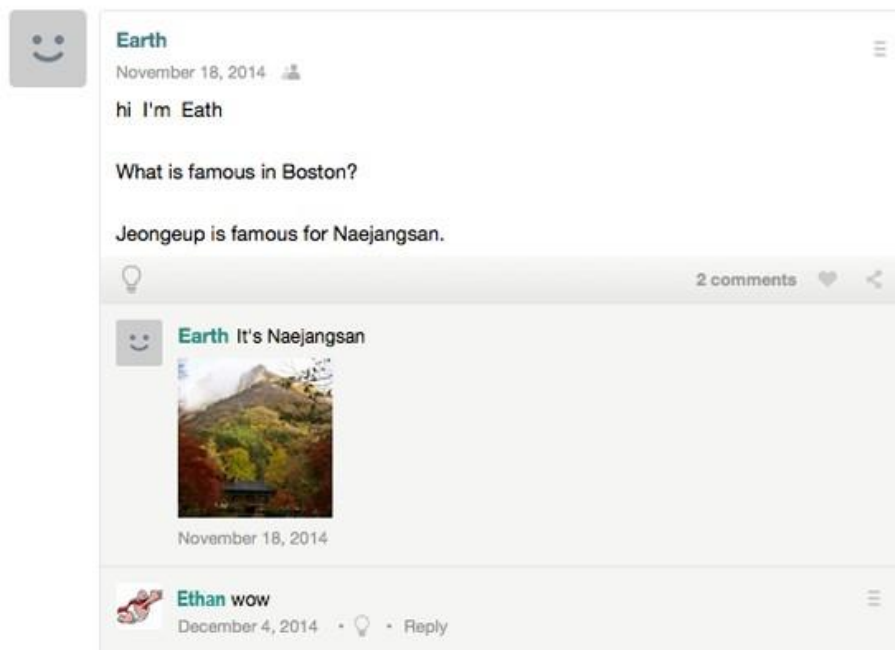
### Students utilizing cultural representations to create common ground

Students from both countries represent their nation's culture in positive and selective ways. This tendency is fairly prominent in the Korean students' group. A telling example is Dong-min's (i.e., Earth) posting related to Ms. Cole's prompt of the week, "Ask a question to Dongsan School students about Korea. And Dongsan students, to answer the question." Hei-ran (i.e., snoopy) asked, "How big is your city?" Then, she posted a very plain picture of Jeongeup's downtown, which she probably took herself, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Hei-Ran's (snoopy) posting of Jeongeup

Brenda replied to Hei-Ran's (i.e., snoopy) posting with a picture of beautiful night scene of downtown Boston with the comment, "Our city is big, 645,966 is our population." The picture of downtown Boston seemed to have come from an online website. Ms. Jang reported that when she showed Brenda's picture on the big screen the whole class expressed great excitement over the Boston picture. A week later, in response to Ms. Jang's prompt, "Please introduce your country's culture (traditional or now) and ask a question about the culture in Korea/U.S.A. (music, picture, performance, food, manner....)." Dong-Min (i.e., Earth) posted a picturesque photo of Naejang Mountain as shown in Figure 2, which is a National Park in Korea, and then he replied, "Very good!" to the previous week's picture posted by Brenda.



**Figure 2** Dong-Min's (Earth) posting of Naejang Mountain

Tasks such as exchanging information about the home culture are relatively low-risk and help create a space for personal relationships by enhancing the engagement level within preliminary intercultural interaction (Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O'Dowd & Ware, 2009). However, O'Dowd (2018a) points out students are sometimes burdened to take "an ambassadorial-style role" (p.14) to defend their culture in telecollaboration when both cultures are continuously juxtaposed. When the pictures of two cities are compared directly, students perhaps felt that they needed to be guardians of their nation in the idea of *Us* and *Them*. When Ms. Jang asked Dong-Min (i.e., Earth) about his post, he said that he posted a nice picture of Jeongeup because he wanted to show nice pictures of Korea to US students after seeing the pictures of Boston. He added that he had purposefully tried to choose a nice part of the city, such as a picture of the Naejang Mountain or picturesque scenes rather than the pictures that he took himself. During the interview, Ms. Jang was asked to comment on her students' response to the pictures of Boston, providing the following explanation:

Well, my students were really excited to see the pictures of Boston's night scene that some of the US students uploaded, and I think those images really impacted my kids. The whole class cheered so loud when we saw the pictures together in class, saying things like, "It's so pretty" and "Cool." After that, I saw that Dong-Min posted a really nice picture of the Naejang Mountain he found on the Internet. I believe this reflects that in his mind he wanted to look cool to the US students in turn.

Considering Ms. Jang's explanation and the fact that Dong-Min came up with the famous national park in his city, the Naejang Mountain, reflects how the *knowledge* of his own country affected his interaction with US students. This is related to Byram's (1997) ICC framework regarding objectives for knowledge; "the national definitions of geographical space of one's own country and how these are perceived from the perspective of one's interlocutor's [i.e., speaker's] country," which includes regional identities or landmarks of significance (p. 60). The objective of intercultural interaction should not be limited to a partner's country and culture but should also include one's own country's culture and knowledge. Traditionally, the four distinct seasons have been considered a unique aspect of Korea that is a source of pride, despite criticism and questions as to why the four seasons should be



considered Korea's pride and joy when they are not unique at all (Jang, 2007). Korean students are taught, starting in the first grade, about the beautiful and distinct four seasons of Korea, and Naejang Mountain is often used as a prime example of the beautiful scenes of fall in Korea. Dong-Min (i.e., Earth) related his prior knowledge of the proud scenic view of Korea to the picture of Boston's skyline, and he wanted to show it to the US students.

One of the emergent issues reported by Ms. Jang is that her students tended to feel a great responsibility to represent Korean culture to the US students, partially because of how she guided the students in class at the beginning stage of the project as part of pedagogical mentoring (O'Dowd *et al.*, 2020), which can be a powerful scaffolding or a constraint at the same time. The Korean vice principal was concerned about the project as well, fearing that the students would represent Korea in a bad way by misbehaving during online interactions. Ms. Jang provided information to explain the vice principal's concern. She stated:

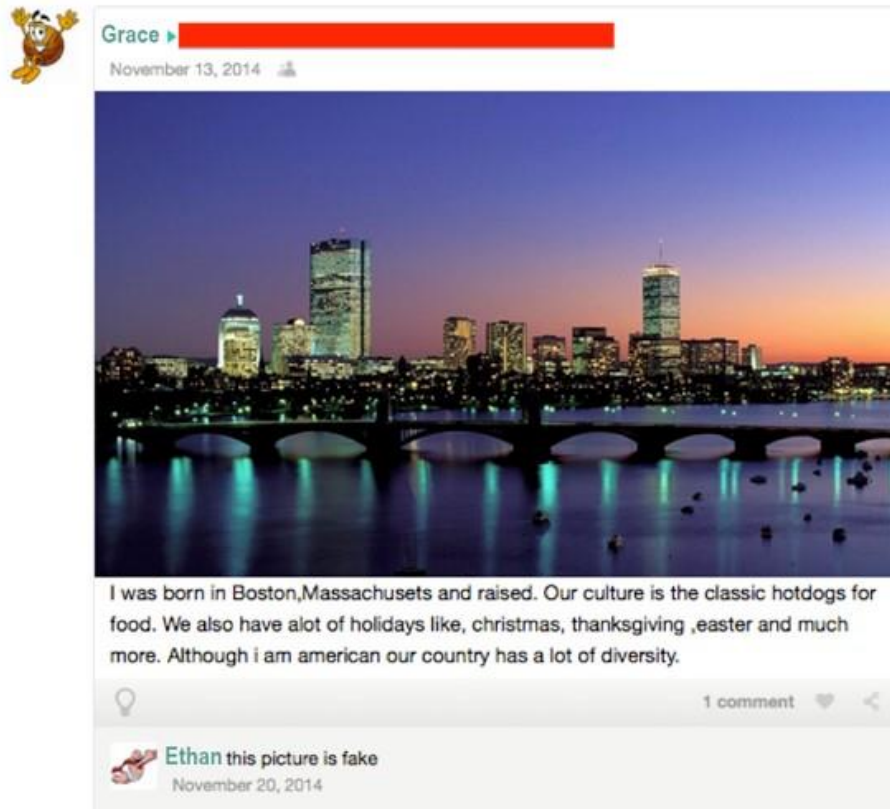
I think students felt a sense of responsibility to be representatives of our culture. [...] When we started this project, the vice principal was really worried that our students wouldn't behave well and would give bad impressions of Korea to the US school. [...] The students thought this project a very natural thing and didn't feel any burdens [at first], but I was influenced by the vice principal's concerns [...] Also, he was kind of worried whether our students would be able to do this international project [because of the overall low socioeconomic family backgrounds and academic achievement of the school] as representatives of Korea, and whether they would bring shame to our country. [...] I was a little bit obsessed with that idea, and I am sure that influenced my students after I gave them a lecture about it, because they are really amenable.

The concerns of the vice principal and Ms. Jang closely relate to the concept often characterized as "shame" in Korean and other East Asian cultures (Wong & Tsai, 2007). The concept of a shamed society posits that its members value saving face and the honor of the society, while the members of a guilt society, as typically found in Western countries, focus more on their feelings of guilt and the result of punishment. Ms. Jang and the vice principal also had expressed their anxiety about the intercultural activity, which originated from the concept of saving face in Korean society, and it resulted in students feeling unnecessary pressure. Ms. Jang told her students that they needed to be polite; they had to be good representatives of Korea because they might be the first Korean students whom the US students had met, although they did not realize that was not the case. The Korean students were encountering international students for the first time, but the US students were already from a class with multiethnic members and they lived in a culturally diverse community. This contrast created somewhat different motives in students representing their culture even though a similar attitude of wanting to present their city favorably was also found in the US student group.

When Grace uploaded another beautiful picture of Boston's skyscrapers (Figure 3). Ethan replied, "This picture is fake." This shows how Grace adopted a point of view when presenting her city to students from another country. The picture seemed to be unnatural, even fake to Ethan, because he may not have experienced the dramatic night scene of Boston in his daily life.

Ms. Cole reported that she was also able to observe students' desire to present their culture more positively when they interacted with students from another country, as demonstrated by their search for nice pictures of Boston from the Internet. However, she reported the perception that her students did not seem to feel pressure to be representatives of US culture like the Korean students; they simply wanted to look cool. Mrs. Cole offers the following explanation:

I do feel like they wanted to represent their city in a positive way and the things that we do here. [...] I guess I don't feel that same kind of pressure that my class represents the entire population of US school students. [...] I feel like it is not put on one class of people to decide about us.



**Figure 3** Grace's posting of a Boston skyline at night

Byram (1997) asserts that attitudinal factors are crucial in successful intercultural communication, and the desired attitudes of interlocutors include being aware of the fact that they will be viewed as representatives of their country at least at the initial stage of interaction. In this light, the attitude that was observed in both student groups to want to present their countries through nice images can be viewed as evidence of growing *attitudes* in them, especially described as “interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in other cultures and cultural practices” (p.50). During the interaction, both students were able to distance themselves from the everyday point of view that they had of their city and take a new perspective to see how others would observe it, which led them to search for beautiful pictures of their city to post. They can distance themselves from the familiar environment around them when they interact with interlocutors from other countries, and in so doing students become more aware of their own country and culture (Cummins & Sayers, 1995). Moreover, both student groups were not only exchanging information about their cities, but they were actually creating common ground as they shared their emotions wanting to look cool to each other, which led them to build a closer rapport and bring more engagement to the intercultural encounter.

### Students exploring another culture

Both student groups expressed increased interest in the other country to their teachers, and many Korean students indicated that they would like to know more about US culture in the post-project survey conducted by the Korean teacher. This especially shows Korean students' *attitudes* in the terms

of expressed curiosity and openness for the US culture. Within the context of intercultural collaboration, curiosity is a double-edged sword as although it signals cultural openness, this can sometimes tend towards a tourist approach to difference (Byram, 1997). With a tourist approach, interlocutors focus on gaining the experience of the unusual instead of trying to develop a new perspective for the interpretation of others with the understanding of both interlocutor's cultural beliefs and their own backgrounds. For example, during this project, Korean students were greatly interested in US school life, including their lunch menu and school buildings basically based on the idea of seeking the exotic experience. Korean students thought St. Samuel School had a great lunch menu when Ms. Jang showed the school's website. Ms. Jang pointed out it was simply because the western food in Korea is not generally considered as a usual meal, but more as delicious snacks for children which many Korean adults prohibits them from eating too much. A meal in Korean language is the synonym for steamed rice, with an implicit image that every regular meal should include steamed rice for most Koreans. Korean students tend to cheer at the US school's lunch menu, because they thought US students are allowed to eat snacks freely as their lunch in school. Ms. Jang described this as follows:

They were really jealous about the school's lunch menu when we started the project. For little kids, those foods sound really delicious. I mean, in Korea, we have food like roasted mackerel or vegetables, but they have something like pizza, or mashed potatoes. Those are like the things we eat as snacks here. We do eat those as snacks rather than a meal [which is the synonym for steamed rice in Korean].

She continued to describe how the students liked the US school's buildings. Again, students liked the buildings because the buildings looked different from buildings in Korea. She stated:

I think they thought the buildings were really nice. You know, the American atmosphere. Something we can't see in Korea. Then, kids were like "Wow! They are really nice!" [...] I think the buildings looked wonderful to them. "Like the buildings from a movie."

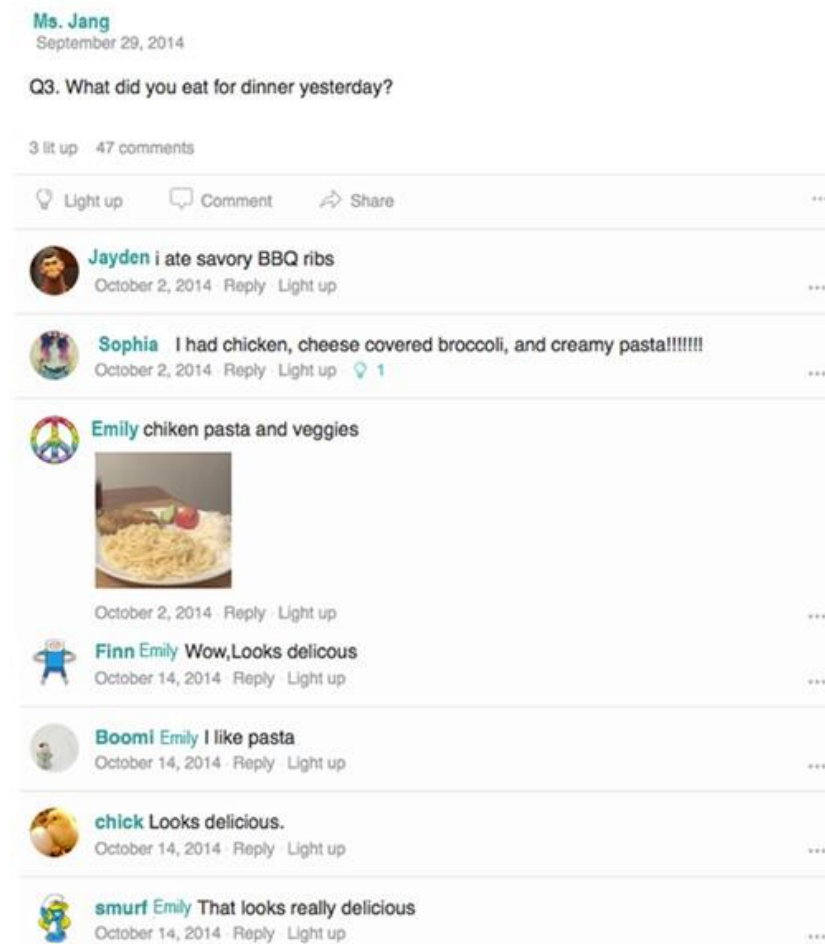
They expressed much interest in the Western food and buildings, however, their tendency towards the US school seems to be mere celebration of difference between them. Though their displayed curiosity is a good example of *attitudes*, "the willingness to question presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment" (Byram, 1997, p.50) is also suggested as expected elements of *attitudes*. Their interests could not expand to meaningful conversations nor reflections on their own cultural beliefs such as a meal equals steamed rice for everyone, but ended as short interactions, showing mere excitement for otherness as tourists (See Figure 4).

Considering the Korean students' limited English proficiency and both student groups' cognitive development level as elementary school students, their intercultural interaction even at this superficial level can be viewed as meaningful. As suggested by scholars such as O'Dowd (2003), dialogic interaction is key to moving beyond superficial engagement with foreign cultural elements. This would require guidance by teachers so that students are able to move beyond cultural description and come to engage in more cultural explanation and reflection.

### **Students' shared small cultures**

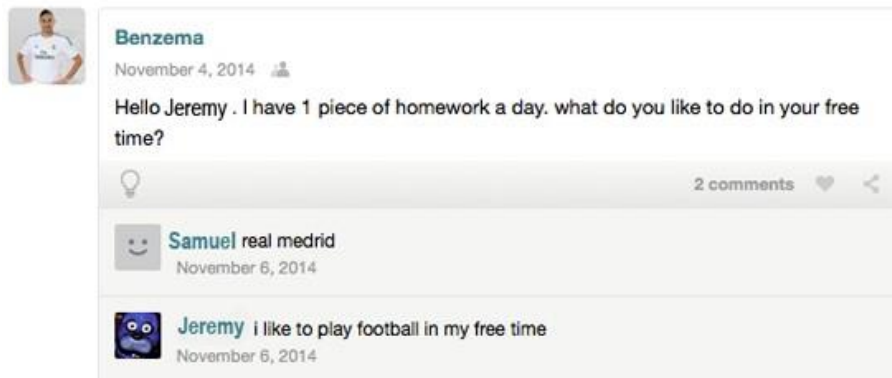
When setting up *Classting* for the interaction, students were requested to use nicknames to protect their identities. Many Korean male students chose their favorite soccer player's name and picture for their profile<sup>iv</sup>. It is reported that students reduce inhibition and gain motivation when they use pseudonyms (Peterson, 2010); however, Ms. Jang reported that type of behavior was often distracting from the cultural prompts. She highlighted this point during the interview, stating:

They were so obsessed with the pictures and names of soccer players from the beginning. [...] They changed their profile pictures endlessly to different pictures of the soccer player during the class. I once even told them that they better not change the pictures any more, but they didn't listen to me and kept changing the pictures and searching for better pictures of the player in class.



**Figure 4** Conversations about food

During the eighth week of the interaction, Samuel reacted to all the soccer player profile pictures used by Korean students. His replies were not related to the Korean students' postings or the cultural prompt of the week: "Students at St. Samuel School ask a question of Dongsan Elementary School students about Korea." For example, Samuel commented *Real Madrid* to Ji-seok's (i.e., Benzema) posting, "Hello Jeremy. I have one piece of homework a day. What do you like to do in your free time?" While Jeremy replied to Ji-seok's question, posting, "I like to play football in my free time." Samuel was responding to Ji-seok's picture and nickname *Benzema*, who is a soccer player of *Real Madrid Club de Futbol* in Spain (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** Samuel's comment about soccer

Interestingly, other Korean boys were also encouraged to write about soccer players by responding to Samuel's comment regardless of the teachers' cultural prompt of the week (See Figure 6). The off-task group's interaction with Samuel triggered other boys to post statements about soccer, which was probably their favorite topic to discuss with their peers.



**Figure 6** Korean students' postings about soccer

Although some of the students were distracted with their profile pictures of soccer players, it did result in the initiation of an active interaction between Korean students and US students, inviting students to participate in an interaction regarding their own interests. Christensen (1994) argues that the interaction between people from different countries or languages is not simply an encounter of different cultures, but an encounter between individuals from the cultures who bring their own identities and meanings to the interaction (as cited in Byram, 1997, p. 40). Byram (1997) also indicated that the intercultural interaction should be regarded as an exchange of individual participants' own meanings and cultures. Despite the geographical disconnectedness, interlocutors may share meanings and cultures in part; therefore, using shared youth culture such as games or even fan-fictions is encouraged in telecollaboration for students' motivation and for the development of understanding of others (Sauro, 2017; Thorne, 2010). Although the teacher considered the boys' behavior as being off-task, their posts about soccer initiated some sort of communicative exchange, which can be viewed as a genuine attempt to establish a communication around a common interest more authentically. For them, nationality was no longer an important attribution in their interaction. None of them showed any interest in introducing or talking about the soccer players of their own countries, but instead focused on the soccer players they like who play in Europe. Thus, it shows how students bring their own culture

and meaning to an intercultural interaction rather than their national identity.

### Conclusions and Implications

This study was initiated to document patterns of engagement in intercultural telecollaboration between elementary school students from a low-income area in Korea and students in the US. The goal on the Korean side was to foster the Korean students' English language learning and to facilitate cultural exchange between the two classrooms. Students were inclined to engage with the intercultural exchange by presenting their national culture in a positive way to others and try to selectively represent their culture, which was especially true of the Korean students after receiving explicit direction from their teacher. Students tend to explore other cultures with great excitement and try to establish a bond with peers, but without any intervention, only going so far as to seek "the exotic" from their counterparts (Byram, 1997). Some students may show off-task behaviors during the interaction; however, if they can bring their own identity and culture to the interaction, those shared small cultures can be catalysts for a more learner-centered and personally engaging communication.

Ideally, cultural exchange is most meaningful and facilitative of intercultural development when the focus shifts away from advocacy of one's culture and judgment of others' and instead helps students move towards a *third place* that "grows in the interstices between the cultures the learner grew up with and new cultures he or she is being introduced to" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 236). In this study, the pressure that Korean students felt to adopt the role of cultural representative during the intercultural interaction led them to adopt a role similar to that of *tourist* when engaging with the US students. While the *tourist approach* describes the undesired role of *guest* in intercultural interaction, young students participating in intercultural telecollaboration may also feel pressure to enact the role of *host* when it comes to utilizing cultural references to relate to their interactional partners. In fact, the enactment of these two roles becomes intertwined in the dynamics of intercultural exchange.

Drawing on a Bakhtinian perspective, Dervin *et al.* (2020) point out that the self and other cannot be separated, even in online intercultural communication, which is sometimes misinterpreted as monological activity due to its characteristics. That is, "[o]ne cannot meet the other without the other meeting them. What one does with the other reflects what the other does with them. What one says depends on what the other says, and vice versa" (p.9). Related to the concept of *tourist approach* (Byram, 1997), the tendency of the host to intentionally present the exotic experience that they selected and favored for the foreign counterpart may be conceptualized as *tour guide approach*. In this study, the pressure to act as representatives affected Korean students in the way they chose what to post to US students, based on the ideas and beliefs of their own or the dominant groups of Korean society in judging "good culture" to be presented to others. This constrains the possibilities for students to be themselves in a true sense, and the cultural beliefs taken for granted by the dominant group of their own society remain unquestioned, such as the proud four distinct seasons of Korea, for instance.

While Korean students enacted a *tour guide approach* in relation to Korean culture, they took a position of *tourist* towards US culture by demonstrating their interpretation of the US students' life based on the cultural norms and common beliefs in Korea. However, true intercultural sensitivity depends on the understanding that the behaviors and language of interlocutors are judged within the context of the interlocutor and not by the counterpart (Bennett, 1993). In such a case, it may be helpful to have explicit guidance from teachers that helps students interpret foreign behaviors from the viewpoint of insiders and gradually decenter from their taken for granted perceptions. In fact, the pressure Korean students experienced to act as representatives may be relieved only if Korean students realize that their counterparts will also view Korean students' behaviors within their own cultural beliefs. Creating such an awareness requires that not only students but also teachers recognize the

relativity and cultural-boundedness of perceptions.

Relevant to students' attempts to enhance common ground with off-task behaviors is Holliday's (2009) argument that the most meaningful aspects in interaction are the *small cultures* that are close to the participants, such as family, classmates, or leisure groups. In searching for resonances, the cultural threads they share can help interlocutors from different cultures cross boundaries and overcome the cultural blocks that they inherently possess (Holliday, 2016). This can be considered particularly important in intercultural telecollaboration involving young learners. Students will be able to relate themselves to intercultural interaction more personally and authentically if they can create common ground with peers from different countries based on reference to elements of young students' sub-cultures as an effective cultural bridge (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). Moreover, by selecting topics of intercultural interaction by themselves, students also become more autonomous learners and can hold genuine conversations (Donaldson & Kötter, 1999). The off-task students' group was fairly distracted from the academic setting of the cultural exchange activity, but the way they became personally connected to the intercultural communication by bringing their own shared cultures into the intercultural encounter illustrates the importance of respecting and embracing students' small cultures in intercultural telecollaboration. As Jeong (2003) argues, students always find a way to share and develop their own culture with each other within the school system as she reviews the meaning of *childness* in the Korean elementary school context. When students try to find a secret place and express themselves in a somewhat rebellious manner, their culture may conflict with the official culture of their school. In that case, teachers should become a coordinator of two cultures by viewing children's culture as children's life and celebrating the *childness* of students.

Telecollaboration between classes from different regions and time zones often results in limited interaction because of the high level of coordination required (Thorne, 2006). Both student groups responded to 10 prompts during the 14 weeks of interactive sessions, though for the last three weeks, the number of US student responses was limited due to their academic calendar. Moreover, to protect the students, they were required to use *Classting* only with the teacher's presence. This rule significantly limited opportunities for more meaningful interaction and the real-time feature of social networking services, which makes Telecollaboration 2.0 distinct. A further limitation of this study is that it is reliant on teachers' perceptions of classroom activity and does not provide direct access to students' own voices. It is important for further research on intercultural telecollaboration of young language learners, within Korea and beyond, to find creative ways of tapping into students' own perceptions of the telecollaboration experience and what moments they identify as stimulating the desire to deepen cultural knowledge and build relationships with their new peers.

### Disclosure statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

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### Appendix 1. List of teachers’ weekly cultural prompts

- Q1. What are your hobbies? (Sep. 15)
- Q2. What is your favorite book, and why? (Sep. 22)
- Q3. What did you eat for dinner yesterday? (Sep. 29)
- Q4. Describe your family and something your family likes to do together. (Oct. 7)
- Q5. Ask a question about the school life to St. Samuel school (Dongsan school students). Answer the questions (St. Samuel school) (Oct. 20)
- Q6. Ask a question to Dongsan students about Korea. (St. Samuel)  
Answer to the question (Dongsan students). (Oct. 29)

- Q7. Please introduce your country's culture (traditional or now) and ask a question about the culture in Korea/U.S.A. (music, picture, performance, food, manner.....) (Nov. 10)
- Q8. About myself (Nov. 17)
- Q9. About Thanksgiving Day (Dec. 8)
- Q10. Goodbyes (Dec. 16)
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<sup>i</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all names in this paper to protect the identities of participants.

<sup>ii</sup> This research was conducted in approval of Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research.

<sup>iii</sup> Both teachers received a small gift of money, \$250 from *Classting*, for participating in this experimental intercultural activity. No financial support was provided to the researcher.

<sup>iv</sup> All names presented in this paper are pseudonyms, however, the soccer players' nicknames and profile pictures are presented as they are from the students' genuine interaction.