

## **Cross-cultural Communication: Saudi, Ukrainian, and Russian Students Online**

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### **Bio Data**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper describes a cross-cultural online writing project in which three English-as-a foreign language (EFL) college instructors in Ukraine, Russia and Saudi Arabia and their undergraduate students participated. The aim of the project was to develop students' writing skills in EFL, to develop their awareness of local and global cultural issues and events, and to develop their ability to communicate and interact with students from other cultures. Thirteen discussion threads, twenty external links, nine documents, three assignments, a photo gallery and Powerpoint presentations were posted in the Nicenet course-site. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the students' messages and reactions are reported.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural communication, EFL, writing, exchange, online instruction, global issues, culture.

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### **1. Introduction**

Interest in cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural awareness, and cross-cultural understanding among politicians, economists, businessmen, educators and other partners is increasing. Second language (L2) students no longer need to leave their

homes or travel to meet people from other countries and learn about their culture. Some foreign language educators in countries like Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Germany, and South America are making use of information and communication technologies to connect L2 students with students of the target language in the USA, UK or Canada. A review of the L2 literature has shown that web-based video, e-mail, audio and video conferencing, web-page design, internet-based resources, culture portfolios, online newspapers and online chat rooms were integrated in the teaching of target culture to junior and senior high school and college students learning English, French, German and Spanish as a second or foreign language.

E-mail exchanges between four American and Canadian college preparatory ESL students were found to be effective in teaching intercultural awareness, in creating a positive affective climate, and in making the English-for-Academic-Purposes (EAP) curriculum more relevant to the students (Ruhe, 1998). In another study by Schoorman and Camarillo (2000), 56 pairs of university-school partners participated in an e-mail-based project. Pre-service teachers and middle school students corresponded with each other for ten weeks. Analysis of the letters written during the ten-week period, end-of-semester pre-service teacher project reports, weekly instructor field notes, faculty/pre-service student dialogue journals, and a questionnaire completed by middle school students at the end of the project revealed positive outcomes including a broadening of multicultural awareness and improvement in L2 skills. In a similar project conducted by Cifuentes and Shih (2001), forty pairs of American pre-service teachers and Taiwanese university students corresponded by e-mail. Findings of pre- and post-connection surveys, midterm surveys, reflective journals, final reports, and interview transcripts indicated that Taiwanese participants were positive about online ESL acquisition and cultural learning before and after the connection. They preferred the one-on-one e-mail exchange to the web-based environment.

Many other studies combined e-mail with other forms of technology. For instance, Singhal (1998) reviewed several studies and projects on computer-mediated communication used for enhancing L2 learning and culture education, and examined their impact on elementary, secondary, and college students. She found that e-mail and teleconferencing provided authentic communication and fostered awareness of languages and cultures. In addition to the studies reviewed by Singhal, 45 French and American

middle school students corresponded via electronic mail on a daily basis and participated in several teleconferences (Shelley, 1996). In the second year of the project, both groups produced a bilingual play, describing various sociolinguistic and cultural elements of the respective cultures. Shelley found that target language usage and interest increased over the duration of the project. Electronic exchange between French and American students was found to be an effective activity that enhanced the language learning skills of all students involved in the project.

Moreover, e-mail, web page design, and a two-way group teleconferencing (audio & video) were effectively used to learn about cultural differences in childhood socialization in an intercultural communication project that allowed French and American foreign-language students to learn the language as a part of culture while taking advantage of telecommunication technology ((Kinging, Gourves-Hayward and Simson, 1999). In this study, students in a U.S. undergraduate French class and in a French post-graduate engineering course pursued an intercultural stance via electronic interactions concerning cultural differences, focusing on childhood socialization. In addition, the participants used a textbook, readings, films and children's literature to learn about childhood socialization.

Furthermore, two studies by Lee (1997) and Osuna and Meskill (1998) reported that use of Internet resources was a meaningful way to integrate language and culture and provide opportunities for students to learn about the target culture while using e-mail to discuss cultural issues with native speakers. Internet resources were used as a means of gaining a deeper sense of Spanish culture by college students. Findings of those two studies demonstrated that the web was a suitable tool for increasing linguistic and cultural knowledge, as well as a means of increasing motivation.

Other technologies that proved to be successful in helping college students bring insider's views of other cultures into the foreign language classroom were Internet-based culture portfolios (Abrams, 2002). Abrams divided 68 intermediate students learning German at a Midwestern university into traditional and experimental groups. Students in the experimental group carried out online interviews with native informants in order to explore the stereotypical views of the cultures of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Responses to a post-project questionnaire indicated that most of the

students in the experimental group were better able to view culture with an insider's perspective, reflected a developing sensitivity to diversity within the cultures of German-speaking countries, and showed an awareness of the idea that political boundaries are inadequate for determining cultural boundaries.

In another study, online newspapers and online chat rooms were used with college-level advanced Spanish students to develop students' cultural knowledge and language skills (Lee, 1998). Pre- and post-program surveys indicated that the program enhanced students' cultural knowledge, reading and oral skills.

However, a constructivist computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environment, consisting of web-based activities and a U.S. e-pal activity used in teaching English writing to 29 freshman Taiwanese students did not help enhance students' attitudes towards American culture (Chen, 2001). Results of the surveys, quantitative observations, and phenomenological interviews indicated that Taiwanese students' attitudes towards learning the target culture, as well as their learning styles, did not undergo any significant change.

From the above studies, it can be concluded that the integration of different forms of technology such as e-mail only, e-mail and teleconferencing, audio and video conferencing, web-page design, internet-based resources and culture portfolios, online newspapers and online chat rooms in the teaching of target culture to middle, high school and college students learning English, French, German and Spanish as a second or foreign language resulted in significant gains in student cultural knowledge and positive attitudes towards the target culture. E-mail was the most common technology used even when combined with teleconferences or internet culture portfolios. On the contrary, e-pal activities did not prove to be as effective.

The integration of online courses in the teaching of the target culture and their effect on English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) students' cultural awareness was not investigated. Most of the studies reported above focused on inter-cultural collaboration between L2 students and L1 students or pre-service teachers. Online collaboration between EFL students from different countries was not the subject of any research. Therefore, the present study aimed to use an online course in which three EFL college

instructors from Ukraine, Russia and Saudi Arabia and their EFL undergraduate students participated. The aim of the course was to develop the students' writing skills, ability to communicate with students from other cultures and awareness of global and cultural issues. The present study describes how the Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi instructors and students were connected, how they interacted and shared knowledge and experiences. It also describes the online course objectives, components and content, discussion topics, and instructors' role. In addition, the study tried to answer the following questions: (1) What are the characteristics of the Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi students' posts in terms of message frequency, length, and content? (2) Which global and cultural issues were most popular among the Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi students? (3) What technical, cultural and communication difficulties did the Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi instructors and students have in the online learning environment? (4) What is the effect of the online project on the Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi students' skills development in EFL as perceived by the students and their instructor? (5) What effects did the online project have on the students' attitudes towards online learning, and interacting with students from other cultures, and towards the global and cultural issues discussed?

A content analysis of students' reactions to the discussion threads in terms of message length and content was carried out. The impact of the online project on the EFL Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi students' skills and attitudes towards online interaction and global and cultural issues was based on qualitative analyses of students' responses to the post-project questionnaire, their comments and reactions, as well as instructors' observations and comments will be reported.

## **2. Subjects**

Twenty-four Ukrainian students from Lviv National Ivan Franko University, Ukraine; fifteen Russian students from Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences; and twenty two Saudi students from the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia participated in the online project in Spring 2003. The Saudi students were all females. The Ukrainian and Russian students were history and sociology majors, whereas the Saudi students were translation majors. The Ukrainian students were freshman and sophomores. Their English proficiency level

ranged between pre- and upper-intermediate. The Russian students were sophomores and their proficiency level ranged between upper-intermediate and advanced. The Saudi students were sophomores and their proficiency level ranged between low- and upper-intermediate. The Ukrainian and Russian students were enrolled in a general English course with an English for Special Purposes (ESP) component, i.e. English for history and sociology. The aim of the course was to develop the students' speaking, reading and writing skills and vocabulary knowledge in their major area of specialization. The Saudi students were enrolled in a Language and Culture course, which aimed at developing the students' awareness of the relationship between language and culture in general, and of English and British and American cultures in particular. The Ukrainian and Russian students share similar Eastern European, Roman Orthodox, and former Soviet cultures, whereas the Saudi students share the same Arabic and Islamic cultures, live in a conservative society and study in a gender-based educational setting. The Ukrainian and Russian students had no prior experience with online learning, whereas the Saudi students had prior experience with online writing instruction with Blackboard from home and were concurrently enrolled in an online course with Nicenet which was used a supplement to the Language and Culture course they were taking.

The author had prior experience with online teaching using Blackboard and Nicenet. Her Ukrainian and Russian colleagues had no prior experience in online instruction. They attended a workshop on teaching EFL writing online using Blackboard and Nicenet that the author gave at the TESOL Ukraine conference in January 2003. During that conference, the Ukrainian colleague showed an interest in sharing an online course with the author in the spring semester that started shortly after the conference was finished (in February 2003).

### **3. In-class Instruction:**

The Ukrainian and Russian students were enrolled in a General English course with ESP elements, i.e. English for history and sociology. The class met twice a week for 90 minutes, with a total of 72 hours of English over the whole semester. The aim of the course was to develop the students' reading, writing and general communication skills. For their face-to-face class (in-class instruction), the students used "*Reward*" Intermediate from Macmillan. The book was supplemented by an ESP component covering topics in history and sociology.

The Saudi students were enrolled in a Language and Culture course (two hours per week), with a total of 28 hours over the whole semester. The aim of the course was to develop the students' awareness of the relationship between language and culture, awareness of British and American cultures and mastery of culture-related terminology. The in-class material for the course covered several topics about British and American cultures (see Appendix 1).

#### **4. Procedures**

##### **Creating the Course**

An online course was created with Nicenet as it was free. The course was called "*Writing across the Borders*". It was used as a supplement to in-class instruction. The aim of the project was to develop students' writing skills in EFL and to develop their awareness of global and cultural issues and events, and give them an opportunity to interact and communicate with students from other countries. The aim of the online course was explained to the students, they were given the class key, and then they enrolled themselves. The Ukrainian and Russian students accessed the Nicenet course from their college computer labs and checked the online course during and after the class session. The Saudi students accessed the online course from home, as they had no internet access from college.

##### **4.2 The Online Course Components and Content**

The online course consisted of 11 conferencing topics (discussion threads), 20 external links, 9 documents, 3 assignments, an online photo gallery and Powerpoint presentations (See Appendix 2).

For the Ukrainian and Russian students, the content of the online course was not related to the *Reward* textbook used in class. The online material was an obligatory part of the ESP course. The Ukrainian students could print the documents from the "*Documents*" section and study them at home. They discussed the conferencing topics in class, studied the new vocabulary items and took the quizzes. Some of the questions on the final exam covered the online course materials. The amount of participation in

the Nicenet course was taken into consideration when each student was given a mark for the course.

For the Saudi students, the content of the online course was not related to the Language and Culture course they were taking. The author wanted to give them the opportunity to communicate and interact with students from other cultures, which was unprecedented in Saudi Arabia. Participation in the project was optional, as most of the students might have been psychologically and culturally inhibited to participate (See *the Instructors Role* Section below). Material in the online course was not brainstormed in class, due to limited class time. The students read the online documents, checked the links and posted responses to the discussion threads whenever they wanted. Quizzes and the final exam did not cover any of the online material. The students were given extra credit for participation.

### **4.3 Instructors' Role**

The Ukrainian and Russian instructors provided training in using the Nicenet online course and brainstormed the discussion threads before and after the students posted their responses. During the course, the three instructors agreed on the discussion threads to be posted in the online course. They posted the documents and external links. Due to the author's experience with online writing instruction in EFL, she helped in planning and managing the online course and provided her colleagues with feedback and suggestions on how to phrase the discussion topics, how many topics to post per week, when to post, how to respond to the students, and what external links to post during the project. The Ukrainian instructor always asked the author questions and was writing to her Russian colleague on a regular basis about what their students were doing and what they were going to do next, although they were doing different things in class.

All of the instructors gave the students positive feedback and encouraged them to communicate and interact and not to worry about spelling, grammatical, punctuation and capitalization mistakes. They did not correct anything that the students posted. The students felt free to express themselves and their own points of view. The instructors shared in the discussion, and always posted responses to the new discussion threads. Thus a warm and secure learning environment was created.

In addition, the author gave moral support for the Saudi students whenever they stopped by her office to tell her about their concerns. At first they were shy, apprehensive and hesitant to register, as they were used to learning in a gender-based environment (female students and female instructors only). They thought that sharing an online course with students from other countries would be like a chat-room, where male and female students chat rather than study. Some of them told her that they wanted to conceal their identity by registering using a male's name, using their first name and initials, deleting their e-mails, or using "anonymous" instead of their real names. The author had to assure them that all course activities were monitored by three instructors and that Ukrainian and Russian students are respectful and serious. She told them about her visit to Ukraine and experience with Ukrainian students. She encouraged them to register using their real names and gave them extra credit for participating in the online course. Despite that, only half of the students who were registered in *Language and Culture* online course participated in the *Writing across the Borders* online course.

#### **4.4 Instruments**

At the end of the course, all of the students were e-mailed an open-ended questionnaire which consisted of several questions (See Appendix 3). Another questionnaire was e-mailed to the instructors (See Appendix 4). Only Ukrainian and Saudi students and instructors responded to and returned the questionnaires. Russian students and their instructor did not, although the authors e-mailed the questionnaires twice. The author knew the Ukrainian instructor very well and both were corresponding before and throughout the course. The author had an opportunity to meet with some of the Ukrainian students when she went to the TESOL Ukraine conference. In addition, the Ukrainian instructor urged her students to answer the questionnaires although the course was over. On the contrary, the author did not know the Russian instructors very well and her request of the Russian students to answer the questionnaire was not supported by their instructor, i.e. the personal rapport part was not present. Thus it was not possible to compare the Russian students' reactions and attitudes with those of the Ukrainian and Saudi students although positive impressions about their online experience could be inferred from their posts. Qualitative analyses of the questionnaire,

and instructor comments and observations are reported below. Qualitative analyses are reported in the form of statements quoted from the students' Responses.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

The frequency of student posts, the total number of posted messages under all the discussion threads, number of responses posted under each discussion thread, the percentage of messages posted by each group of students, and discussion threads with the highest and lowest responses were calculated. The mean, median and range of message length were also calculated for each group.

### 5. Project Outcomes

#### 5.1 Description of Student Posts

Analysis of the students' messages and reactions showed that all of the students posted a total of 186 responses (posts) under the discussion threads (instructors' messages were excluded). The Ukrainian students posted 67%, the Russians posted 23%, and the Saudis posted 10% of the responses. 24% of the students did not post anything (one Ukrainian, five Russians and eleven Saudis). The typical Ukrainian student posted 5 messages (Range = 1 to 11 messages), the typical Russian student posted 3 messages (Range = 1 to 7 messages) and the typical Saudi student posted one message (Range = 1 to 4 messages). None of the students took the initiative to post any conferencing topics or links related to any global or cultural issue (See Table 1).

Table (1)

Frequencies, Percentages, Medians and Ranges of Students' Posts

	<i>Frequency of Posts</i>	<i>% of Posts</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Range</i>
Ukrainians	125	67%	5	1-11
Russians	43	23%	3	1-7
Saudis	38	10%	1	1-4
Total	186			

The discussion threads with the highest number of responses were: *Welcome*, in which the students introduced themselves (23%), *Voices on Iraq* (19%), *Culture Shock* (14.5%), *Culture Awareness and Mass Media* (12%), *Man against Women* (10%), *Beliefs, Rumors and Prejudices* (10%), *Netiquette* (7.5%), and the closing thread *Thanks to Everyone* (2%). These percentages reflect familiarity with the topic, relevance to current global events, interest, relationship of the topic to students' personal experiences and knowledge, and degree of abstractness (See Appendix 2 and Table 2).

Table (2)  
Distribution of Students' Posts According to Topic

Discussion Threads	%
<i>Welcome</i>	23%
<i>Voices on Iraq</i>	19%
<i>Culture Shock</i>	14.5%
<i>Culture Awareness and Mass Media</i>	12%
<i>Man Against Women</i>	10%
<i>Beliefs, Rumors and Prejudices</i>	10%
<i>Netiquette</i>	7.5%
<i>Thanks to Everyone</i>	2%

The responses that the Russian students posted under '*Welcome*' ranged between 110-215 words (Median = 178 words), those posted by the Ukrainian students ranged between 12 and 195 words (Median = 82 words), and those posted by the Saudis ranged between 27 and 140 words (Median = 53 words) (See Table 3). The conferencing topic with the longest responses was '*Voices on Iraq*' due to exposure to a flow of information from the media before and after the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. Students were also emotionally involved in the event. The Russian students were the most proficient in writing, as they were enrolled in a British-Russian university. Most of the responses posted by the Saudi students were under '*Welcome*', one was posted under '*Culture Shock*', and two were posted under '*Voices on Iraq*'. The responses the Saudi students posted under '*Welcome*' were short and brief. They just gave their name, age, major, name of institution, thanked their instructor for giving them the opportunity to participate, and expressed their interest in the cultural exchange. On the other hand, the

Ukrainian and Russian students talked about their towns, jobs, and personal experiences (See the Appendix 5). The Saudi students posted few responses after the author finished teaching them and as the author had no control over quizzes, grades and participation. They probably could not generate ideas. However, they continued to check and read the documents and posts.

Table (3)  
Description of Message Length in Words

	Median	Range
Russian	178	110-215
Ukrainian	82	12-195
Saudi	53	27-140

## 5.2 Difficulties

Responses to the questionnaires showed that the Ukrainian students had limited access to the computer lab and none of them had a PC at home. They had difficulty connecting to the Internet, which made browsing slow, tedious and sometimes impossible. 30% did not have time to respond to the discussion threads, 20% could not access the Nicenet course, 20% found the documents difficult to understand, as they came across difficult words and spent a lot of time looking up their meanings, 30% were not familiar with the discussion topics and could not generate ideas and 10% had little experience with the Internet (See Table 4).

Table (4)

Types and Percentages of the Difficulties for the Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi Students

	<i>Difficulties</i>	%
<b>Ukrainian</b>	Slow browsing (bad connectivity)	90%
	Did not have time	30%
	Not familiar with discussion topics	30%
	Could not generate ideas	30%
	Could not access the website	20%
	Difficulty with documents	20%
	Little experience with the internet	10%
	Slow browsing	
<b>Russian</b>	Slow browsing	60%
	Did not have time to check website	30%
	Had no access to the internet	20%
<b>Saudi</b>	Bad connectivity	40%
	Did not have time to check website	20%
	Were not interested	20%
	Could not keep up with the posts (browsing was a chore)	10%
	Slow in typing	10%

Responses to the questionnaires also showed that 10% of the Saudi students were slow in typing, and 20% did not have time to check the website. As the number of documents and posts increased, 10% found reading the posts and documents a chore and could not keep up with them. 20% lost interest (See Table 4 and the cultural difficulties that Saudi students had at the beginning of the course in the Instructors' Role section above).

The Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi instructors were doing different things in class and the same thing online. The Ukrainian and Russian instructors checked Nicenet several times a day. Providing feedback and checking the online class participation were difficult for them, because they had many things to do, and had to respond to the students individually. Since they did not have a computer at home, they had to do everything in the office. They came to work early and went home late. A bigger challenge for them was the course documents, finding related links and providing

feedback. Preparing the documents was an improvisation, and they thought about the content along the way. Looking for material was also time-consuming. At first, the Ukrainian instructor e-mailed the author on a weekly basis seeking advice. She wanted to post the discussion topics for the whole semester all at once. Some of topics she selected were not specific and she did not know how to handle the course. The author recommended that topics be specific, deal with one issue only, and be related to the students' background knowledge and experiences. She also recommended that instructors post one topic per week, act as a student, write a response whenever she posts a discussion thread and give positive feedback whenever the students post a response no matter how inadequate it is.

Managing the online course was not a burden for the author because of her prior experience with online teaching. The only challenge was to keep her students interested and lack of computers and Internet access in her college, made it difficult for her to go through the discussions threads in class and solve technical and training problems that the students might have faced.

### **5.3 Effect on Skills and Attitude**

The Ukrainian students reported that the online documents helped them generate ideas for their messages, learn new vocabulary items, and enhanced their reading and writing skills. Their instructor noted that her students' proficiency level in English improved as a result of the online course and the amount of reading and writing they were exposed to. At the end of the semester, they were speaking, reading and writing better. Similarly, the Saudi students reported that their English improved as a result of reading the documents and posts and noting how the Ukrainian and Russian students wrote and thought. They acquired new information and exchanged ideas with students from another culture. Zubashevsky Nazar wrote: *"Yes, my English improved. Yes this course help (helped) me to know many new words, to know more about the opinion of different people to many problems in our life"*. Roksolana Avdykovych wrote: *"My English improved, I know a lot of new words, can speak easier. I didn't know some words, I used a dictionary and read more information on this topic"*. Holub Maria wrote: *"I find it helpful, because (because) it gives to us feeling (and knowledge) of "live" English. The online course gives us something new and interesting information, which is sometimes*

*helpful for us". A Saudi participant's (Eman Baghlaf) wrote: "of course yes because I read different styles of writing... it is a new way of learning ,and I get great benefits because I read , and write , so my skills improved".*

As to students' attitudes towards the cross-cultural online exchange, all of the Ukrainian students enjoyed discussing, and expressing opinions about global and cultural issues and events. They thought the course helped them understand some aspects of "world life" and gave them a feel of "live" English. The Saudi students enjoyed reading the messages and reactions posted by the Ukrainian and Russian students. The instructors noted that their students were very enthusiastic and found the online project exciting. Nazar wrote: *"Yes this course help (helped) me to know more about the opinion of different people to many problems in our life... Yes, I want to take part in such curses again".* Maria wrote: *"I find it helpful, because (because) it gives to us feeling and knowledge of live English. The online course gives us something new and interesting information, which is sometimes helpful for us ... Yes, I would do that (register again in a similar course with students from other countries) if I had such opportunity".* Lyuba said: *"In online courses we changing (exchanging) interesting information with foreing (foreign) students and it is very useful for us".* Oxana and Natalya. wrote: *"The online course is more interesting than traditional in-class instruction".* Eman wrote: *"If I have the chance, of I will register (again in a similar course with students from other countries)... realising the variations of the other cultures, and ways of life in the other countries ... the net is very important especially (especially) if we use this tool for learning".*

Although the Saudi students were apprehensive and hesitant to participate in this project, they found it informative and their experience clarified the misconceptions and fears they had about learning and interacting with students from other countries. Their responses to the questionnaire and oral comments to the author showed that they were impressed by how fast the Ukrainian students responded, how often they wrote, and how long their messages were. They found the Ukrainian and Russian students respectful and interested in discussing global issues, and found the information the students provided about themselves, their universities and towns enriching. It was fascinating for the Ukrainian as well as the Saudi students to be in touch with their

instructors who were abroad and to be in the same class with students from other countries.

All of the Ukrainian and Saudi students expressed an interest in continuing the project in the future or participating in similar projects. The following semester, the Ukrainian students used the online documents, discussion materials, and posts for a sociology class that they took the following semester. Helena, the Ukrainian instructor wrote to the author:

*"I have a group of students who participated in the Nicenet discussion last year (now they are the second year students), and they keep asking me if we are going to have something similar this year. They told me that they use their Nicenet discussion materials and postings for their Sociology class. That's interesting!"*

However, the Ukrainian, Russian and Saudi students did not exchange any e-mails with other neither during nor after the online course was over.

The positive effect of cross-cultural online collaboration on the Ukrainian and Saudi EFL students' attitudes obtained in the present study is consistent with findings of other cross-cultural collaborative projects between L1 and L2 students and/or pre-service teachers using other forms of technology. For instance, Ruhe (1998) reported that e-mail was effective in teaching cross-cultural awareness, created a positive affective climate, and made the English-for-Academic-Purposes curriculum more relevant to students. In addition, Schoorman and Camarillo (2000) noted that e-mail exchanges between university pre-service teachers and middle school students broadened their multicultural awareness and improved their skills. Target language usage and interest increased over the duration of the project. Electronic exchange between the schools enhanced the language learning skills of all students involved in the project (Shelley, 1996). Web resources proved to be a suitable tool for increasing language and cultural knowledge, as well as a means for increasing motivation (Osuna & Meskill, 1998; Lee, 1997). They were a meaningful way to integrate language and culture and to provide opportunities for students to learn about the target culture while using e-mail to discuss cultural aspects with native speakers. E-mail increased students' interest and motivation. Likewise, Lee (1998) reported that online newspapers and online chat rooms improved advanced Spanish college students' language and reading skills, and increased their cultural knowledge.

By contrast, findings of the present study are inconsistent with findings of Chen's study (2001) which found that Taiwanese freshman students exposed to American culture in a constructivist CALL environment. Chen's results indicated that college EFL learners' attitudes towards learning American culture and learning styles did not undergo any significant change. The more the subjects participated in the CALL environment, the less they felt that information on the Internet helped them understand American culture, and the less they liked exploring American culture via the Internet.

## **6. Conclusion**

Online instruction in EFL is not widely used in Ukraine, Russia and Saudi Arabia. So the *Writing across the Borders* online course was a pioneer project in those countries. The project was found to be effective and successful. The interaction between those instructors and students who belonged to two completely different cultural, political, linguistic and educational backgrounds, and different majors: Saudi vs Ukrainian-Russian was impressive. It showed that students from different countries have common interests and common points of views regarding some global cultural issues. In their responses to the questionnaire, the students reported that they developed a global perspective as well as language and communication skills. They developed a positive attitude towards other cultures and learnt to accept and respect differences in points of views, beliefs and traditions. Such an effective project did not need any financial support, no special hardware or software, and no re-scheduling. EFL students and instructors in low-tech learning environments can still use collaborative online instruction with Nicenet, Moodle or OWCP effectively even as a supplement to in-class instruction. They can share experiences, instructional materials and try out new teaching techniques.

Cross-cultural online projects could become more effective in enhancing students' attitudes and skills, if collaborating instructors focus on the same skill in-class and online, and all groups use the same in-class material. They can pre-plan the course and agree on the cultural topics. Discussion topics must be specific, and general and complex topics should be avoided. The students can begin discussing topics related to the students' local cultures, move on to discussing topics related to the target language culture, i.e. American and British cultures, and then discuss global issues. Students must

be encouraged to select and post their own discussion threads and culture links and should be given an overview of the course in the 'Assignment' section at the beginning of the course. It is advisable for instructors to write in the 'Documents' section and post discussion threads on a regular basis, so that the students have a feel for what is going on. An online course would be more helpful if it is more structured and deadlines for submitting assignments and responding to a discussion thread are more rigid. Discussion threads can be brainstormed face-to-face, before and after posting messages. Partner instructors can write to each other about their expectations before class, and about how the class actually went. To help students take the online course more seriously, it must be part of the final exam and course credit. Studies that investigate cross-cultural online projects that are fully delivered online and which have identical content and pre- and post-project assessment are called for.

## **Appendix (1)**

### **Cultural Topics Taught to the Saudi Students in Class**

The British and American culture course that the Saudi students took in class covered the following topics: *Definition of culture, difference between culture and civilization, the process of enculturation, characteristics of culture, cultural patterns, cultural traits, multiculturalism, cultural anthropology, cross-cultural, ethnography, location of the UK, different names, political divisions of the UK, general characteristics, British colonies, British history, Industrial Revolution, British government, the constitution, parliament, prime minister and cabinet, politics in the UK, political parties, population, ancestry, language, city life, rural life, food and drink, recreation, religion, educational system, health care system, museums and libraries, the arts, land regions, rivers and lakes, climate, economy, service industries, manufacturing, agriculture, mining, fishing, energy resources, international trade, imports and exports, transportation and communication; U.S. regions, U.S. population, U.S. ancestry, language, urban and rural life in the U.S., schools, museums, religion, recreation, food, the arts, the land, climate, the economy, energy resources, transportation and communication in the U.S.*

## **Appendix (2)**

### **The Online Course Components and Content**

The online course consisted of 11 conferencing topics (discussion threads), 20 external links, 9 documents, 3 assignments, an online photo gallery and Powerpoint presentations. The discussion threads covered the following: *Netiquette, beliefs, rumors and prejudices, cultural shock; impressions about the USA; voices on Iraq; cultural awareness and mass media; man and civilization; education; man against women; thanks to everyone* in addition to the *International Women's Day celebrated on March 8<sup>th</sup>* and *Easter celebrated on May 27<sup>th</sup>*. The Documents covered the following topics: *Netiquette Rules* by V. Shea; *Ancient Men and Women*; *Cross-Cultural Problems*; *Cultural Dimensions*; *Fog of War*; *Truth is the Victim of Collateral Damage*; *Political Leaders on the War in Iraq*; *Voices on Iraq*; *Saddam Defies U.S. Demand to Leave*; *Coalition for the Immediate Disarmament of Iraq*; *The Difference in News Coverage by The US Mass Media and Mass Media in Other Countries* from Eugene Weekly. These documents were written, abridged or modified by the instructors. The external links included the following: *International Writing Exchange*; *Learning English on the Net*; *Cindy's Computer Clinic for Beginners*; *Pictures of King Saud University*; *Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences*; *Lviv and Lviv National Ivan Franko University*, *A Fish out of Water* by Duncan Mason; *Thinkquest: Cultural Connections*; *Take the Shock out of Culture Shock* by Charlotte Thomas; *A Mini-Lecture on Culture Shock* by Randall Davis; *The Problem Of Adjustment to New Cultural Environments*; *Culture Shock* by Carmen Cuanipa; *Language and Gender*; *On-line Netiquette*; *Netiquette Rules*; *Uncle Sam* (a cartoon published by the students of the McConnell Center for Political Leadership); *Events Leading to the Brink of War* (a timeline); *Bush: Leave Iraq within 48 hours* (a transcript from CNN of President Bush's Monday night televised address to the nation); *Postwar Plans* (a cartoon published by startribune.com). The Photo galleries and Powerpoint presentations showed pictures of Ukraine, Russia and Riyadh and the three institutions.

### **Appendix (3)**

#### **Students' Questionnaire**

1. *Name (Optional):*
2. *Why did you register in and use the Nicenet online course?*
3. *What did you like about the Nicenet online course? What did you not like about it?*
4. *Did you communicate with your online classmates from other countries outside the course (send private e-mails to each other)?*

5. *Did your English improve as a result of using the online course ? In what ways?*
6. *Did it make any difference in learning English?*
7. *If you did not post any responses or paragraphs in the online course? Why?*
8. *What problems or difficulties did you face in using the online course? How were those problems solved?*
9. *How much time did you spend using and browsing the online course?*
10. *Would you register again in a similar course with students from other countries? Why?*
11. *What do you think of the cultural topics discussed in the online course?*

#### **Appendix (4)**

##### **Instructors' Questionnaire**

1. What course were the students enrolled in (in class)?
2. How many hours a week was it?
3. What was the students' proficiency level at the beginning of the semester?
4. Did the students' English improve as a result of using the Nicenet course? In what ways?
5. What textbook did you use for the course?
6. What skills did the textbook and course emphasize?
7. Were the conferencing topics posted related to the textbook?
8. Where did the students access the Nicenet course from?
9. Where did you access the Nicenet course from?
10. Did you face any problems or difficulties in using the Nicenet course?
11. How much time did it take you to prepare for the Nicenet course and check the Nicenet website?
12. How did you coordinate the Nicenet course with your colleagues from the other country?
13. Did any of the questions on the final exam cover any material or information covered in the Nicenet course?
14. Did you give marks for using the Nicenet course?
15. How did the students feel about sharing an online course with students from other countries?
16. If you were to teach the same online course again with instructors from other countries, what would you change?

## **Appendix (5)**

### **Examples of Saudi, Ukrainian and Russian Students' Posts**

Below are examples of the students' posts and comments. Posts and comments are left as they were originally written by the students.

#### **Examples of Saudi students' posts (unedited):**

(i) *hellow every body.. I am so glad to have international friends and teachers in the same time .. That is what I always lookin for.. I will introduce myself.. I am Nada. I'm 20 years old .. I'm from K.S.A .. I'm A student in king Saud university in Riyadh city .. My major is English Language & Translation.. I'm in the 2nd year. Also, I wana told you that I always belive in this (WhO I aM Is NoT WhAt I hAve But WhAt I tRy My bEst At). I often hear about Russia but I have no clear idea about it , so I think now I have friends from that area & I am sure that they will give me some information about it ... thankx anyway for being speacial members & friends in our site & a speacial thanks for Prof. reima.*

(ii) *My name is Nouf, 20 years old. I'm a Saudi. I'm also one of Prof. Reima's students and I really appreciate what she's doing to us. I'm so excited to be in this class and I'm hoping if i could reach a higher level in writing. Finally, just remember that when everything seems against you, that the airplane takes off against the winds, NOT with it.*

(iii) *Heloooo everyone. Im Fatima frome Saudi Arabia and Im 19 years old. Im studing Languages and Translation in King Saud University. Im looking forward to get to know new friends.*

#### **Examples of Russian Students' posts (unedited):**

(i) *Hello! Let me introduce my self My name is Eugueny, I m from Omsk, this city is situated in Siberia. It is a very quiet town because it very far from Moscow and Europe with their trouble. Now I live in Moscow and studying in Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. In this school we have a lot of meetings with very interesting people who speak about world economical and political processes, it is very interesting. My hobbies are reading, swimming and computing, I like it. How*

*are you? What are your hobbies and interests? Write me a letter. I am looking forward to hearing from you. Good Luck! Eugueny.*

*(ii) My name is Galina. I am from an ancient town Serpukhov in Moscow Region which used to be the southern point of the Moscow defensive triangle. Now I live in Moscow, as I study and work here.*

*I am a student at the Russian-British University Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. The School integrates the best aspects of British and Russian academic traditions and provides a wide range of interesting courses in different spheres, such as Law, Sociology, Political Science, Cultural Management, etc.*

*My avocation is studying foreign languages. The courses provided by the Academic Linguistic Center of the School are intensive and effective. I enjoy them exceedingly. Apart from this, I started learning Italian four months ago, and I've found it to be quite an interesting and useful occupation.*

*At the present time, I participate in a new project 'Writing across the Borders'. In the frame of this course the students are supposed to work out a Profile of the Ukraine and present the results in the format of Power Point Presentation 'My View of the Ukraine'.*

*My colleagues and I are looking forward to corresponding with you and trying to find out as much interesting information about your country as only possible.*

*Sincerely yours, Galina Savostyanova*

**Examples of Ukrainian Students' posts (unedited):**

*(i) I would like to introduce myself. My name is Tania Rodnienkova. I like my studying in Lviv I. Franco National University because classes aren't so boring as I was told earlier and appears rather interesting. But most of all I like University because of possibility meeting new people- confident and fresh thinking. I'm studying Sociology. About myself. I have a lot of hobbies. I like going in for sports (especially basket-ball), listening to the music and watching old black and white films. Besides*

*I'm fond of computer design. When I have free time I like painting and reading. I like modern Ukrainian literature. I'm interesting in developing Ukrainian culture-modern art and literature, Ukrainian underground music and culture. I adore travelling and spending days off in the open air.*

**Examples of Students' Comments (unedited):**

*(1) Hello, dear colleagues!!! Lyuba Samets and Roksolana Avdykovich are writing to you. It was very interesting to work with you, to read your messages, to discuss different topics. It was really useful and instructive for us. We think that most of us agree to continue this project in the future. We thank our teachers for the interesting information in Documents section. We took a lot of useful rare information from it. It helped us in preparing our messages. We thank all students who took part in Writing across the Borders. We wish you to pass all exams and have a good rest.*

*(2) Hello! We have read your letter to us. We think that this writing exchange project helped us to understand the different sides of world life. We liked this project and we hope that we will have such a project in future because it was interesting and helped us to develop the necessary skills and heighten language competence. We hope that the other countries will take part in such projects and we will see the thinks of other people in many countries.*

*Yours,*

*Ukrainian students*

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