Engaging Study Abroad Students in Intercultural Learning Through Blogging and Ethnographic Interviews

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Abstract: The study involved 16 American undergraduate students who used weekly blogs and conducted ethnographic interviews with native speakers to develop their intercultural competence over the course of one semester abroad. Selected blog entries, post-surveys, and final interviews were collected and analyzed to report the findings. The results show that blog tasks afforded additional opportunities for students to reflect upon cross-cultural issues and exchange cultural perspectives with native informants. Blog entries indicate that students demonstrated various stages of intercultural competence from understanding cultural differences to demonstrating attitudes of openness and appreciation for the target culture. The study concludes that the accessibility to networking, the option of using the first language (L1) for self-reflection, and effective strategies for interpersonal communication are essential to maximize the potential of blogs for intercultural learning.

Key words: blogs, ethnographic interviews, intercultural learning, study abroad

Introduction
With the ever-increasing mobility of people throughout the world, globalization has created a pluralistic community of diversity and co-existence. The need for foreign language (L2) learners to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been strongly advocated as an essential component in L2 instruction. According to Byram (1997), ICC encompasses a constantly evolving process of developing cultural knowledge, the skills of discovery and interaction with others, open attitudes, and critical awareness. Common belief suggests that formal classroom instruction alone is not sufficient and that close interaction with native speakers (NSs) through cultural immersion is vital for students to gain ICC. Accordingly, many L2 programs have integrated overseas experience as part of degree requirements into their curriculum. However, simply living abroad does not automatically lead to linguistic gains and intercultural awareness (Byram & Feng, 2006; Freed, 1995; Pellegrino, 2005). Given that many students struggle to understand cross-cultural issues encountered during their sojourns abroad, how can we maximize their study abroad (SA) experience and engage them in meaningful intercultural exchanges?
Among other approaches to intercultural learning, blog technology has been increasingly used to foster cross-cultural communication and awareness (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Lee, 2009b; Pinkman, 2005). Given that blogs are asynchronous modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC), students write at their own pace without time pressure, which allows them to reflect critically upon the content (Hourigan & Murray, 2010; Lee, 2010). In addition to encouraging self-reflection, blogs evolve into a dynamic and interactive network where students share and exchange ideas through responses with comments. L2 researchers have stressed that intercultural learning should move away from focusing on factual knowledge gains to examining the process of developing ICC (Bateman, 2002). To this end, ethnographic interviews as part of CMC have been employed to promote the understanding of deep cultural meanings from the point of view of a culture’s members (Byram & Feng, 2006; O’Dowd, 2006). Through the lenses of an insider’s perspective, students learn about themselves by reflecting on their own values and beliefs.

To expand the existing research and share further insights on how digital technologies support intercultural learning, this study explores how the use of asynchronous CMC via blogs in conjunction with face-to-face (FTF) interaction with native informants fosters the development of students’ intercultural knowledge and skills in the SA setting.

**Review of the Literature**

**Development of ICC**

While there may never be a consensus among L2 educators as to how to develop and assess ICC, Byram’s (1997) ICC model as a conceptual framework consisting of four interrelated components—knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness—appears to be the most frequently adapted approach (see Byram, 1997, pp. 50–63 for details). Within this framework, the goal is to promote in-depth cultural learning that goes beyond the superficial “facts only” approach. To become competent intercultural speakers, learners need to be open-minded to people of other cultures so that they understand cross-cultural perspectives with a nonjudgmental attitude and respect (Bennett, 1993). In the process of developing ICC, learners are encouraged to critically reflect upon cultural similarities and differences and further develop the ability to tolerate differences that allow them to handle everyday situations encountered in the host country (Byram, 2000). Once learners develop their cultural awareness through personal discovery and social engagements, they reduce their ethnocentrism and show appreciation for other cultures. Deardorff (2006) concluded that the more positive the attitude that students show, the more knowledge and skills they will develop. Furthermore, the more often students reflect upon cross-cultural issues, the higher the degree of ICC they will achieve.

Students can achieve ICC through FTF in an immersion context (e.g., SA) or CMC exchange (e.g., telecollaboration). Within the immersion setting, researchers have employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as surveys (e.g., Deardorff, 2006), reflective journals (e.g., Jackson, 2005), and cultural portfolios (e.g., Byram, 2005) to understand the process of intercultural learning and document its outcomes. The results showed that learners developed various stages of ICC from adaptation to integration to the local community (Burnett & Gardner, 2006) and gained in-depth understanding of the host culture (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; Schuetze, 2008). For example, in her study using a pretest and posttest to measure students’ cross-cultural adaptability and sensitivity, Williams (2005) found that the majority of the students exhibited a greater change in their intercultural skills after one semester studying abroad. Researchers have discussed a number of possible factors influencing the success of SA, including active interaction with the host culture and families (Kinginger, 2004; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2010; Wilkinson, 2002),
self-identifying (Pellegrino, 2005), and language skills and motivations (L. Q. Allen, 2000; DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Isabellí-García, 2006; Jackson, 2008).

When FTF interaction is not possible, efforts have been made to use CMC for intercultural exchange (e.g., Belz, 2003; Lee, 2009b; O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Research findings revealed that in addition to linguistic and pragmatic gains (Kinginger & Belz, 2005), students gained cross-cultural perspectives through critical reflection and interacting with NSs (Abrams, 2002; Liaw, 2006; O’Dowd, 2006). For example, the results of the study conducted by Jin and Erben (2007) showed that students of Chinese developed greater intercultural sensitivity and showed respect for cultural differences through an online exchange via instant messenger. The process of analyzing and reflecting on native informants’ perspectives enables students as outsiders to learn about the cultural framework governing the what, how, and why of insiders’ expressions in everyday interactions. Successful intercultural exchange via CMC, however, relies on openness toward the target culture and willingness to resolve misunderstandings (O’Dowd, 2006).

Intercultural Learning: Blogging and Ethnographic Interviewing
Apart from Web 1.0 technology (e-mail, chat, discussion board), instructors have increasingly employed blogs as one of the Web 2.0 tools for different instructional purposes (e.g., Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Bloch, 2007; Churchill, 2009; Lee, 2009a; Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Pinkman, 2005). For example, personal blogs are collections of online journals that foster reflective learning (e.g., Lee, 2010; Yang, 2009), whereas collective blogs involve an entire class or small groups of students who collaboratively construct L2 knowledge (Lee, 2009b). Using a socio-cognitive approach, researchers have designed blogs primarily for cross-cultural exchange to promote global communication and inter-cultural awareness. For example, Ducate and Lomicka (2008) found that L2 learners benefited from reading the blogs of NSs. As a result, their reading skills and vocabulary in the target language were enhanced. Using Byram’s (2000) assessment guidelines, Elola and Oskoz (2008) reported that the use of blogs enabled both SA and at-home students not only to exchange cultural knowledge from personal perspectives but also to develop their ICC. Similarly, in her recent study of Spanish-American intercultural exchange, Lee (2009b) found that various blog tasks afforded unique opportunities for students to exchange cultural perspectives and raise their awareness of cross-cultural issues. Despite the positive effects of blogs on intercultural learning, Carney (2007) argued that the post-comment structure of blogs results in brief exchange and lack of continuity. Thus, instructors should find ways, such as using guided questions, to engage students in reflective thinking in order to develop a deeper cultural exchange.

In addition to blog exchanges, learner ethnography often fosters real-world interaction in which an insider perspective is revealed in order to better understand cross-cultural differences. According to Spradley (1980), “Ethnography offers us the chance to step outside of our narrow cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism, if only for a brief period, and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems” (pp. vii–viii). To this view, ethnography relies primarily on an in-depth understanding of the values, beliefs, and attitudes underlying the behaviors of others through first-hand observations (L. Q. Allen, 2000). Research findings have shown that ethnography promotes learners’ openness and curiosity toward the target culture and raises cross-cultural awareness (Bateman, 2002; Roberts, 2003). For example, Su (2008) examined the effects of using the ethnographic interview project on the development of students’ intercultural awareness and skills. The findings indicated that Taiwanese students learned
to view their own culture in new ways and increased their confidence in using the target language to communicate with English speakers. Similarly, Jackson (2008) reported on an ethnographic case study of Chinese students living abroad showing that students’ progress in their intercultural sensitivity and understanding increased after a 5-week SA in England.

Based on the above discussions on ICC, blog technology, and ethnographic approaches to intercultural learning, the current study aimed to (1) develop learners’ intercultural knowledge and awareness through reflective blogs, and (2) foster cross-cultural communication through ethnographic interviews with native informants.

**Methodology**

**Setting and Goals**

The project involved 16 American students from two SA programs sponsored by the Center of Modern Languages (CML) at the University of Granada in Spain. The researcher and the partner instructor were resident directors, and they each taught a similar course regarding the language and culture of Spain. To provide students with increased opportunities to explore the target culture and interact with NSs outside of class, they worked closely to design the project, which was part of the course assignments outlined in the syllabus.1 Blog technology fostered critical reflection on cross-cultural issues, whereas FTF interviews offered real-time intercultural dialogue with NSs. The course management system Blackboard supplemented course materials and organized assignments. The researcher and partner instructor adopted Blogger, a free software program, to create blogs because they were not available in Blackboard at the researcher’s institution. Students received a brief training on how to use Blogger in a computer lab at the beginning of the semester.

**Participants**

Sixteen American students from two SA programs in Spain participated in the project in fall 2009. All participants completed a questionnaire concerning their personal, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. They ranged from 18 to 22 years old. The students consisted of sophomores (n = 7), juniors (n = 8), and a senior (n = 1). The majority of the students were either Spanish majors (n = 7) or minors (n = 6). The majority of the students had three years of Spanish in high school and had completed one full year of college-level intermediate Spanish. Thus, they had sufficient language skills2 to participate in the project. Most of them did not have the experience of dealing with NSs prior to their SA. During the course of one semester abroad, students lived with host families, took classes at the CML, and participated in cultural activities arranged by the SA programs. None of them had used blogs prior to the project.

NSs (n = 26) ranging in age from 17 to 64 from local communities and the University of Granada agreed to participate in the project. More than 70% of the NSs (n = 19) had experience dealing with American students, as they were host family members with whom the students lived or conversation exchange partners from the CML. In addition to having regular interactions with the students at home or outside of class, the NSs assisted students in ethnographic interviews3 and participated in the class blog discussions.

**Procedure**

As part of the coursework, students carried out three types of blog tasks in Spanish throughout the semester (see Table 1). For personal blogs, students were encouraged to observe and reflect upon cultural differences through which they would bring their own perspectives to underlying values of the host culture. Personal blogs were intended to promote self-expression and self-reflection rather than idea exchange. Students therefore were not required to read and comment on each other’s posts. As the students were still developing their interlanguage and did not have sufficient linguistic knowledge to
In addition to personal blogs, the researcher set up a class blog to open an exchange space where students shared and negotiated their understanding of cultural issues through responses with comments. For weekly assignments, students read topic-specific readings, participated in make error correction, the instructor provided them with feedback by writing comments on incorrect usage of lexical items and grammatical structures on their entries. After receiving the instructor’s feedback via e-mail, students made error corrections by editing the entries on their blogs.

In addition to personal blogs, the researcher set up a class blog to open an exchange space where students shared and negotiated their understanding of cultural issues through responses with comments. For weekly assignments, students read topic-specific readings, participated in

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<th>Blog Type</th>
<th>Description of Task</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personal blog</td>
<td>Each student is responsible for keeping a personal blog. The blog serves as a personal diary in which you write reflective observations about various aspects of the Spanish culture and address cultural differences from your own perspectives. To make meaningful cross-cultural observations, you should pay attention to current events, popular culture, native speakers’ behaviors and attitudes, and your surroundings (e.g., at home, on the street, or in school). You are required to write three weekly entries through which you critically reflect on the chosen topics. Each entry should have approximately 150–200 words in Spanish. You are strongly encouraged to take pictures from cultural activities and incorporate them into your blog.</td>
<td>September 2 to October 29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class blog</td>
<td>After completing weekly assignments on readings, cultural activities, and/or ethnographic interviews, you should post a 200-word entry to share your observations. You are strongly encouraged to ask questions regarding the assigned topic and make comments on others’ postings. Be sure to upload each interview to the blog for others to view. It is recommended that you use external resources (e.g., YouTube video clips, external links) to support the content.</td>
<td>September 3 to November 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project blog</td>
<td>For this project, you choose a topic that interests you the most and create a blog to compile and share information. You are required to read a minimum of three articles and conduct a minimum of two interviews with expert speakers to find out their own perspectives about the topic. You analyze the readings and interviews, and then write about your own observations. Be sure to upload the interviews and add additional sources (e.g., newspapers, podcasts, videos) to the blog.</td>
<td>November 10 to December 8</td>
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cultural activities (e.g., films, plays, excursions), and conducted interviews with NSs. For example, one of topics was about immigrants in Spain. Students first read the poem Piénsalo (“Think About It”) by the Spanish poet Luis García Montero and viewed YouTube video clips regarding immigration issues. They then attended the play La vida por delante, a story about immigrants, in a local theater. Finally, they interviewed their NS partners to gain individual perspectives on immigration issues. It should be noted that ethnographic interviews were an integral part of blog assignments. To facilitate the interviewing process, the instructor provided students with guidelines and they spent one class practicing interview techniques, such as asking structural and contrast questions (see Spradley, 1979, for information). All interviews were recorded using a digital audio or video recorder owned by one of the SA programs. Students uploaded the recorded interviews to the class blog for viewing. Finally, students spent 5 weeks conducting a cultural project by choosing a particular aspect of Spanish culture that most interested them (see Table 1 for details).

At the end of the semester, the researcher created an online survey hosted by SurveyMonkey.com to gauge students’ views of the effectiveness of blogs and FTF interviews for intercultural learning. More than 90% of the students (n = 15) voluntarily completed the post-survey. The researcher also conducted final interviews to gather additional feedback and to secure an in-depth understanding of how students’ experiences with the blog project affected the way they viewed intercultural learning. Final interviews took place within a group of three or four students to create an interactive dialogue between the students and the researcher. Each group interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded digitally for data analysis.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection included both qualitative data (blog entries, final interviews) and quantitative (post-surveys). The online survey consisted of 10 statements. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (1 = Strongly Disagree) to 5 (5 = Strongly Agree) gauged students’ reactions to the project. Students indicated their level of satisfaction by ranking each statement from 1 to 5. Open-ended final interview questions were used to obtain additional observations and offer suggestions for improvement. Selective postings from personal and class blogs provided additional evidence to illustrate and support the findings. Using Bennett’s (1993) intercultural sensitivity and Byram’s (1997) model of ICC, the researcher performed a content analysis of blog entries to determine if intercultural learning took place. The discussion centers around two major findings: (1) the effectiveness of reflective blogs on the development of ICC, and (2) the affordances of ethnographic interviews for ICC.

**Findings and Discussion**

**The Effectiveness of Reflective Blogs on the Development of ICC**

Based on the mean score displayed in Table 2, students reacted positively to the project. The high rating indicates that they were satisfied with the results (statement 10). For many students, the project afforded them increased opportunities to interact with local people in a meaningful way, as this student explained during the final interview:

> For me, the project opened doors to all kinds of learning from observing people’s behaviors and attitudes toward others to exchanging cross-cultural perspectives with native speakers. This project helped me to gain a better understanding of the Spanish culture and I learned to appreciate it.

More than 80% of the students viewed blogs as an effective tool for intercultural learning (statement 1). They enjoyed the experience and found it rewarding. The following quotation illustrates the student’s positive view of blogging:
themselves fully using the L2. The finding suggests that the use of the first language (L1) should be an option because it would allow students to better reflect on their cross-cultural perspectives, as supported by CMC researchers (Elola & Oskoz, 2008; O’Dowd, 2006).

The high rating (mean = 4.13) of blog types used for the project indicates that the majority of the students were in favor of using personalized and interactive blogs (statement 2). Nearly 80% of the students agreed that they benefitted from writing reflective entries and receiving valuable comments from their peers (statement 3). The most striking finding was that regular blogging allowed SA students to demonstrate the various stages of their intercultural competence. Students initially expressed feelings of discomfort and somewhat negative attitudes toward the host culture. Sentences like *No me gusta* … (“I don’t like…”) and *Me parece raro* … (“It seems odd to me…”) or words like “weird,” “bizarre,” “strange,”

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<th>Statements of the Survey</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Blogging was an effective way to gain cultural knowledge and awareness.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I liked how each type of blog (personal, class, and project blog) was implemented in the project.</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.52</td>
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<td>3. I benefited from writing reflective entries and reading my peers’ entries and comments.</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.35</td>
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<td>4. I preferred writing blog entries to the paper format writing.</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>0.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Tasks for the blog assignments (e.g., free and instructor-chosen topics) were interesting and stimulating.</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.49</td>
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<td>6. I enjoyed conducting oral interviews with native speakers.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.56</td>
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<td>7. I found ethnographic interviews engaging and informative.</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Ethnographic interviews allowed me to gain valuable insights into the host culture.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.59</td>
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<td>9. Reflecting upon the informants’ responses/comments helped me better understand my own culture.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Overall, I had a positive experience with the project.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.68</td>
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and “surprised” appeared repeatedly to describe their reactions to culture shock at the beginning of blogging. The following excerpts demonstrate students’ awareness of cultural similarities and differences (translated to English):

It is weird that my host mom often gives me cookies for breakfast and we eat a fresh piece of fruit or yogurt after lunch. In the United States we would have pies or cakes for dessert. I do miss fresh baked bagels and donuts in Dunkin’ Donuts.

I’m surprised that here in Spain it’s perfectly fine not to leave tips in restaurants or tip taxi drivers. I still don’t like the idea of not tipping people for the service. I work as a waitress in the U.S. and I would want people to tip me.

These reactions echo the findings reported in Elola and Oskoz (2008) indicating that blogs enabled SA students to demonstrate their ability to compare and contrast the two cultures, which is fundamental for the development of ICC.

Furthermore, cross-cultural reflections through blogging revealed that SA students felt capable of dealing with cross-cultural challenges by seeing things from a different point of view (Byram, 2000). For example, this student commented in her blog on the traditional lecture style used by the Spanish professors:

Classes son muy diferentes. Los profesores hablan todo el tiempo y no hay discusiones entre nosotros. Es muy dificil sentarse en la clase para dos horas pero los profesores saben mucho y piensan que los estudiantes deben aprender mas sobre la literatura y cultura. Estoy aprendiendo mucho.

(Classes are very different. Professors talk all the time and there are no discussions among us. It is difficult to sit in the class for two hours but professors know a lot and they think that students should learn more about the literature and culture. I’m learning a lot.)

The students’ blog posts were arranged in chronological order and were archived, allowing for easy retrieval. After reviewing the entries written by this student, the researcher noted that the entries from the third and seventh week demonstrated his ability to change cultural perspectives:

Mi señora siempre me dice que no puedo duchar para mas que cinco minutos. No se por que. Otra cosa es que ella quiere que yo regreso a casa antes de la medianoche si yo saigo con mis amigos. Cosas asi no entiendo y a veces me molesta. Creo que en los Estados Unidos la gente tiene mas libertad para hacer cosas. (Week 3)

(My host mom always tells me that I cannot take a shower for more than five minutes. I don’t know why. Another thing is that she wants me to come home before midnight if I go out with my friends. Things like that I don't understand and sometimes it bothers me. I think in the United States people have more freedom to do things.)

The above entry shows that the student found housing rules restrictive. By the seventh week, he manifested a better understanding of host living conditions that led him to reflect on his own culture:

Ahora entiendo por que mi senora me pide apagar la luz cuando no estoy en mi habitacion. El agua y la electricidad son muy caros en España. Creo que son buenos habitos. Nosotros no ponemos mucha atencion en cosas asi y gastamos demasiado. (Week 7)

(Now I understand why my host mom asks me to turn off the light when I am not in my room. Water and electricity are expensive in Spain. I think they are good habits. We do not pay much attention on things like this and we spend too much.)

The finding seems to suggest that the better the attitude the students have toward the host culture, the more it helps them develop intercultural awareness, as proposed by Deardorff (2006).
In the process of assimilating to the target culture, SA students learned to grow away from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism defined by Bennett (1993), as illustrated in the following blog posting (translated to English):

I don’t feel that my life in Spain is different because I’m used to many things here. When I return to the U.S., the life is going to seem strange. I remember that I have written about my cultural shock, such as food, schedule, and no heat at home. Now I’m totally used to my day being put on pause for 3 hours a day and to eating dinner at 9 p.m. I actually enjoy taking a nap after a big lunch, which I found strange before.

This reflection illustrates the student’s various stages of intercultural sensitivity from feeling “strange” (ethnocentric stage) to actually “accepting” and “adapting” (ethnorelativist stage) to cultural differences, which helped the student become more interculturally competent.

The post-survey data showed that nearly 70% of the students preferred the blogs to the paper journal writing (statement 4). Students found blogging appealing, as they wrote for a broad audience beyond just the instructor (Lee, 2010). They also applauded the availability of using media sources and hyperlinks to support the text content. Some students maintained that blogging gave them a sense of belonging, as they collaboratively shared and exchanged cultural perspectives in the class blog. However, almost 30% of students suffered a lack of access to a computer at the host institution or to the Internet in the host family’s house. As a result, these students were frustrated by not being able to participate actively in the blogs. One student, for example, expressed her disappointment during the final interview:

I wish I had an option to use paper like a notebook to write journal entries. There was no Internet in my host house so I had to either go to an Internet café or stay in school to do my homework. In school, there were not enough computers so I often had to wait to use one. I couldn’t really participate in blog discussions because I had limited access to the Internet.

The comments confirm those reported in previous studies of CMC indicating that the accessibility of networking becomes essential for network-based learning and further affects students’ motivation (Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2005).

Regarding blog tasks, most students were satisfied with both free and instructor-assigned topics (statement 5). They found that using a variety of topics enabled them to explore many facets of the target culture. Table 3 illustrates sample topics for each type of task, which served as a point of departure for blog assignments. While some entries were personal observations about class discussions (e.g., media and press, ethnic diversity in the region of Andalusia), other postings were self-reflections on cultural products, practices, and perspectives (e.g., Spanish food and tips, Western influence, clothing and fashion, verbal and nonverbal behaviors). In some cases, blog tasks required students to get involved in cultural activities ranging from attending a concert to participating in a cooking lesson. As a result, task-based instruction provided SA students with additional opportunities to interact with the host culture, as reported in previous SA studies (H. W. Allen & Herron, 2003; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2010).

The Affordances of Ethnographic Interviews for ICC
As shown in Table 2, ethnographic interviews received a high rating (4.20 out of 5), demonstrating that the majority of the students enjoyed working with NSs (statement 6) and found FTF interviews useful and informative (statement 7). Comments drawn from the final interviews showed that ethnography as part of blog tasks not only increased students’ confidence in using the target language but also facilitated the
The truth is that not everyone watches or goes to bullfighting shows. I have never seen one and I am against the idea of killing animals. The same thing can be said about flamenco. Some Spaniards cannot stand flamenco music. I grew up listening to Paco de Lucia and Moraito. I am passionate about flamenco. In fact, my friends and I play in a small bar near the Elvira street. You are welcome to come …

Student: Thank you for the invitation. I would like to come. It is interesting to hear what you have just said. I thought all Spaniards were passionate about this sport. It seems to be an important tradition and central to the cultural identity. Now I see that what I think as an American about bullfighting is just an example of many stereotypes.

As illustrated in the above example, the informant revealed his own beliefs and attitudes toward the traditional Spanish culture that raised questions for the student who drew new meaning, modified perceptions, and more awareness of cultural norms and practices.

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<tr>
<th>Task/Blog Type</th>
<th>Sample Topics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student-chosen topics/personal blog</td>
<td>Schedule, meals, and nap&lt;br&gt;Streets, garbage, and recycling&lt;br&gt;Mediterranean diet, finger food, and tipping&lt;br&gt;Family life (host family) and school (classes)&lt;br&gt;Social behaviors and manners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor-selected topics/class blog</td>
<td>Animal rights (e.g., bullfighting)&lt;br&gt;Mass communication, television programs, and press&lt;br&gt;Immigration, ethnic groups, and racism&lt;br&gt;Lifestyle and expressions (e.g., no pasa nada)&lt;br&gt;Food and thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics of interest/project blog</td>
<td>University system and scholarships&lt;br&gt;Health care system and flu&lt;br&gt;Economic and political issues&lt;br&gt;Immigration in Spain and in the United States&lt;br&gt;Living environment and recycling</td>
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Through the opportunity to interact with native informants, students could also recognize their own perceptions of generalizations and stereotypes, as evident in the following excerpt (translated from Spanish):

I would not have gained a deeper understanding of certain aspects of the Spanish culture had I not had the opportunity to interview my host father. It was interesting to learn about the host culture from personal views shared by real people not from a textbook. I became more aware of how I feel about my own culture by listening to and analyzing the information that emerged from the interviews. For me, it is the best way to get to know people from other cultures.

As illustrated in the above example, the informant revealed his own beliefs and attitudes toward the traditional Spanish culture that raised questions for the student who drew new meaning, modified perceptions, and more awareness of cultural norms and practices.
Moreover, ethnographic interviews allowed SA students to understand how meaning is used according to its context. When translated literally from Spanish, some words may sound like offensive insults. Depending on the tone and how well one knows the other person, it may not necessarily be treated as an insult. Otherwise, there is a likelihood of confusion and misunderstanding. For example, one student felt offended by the native informant who constantly used the expression *Es de puta madre* (“It is incredibly cool”) during the interview. Although *puta* is a very vulgar slang word, it is commonly used in Spain, especially among young people. Obviously, the student took the direct translation and misinterpreted the praising expression meaning “excellent” in Spanish. The finding suggests that it is important to introduce students to the local language (e.g., slang, idioms) because they certainly will not always hear textbook Spanish during their overseas sojourn.

Effective cross-cultural communication translates to pragmatic skills guided by norms of the host society, such as *tutear*—addressing someone using tú (informal “you”) in social situations in Spain. The finding suggests that it is important to introduce students to the local language (e.g., slang, idioms) because they certainly will not always hear textbook Spanish during their overseas sojourn.

The above quotation demonstrates positive results of using ethnographic interviews, as reported in Bateman’s study (2002) showing “an increase in understanding of and respect for Spanish speakers” (p. 327).

One significant benefit arising from students’ blog reflections is how FTF interviews created optimal conditions for them to interact socially with NSs during which they practiced using a variety of speech acts including greetings (e.g., “Hi, how are you?”), showing appreciation (e.g., “Thank you for your time and help!”), making requests (e.g., “Could you tell me more about this?”), and apologizing (e.g., “Sorry for being late!”). In many instances, the students demonstrated their pragmatic competence during their exchanges with NSs.

Today I interviewed my political science professor. I was surprised that he asked me to address him using tú. I really did not feel comfortable doing that. In my Spanish classes, I learned that the informal tú is used when speaking to family members or close acquaintances. I got confused. He jokingly said to me that it would make him feel younger … and of course we laughed. I guess it all depends on the person not the rule.

It is possible that the informant viewed the professor-student relationship as a casual one, and the use of tú was a way to shorten the social distance and diminish the perception of the professor as an authority figure.
Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

The current study explored the effectiveness of using blogs in conjunction with FTF ethnographic interviews on the development of SA students’ ICC. The findings of this study are noteworthy and point to pedagogical implications. First, the application of blog technology itself does not guarantee the success of learning outcomes. Task-based learning is meaningful for students to actively engage in the learning process through the use of both free and instructor-assigned topics (Lee, 2010). Second, the combined method of using blogs and ethnographic interviews prove to be effective in empowering SA students’ intercultural awareness and communication. Third, FTF interaction with NSs exposes SA students to first-hand cultural observations and pragmatic behaviors within social contexts. Thus, researchers should incorporate native informants into intercultural learning projects to increase meaningful and authentic communication. Fourth, in addition to blogs, scholars should explore freely available social mediums such as Facebook or Twitter, as they have the potential to create social networking for intercultural exchanges. Finally, Internet access from the host family and school is an essential attribute of successful intercultural learning. Program directors and instructors should make an effort to ensure that students have access to the Internet on a regular basis.

To conclude, the development of learners’ ICC should be the core of L2 instruction in the age of globalization (Thorne, 2003). While immersion experience through direct contact with the host culture is indispensable to gaining high levels of language and cultural proficiency (Davidson, 2007), the use of combined CMC and FTF exchange and well-designed tasks afford SA students increased opportunities to interact with the host people and culture. The results of this study showed that the majority of the students had a positive and rewarding experience with blogging. Most of the students acknowledged that they would not have...
gained in-depth cultural understanding through blog assignments outside of class had they had only in-class meetings.

According to Byram (2000), a competent intercultural speaker can consciously and critically understand the relationships between his or her own culture and the culture of others. The study showed that ethnographic interviews provided SA students with a superb venue for ICC with native informants. Through real-time interaction, SA students not only gained cultural knowledge but also became more aware of their own beliefs and attitudes toward their own culture. Most important, the project helped students to become autonomous learners who described, understood, analyzed, appreciated, and enjoyed intercultural experiences and differences. With the ever-increasing population of students studying abroad, L2 educators should continuously make efforts to assist students in adapting to the new culture so that they feel comfortable interacting with others in social settings and gain further ICC. The use of Web 2.0 social networking and FTF interaction proves to be effective for the development of SA students’ intercultural knowledge and skills.

Notes
1. The project was worth 60% of the course work.
2. Students were required to take a proficiency-based test designed by CML faculty, and the majority attained an intermediate level of Spanish proficiency to enroll in Hispanic Studies.
3. While the majority of the students interviewed the same native informants throughout the course of the project, a few students changed their partners due to scheduling difficulties.
4. As the majority of the students owned a laptop with video capability, they used iMovie (Mac users) or Movie Maker (PC users) to record interviews.
5. The majority of video files were uploaded to YouTube before they were embedded in the class blog.
6. Note that the researcher selected only personal and group blogs from the third, fifth, and seventh sessions to reduce the sizable corpus of data in order to maintain consistent and systematic analysis.
7. Intercultural sensitivity refers to learners’ reactions to cultural differences that help their ICC with native speakers.
8. ICC involves knowledge (products and practices of the target culture), skills (ability to acquire new knowledge and interact with native encounters), attitude (curiosity, openness, and readiness to disbelief) and critical cultural awareness (ability to evaluate information critically).
9. All examples presented in this article were taken from the current study and without any corrections. While accents, tildes, and umlauts are supported in Blogger, students often do not use them.
10. According to Bennett (1993), developing intercultural competence requires different cultural experiences through which learners go through ethnocentric stages of denial, defense, and minimization to ethnorelative stages of acceptance, adaptation, and integration.

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