



# Students' intercultural sensitivity development through telecollaborative Chinese language learning on Zoom: a case study of Irish students at the beginning-level of Chinese language

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**Abstract.** This descriptive study presents the first research cycle with four synchronous telecollaborative language learning sessions on Zoom between Irish and Chinese teenagers. Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) post-questionnaire results show that the mean of interaction enjoyment scale is the highest compared to the other four categories, which implies that telecollaboration provides an enjoyable and authentic environment for Irish adolescent learners to experience communication with native speakers. However, low averages of ISS categories indicate some factors are at play such as short telecollaboration duration and potential technological issues. The gap between the previous needs analysis and current findings demonstrates that participants probably underestimated the challenge of engaging with Chinese native speakers, which would suggest that more scaffoldings and preparations are required for beginning-level learners before and during telecollaborations.

**Keywords:** telecollaboration, intercultural sensitivity, Chinese as a foreign language learning.

## 1. Introduction

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is a sub-field of computer assisted language learning. Telecollaboration projects are recognized as one of CMC types

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by some researchers (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018) concerning distance collaborative learning and exchange through technology with a group of people speaking the target language. In recent years, many researchers have raised interest in exploring learners' intercultural communication competence development (Chun, 2011; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020). Intercultural communication competence as an 'umbrella' concept (Chen & Starosta, 1996) includes three dimensions – intercultural awareness (cognitive), intercultural adroitness (behavioral), and intercultural sensitivity (affective). With regards to the last aspect, ISS was created by Chen and Starosta (2000) to measure partners' "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, and accept differences" (p. 3) during intercultural communications.

This study aims to present preliminary findings about young Irish learners' intercultural sensitivity in a telecollaborative learning environment with Chinese native speakers by addressing the following research question: What kind of role does telecollaborative learning play in developing intercultural sensitivity among young Irish learners?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

The whole project applies a design-based research approach which includes two cycles of problem identifications, telecollaborative intervention designs, implementations, reflections, and revisions (supplementary materials, Appendix 1). This study followed by a needs analysis with the same group of Irish participants in 2019 goes forward to Cycle 1 implementation phase, which contains four synchronous telecollaborative sessions within four weeks in spring 2021. Twenty-four students (12 Irish at beginning-level of Chinese language, 12 Chinese) with ages ranging from 13 to 15 years old and three teachers (one from Ireland, two from China) participated in this study.

### **2.2. ISS survey**

The ISS uses a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). It consists of 24 items categorized into five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness (supplementary materials, Appendix 2). The scales are calculated as set out in Chen and Starosta

(2000). This paper reports a detailed analysis of ISS survey results received from seven Irish respondents after four telecollaborative sessions.

### 3. Results and discussion

In the previous needs analysis, Irish participants reported a keen interest in “engaging with China through native speaker contact” (Wang, Bauer, & Devitt, 2019, p. 394). However, they were more negative about the actual interaction engagement with native speakers along with low averages of interaction confidence and attentiveness (Table 1). This result can be explained by the fact that one participant had very negative responses to this survey. Besides, there may have been other factors at play including short telecollaboration duration, technological issues, and participants' limited Chinese proficiency. The highest average score in interaction enjoyment (3.76) implies that Irish learners enjoy communicating with native speakers through telecollaborations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of ISS items

		Interaction Engagement	Interaction Enjoyment	Respect for Cultural Differences	Interaction Confidence	Interaction Attentiveness
N	Valid	7	7	7	7	7
Mean		2.24	3.76	3.19	2.43	2.24
Std. Deviation		.65	1.37	.80	.62	.69
Minimum		1.00	1.00	1.50	1.40	1.00
Maximum		3.00	5.00	3.83	3.00	3.00

Appendix 3 (supplementary materials) summarizes responses to all ISS items. A detailed analysis of each category is provided below.

#### 3.1. Interaction engagement

This factor refers to participants' feelings in intercultural communications. Figures of Item 1 show that most of the respondents enjoy interacting with people from different cultures. Responses to Items 13 and 24 indicate that more than half of participants step into different cultures with an open mind. In terms of open-mindedness, Chen and Starosta (2000) precisely explained it as a willingness “to explain themselves and accept their counterparts' explanation in intercultural interaction” (p. 5), which would suggest that Irish participants hold positive attitudes toward different cultures (Item 21).

### **3.2. Respect for cultural differences**

This factor deals with participants' reactions to their counterparts' culture and opinions, either respective or tolerant. The majority of responses to Items 2, 18, and 20 suggests that participants are more culturally relativized than ethnocentric. Five of seven participants show their disagreement with Item 7 and hence that they like to be with people from different cultures. In addition, this item along with Items 2, 8, 18, and 20 are connected with the concept of non-judgment discussed by [Chen and Starosta \(2000\)](#), which "reflects the quality of a sensitive person by allowing oneself to sincerely listen to one's culturally different counterparts" (p. 5). This is a significant step for young generations to be more objective and neutral toward cultural differences and enjoy themselves in intercultural communications with others ([Okumura, 2020](#)). The uncertain responses in Item 16 can be explained by the fact that sometimes people cannot provide a specific response regarding unforeseen circumstances.

### **3.3. Interaction confidence**

Interaction confidence presents the extent of participants' confidence in intercultural communications. Figures of Items 4 and 10 show that respondents feel confident during telecollaborations. However, five uncertain responses (Item 5) may be caused by the paucity of specific communicative situations given to participants. Their individual differences regarding personalities and language proficiency levels might have also been the reason. The influence of these affective factors on young generations cannot be neglected.

### **3.4. Interaction enjoyment and attentiveness**

While interaction enjoyment is self-explanatory, interaction attentiveness reflects the endeavors and attempts that participants make in intercultural interactions. Overall, the majority of responses to Items 9, 12, and 15 indicate that participants enjoy collaborations with Chinese peers through Zoom. Figures of Items 14 and 17 reflect the degree of participants' adroitness to intercultural differences, which assist them to better understand and capture different information during intercultural interactions.

### **3.5. Limitations**

Findings have to be seen in light of two major limitations. The primary limitation is related to the issue of a small sample size. It may affect the reliability of ISS

results due to responses bias, e.g. one participant had very negative responses to the ISS survey. The second limitation is concerned with time constraints (four weeks) in the process of this study. We would consider recruiting more participants in Cycle 2 with a more extended project duration (if possible) and optimizing the telecollaborative task design to fill in these gaps.

## 4. Conclusions

Despite the limited number of participants, our telecollaboration experiment seems to have provided an enjoyable and authentic environment for Irish adolescent learners. The issue of low averages for ISS categories implies that other factors such as a short telecollaboration period and potential technological problems cannot be neglected. The disconnection between the needs analysis (Wang et al., 2019) and findings in this study demonstrates that learners probably underestimated the challenge of engaging with native speakers, which would suggest that more scaffoldings and preparations are required for beginning-level learners before and during telecollaborations. More in-depth analysis to compare the pre and post changes of intercultural sensitivity among this group and the differences between Irish and Chinese participants will be discussed in an upcoming study.

## 5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/pt4m9jisjqgc8tqntyb3oboxr90m1ku>

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