

## A QUALITATIVE META-ANALYSIS OF INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH INTO AUDIO-VISUAL SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** *In this article we conduct a meta-analysis (Timulak, 2009) of qualitative studies into computer-mediated, synchronic, oral interactions between language learners from different countries focusing primarily on Intercultural Communicative Competences (ICCs) (Byram, 1997). To find studies that met our criteria, keyword searches were conducted in Google Scholar and in the main CMC journals. To filter the search results, we used AntConc 4.4 and close readings of the studies found. We ascertained that only three met our criteria (O'Dowd, 2006; Akiyama, 2017; Liaw, 2019). Our analysis shows that the ICCs identified in these articles are also found intraculturally. Moreover, when the language competence of the participants is similar, we argue that the communication between NS and NNS is practically indistinguishable from NS-to-NS communication. These results seem to call into question the validity of ICCs. We conclude therefore that language teaching should focus on improving communicative and pragmatic competence in the target language.*

**Key words:** *Intercultural Communicative Competences, Computer-mediated Communication, Synchronous, Spoken, Qualitative meta-analysis.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Our objective in this article is to carry out a meta-analysis (Timulak, 2009) of empirically-based qualitative studies into computer-mediated (CMC), synchronous, oral interaction between language learners from different countries that focus primarily on the intercultural dimension. To the best of our knowledge, although over a dozen meta-analyses of other aspects of computer-mediated communication do exist, this type of meta-analysis has never been carried out. The decision to concentrate on synchronous oral interaction rather than the written mode is that it offers, as O'Dowd (200:92) points out, "a much more authentic and personal side" to CMC, one in which learners communicate in real time. After an exhaustive search, we found only three articles that met the criteria set out above. Interestingly all three publications used Byram's 1977 publication as their theoretical background.

Therefore, in the following sections, we will start by providing a synopsis of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as laid out by Byram (1997). This will be followed by a methodology section detailing how our corpus was chosen, a section involving the meta-analysis of the three studies, a discussion section, and conclusions.

### 2. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

In the field of language learning, by far the most frequently cited author regarding ICCs is Michael Byram (1997). His name appears in 148 studies in our corpus of 358 publications (see methodology section). This compares to 48 studies that mention Deardorff (2006, 2015), another well-known expert on ICCs. Therefore, in this section we will provide an overview of ICCs from Byram's most frequently alluded to publication in our corpus (Byram, 1977), which is also used as the theoretical background in the studies that meet our research criteria. Byram (1997:34) states that there are three main factors in intercultural communication: attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Byram (1997:34) states that he is only interested in attitudes "towards people who are perceived as different in respect of the cultural meanings, beliefs and behaviours they exhibit". He goes on to say that having a positive attitude towards others in intercultural communication is not enough and may get in the way of mutual understanding.

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He adds that it is more important to be curious, open, and “suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others’ meanings, beliefs and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging” (Byram, 1997:34). The second factor, knowledge, can be divided into two main categories, namely:

knowledge about social groups and their cultures in one’s own country, and similar knowledge of the interlocutor’s country on the one hand; knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels, on the other hand (Byram, 1997:35).

In other words, knowledge must be declarative but also procedural, that is, the knowledge of how to act in specific circumstances.

The third factor, which Byram (1997:37) calls skills, refers, in the first place, to the ability to interpret documents, in a broad sense, from another country and relate them to others in one’s own or another culture. Interpretation of a document depends on an individual’s knowledge of a culture, whether it is knowledge acquired in formal or informal settings. Byram remarks that individuals may not be aware of how taken-for-granted knowledge acquired in their own culture may help in the interpretation of documents from another culture. The interpreting-and-relating skill, he adds, does not necessarily involve interaction at all and may be limited to documents. This skill also includes discovery and interaction. Discovery implies that although the individual may have limited knowledge of the other culture, he/she has “the ability to recognise significant phenomena in a foreign environment and to elicit their meanings and connotations, and their relationship to other phenomena” (Byram, 1997:37). The skill of interaction is a mode of discovery which relies on the interlocutor’s ability to manage the constraints inherent to a particular context, including the participants, in which the interaction is taking place.

Rather than attempt to “produce a definitive and all-purpose definition” of culture, Byram prefers a definition that suits the purposes of foreign language teachers, that is, “the beliefs and knowledge which members of a social group share by virtue of their membership” (1997:39). Shared meanings, according to Byram, link this definition to the concept of language. However, shared meanings, he adds (1997:40), also occur between “geographically distanced groups”. Like any definition of culture, Byram’s is not airtight as it does not define what is meant by social group, which could refer to groups within national boundaries who share the same language or indeed any type of social group.

In intercultural encounters, Byram (1997:40) claims that national identity is usually one of the first attributions made but not the only one; it can also include others such as gender, ethnicity, age, and social class. He goes so far as to say that the national identity of the interlocutor may be forgotten if one or more of the other factors is more salient. He does not mention, nevertheless, that in intracultural encounters two or more interlocutors may be from different regions and that their accents may also be the first variable that is noticed (Stewart et al., 1995; Jiang et al., 2020). Moreover, based on Christensen (1994), Byram (1997:41) agrees that from a purely sociological perspective, “there is no difference in principle between inter- and intracultural communication” but psychologically there is a significant difference between the intra- and inter-cultural contexts. The difference is language proficiency, which Christensen (1994) ignores or plays down. Byram (1997:41) claims that from a psychological viewpoint, non-native speakers can “experience a degree of powerlessness” during interactions with native speakers due to a lack of linguistic skills. Byram, however, does not consider the power imbalance caused by differences in language proficiency that exists between social groups within the same nation (see Attig and Weinert, 2020 for an overview of the effects of socioeconomic status on language skills). Byram (1997:41) claims that “psychological analysis” suggests that the difference between intra- and inter-cultural interaction is “significant” but does not provide further details.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Meta-analysis (Timulak, 2009) is a research methodology that has been employed frequently to study quantitative data in several fields. Qualitative meta-analysis has been implemented less frequently but the goal of both is “to assess a field of study beyond one particular study” by analysing the findings of primary studies (Timulak, 2009:591). The first step in our meta-analysis was to locate the empirical studies that meet the criteria set out in the introduction, that is, studies that centre on intercultural analysis in synchronous, audio-visual communication between learners from different countries. Timulak (2009:593) refers to this process as “selecting primary studies”. In the first phase, we conducted online searches in Google Scholar and the main CMC journals for publications that met these criteria. Our first search included the words “intercultural” and the older quasi-synonymous term, “cross-cultural”. As a result, we found 410 articles, chapters, and monographs. Using the AntConc 4.4 concordance tool, we used these articles as our corpus and carried out a search using the terms, “video” and “synchronous” as these were considered the best options to find publications on synchronous, spoken, face-to-face CMC and, simultaneously, to filter out the publications that focus on asynchronous and written interactions. This produced a list of 358 articles in which the word “intercultural” appeared in the same article as “video”, “synchronous”, or

both. In our quest to filter out articles that did not meet our criteria, the second phase of our search consisted in looking for the terms “intercultural” and “cross-cultural” in each individual article, chapter, or monograph. Many publications were eliminated because these terms were only found in the bibliography. Others were eliminated as “intercultural” or “cross-cultural” were employed in a very broad sense to merely describe interactions between speakers of different languages, that is, their focus was not on intercultural issues of any kind in the sense meant by Byram (1977). The same procedure was carried out with “video” and “synchronous”. After the objective search and concordance filter processes were completed, nineteen publications were identified, which, *prima facie*, contained an analysis of spoken face-to-face synchronous intercultural interaction focusing on the intercultural dimension. The next stage in the process required close reading of these studies by both authors. The publications that simply included tables or charts with no analysis of interactions were discarded. Here, inter-rater reliability, referred to as “credibility checks” by Timulak (2009:595), was 100%. As a result, nine articles, which appeared to meet the original criteria, were identified. At this stage, both authors worked together to make sure these publications met the criteria set out in our objectives. During this process, the following five articles were discarded because although they contained frequent references to the term “intercultural”, the analyses they presented did not include qualitative intercultural analysis of any real interactions (del Rosal, Conry & Wu, 2017; Jung, et al., 2019; Morollón-Martí, & Fernández, 2016). Carbaugh (2005) was also discarded because, although it met all our criteria, none of the author’s examples consisted of recorded conversations but were committed, it seems, to memory. The last two articles, Canto & Jauregi Ondarra (2017) and van der Zwaard & Bannink (2018) required even closer reading before finally being discarded. They both include references to the term “intercultural” but intercultural analysis was not the goal of either publication. The first involved Dutch and Spanish students who were given overtly cultural topics, such as examinations to become civil servants in Spain and the Dutch tradition of hanging up rucksacks outside a house to mark the end of their school days. However, the aim of this article was to showcase the pedagogical benefits of TC, one of which is intercultural communication. In the second, Australian and Dutch culture-centred jokes, respectively, serve to ensure that students had to engage in negotiation of meaning, which was the focus of the study, to explain the jokes to their interlocutors. At the end of the three phases, it was found that only three studies (Akiyama, 2017; Liaw, 2019; O’Dowd, 2006) featured intercultural analysis of computer-mediated synchronous face-to-face spoken interaction.

#### 4. RESULTS OF THE META-ANALYSIS

This section, which Timulak refers to as “data analysis” (2009:594), is made up of a thorough critical analysis of the intercultural interaction in each of the three studies (Akiyama, 2017, Liaw, 2019, O’Dowd, 2006). Following Timulak (2009:595) we have endeavoured to retain information regarding objectives and participants in each study.

In the first study, Akiyama (2017:194) focuses on “technology-mediated intercultural miscommunication”, specifically differences in turn negotiation in synchronous oral videoconferences during English/Japanese tandems. The examples of interaction consist of three excerpts in English (969 words in all, including annotations) featuring two dyads: Hiroyuki and Edwin (one extract), and Tomoya and Benjamin (two extracts). From an intercultural point of view, Akiyama focuses on the silence of the Japanese speaker in the first dyad and hyperexplanation on the part of her partner, Edwin. Edwin (2017:208) complains that Hiroyuki did not use *aizuchi*, a type of Japanese back-channelling that typically shows the listener’s support of the speaker. Because of this, he asked to have another partner. Akiyama (2017:199) states that Edwin had expected his partner to use *aizuchi* more extensively and was obliged to employ hyperexplanation to “avoid any potentially face-threatening repair work”. The author (2017:196) describes the interaction between the first pair as “unsuccessful” due to Edwin’s misinterpretation of Hiroyuki’s silences. According to Akiyama (2017:196), Hiroyuki’s silence aims to prompt linguistic help from Edwin. The first case of prolonged silence (example 1), nearly three seconds, prompts Edwin to embark on the first case of the “high involvement strategy of hyperexplanation” (Akiyama, 2017:196). Hiroyuki uses 100 words while Edwin uses 314 in the extract we are shown. The conversation is about partying, which, according to Hiroyuki, does not happen at all in Japan. The fact that Edwin brings up the topic of illegal drinking and flirtation in what is only the second time the two have met is described as “somewhat awkward” (2017:196).

##### Example 1

Edwin<sup>1</sup>: Like um (1.49) the thing about the partying that I don’t like as much is that (1.12) it’s not very personal.

Hiroyuki: (2.83)

Edwin: You just you-you go inside the the house (1.16)? You (1.35) you um (2.28) like you you-you drink a little bit. ((drinking gesture with a 1.25 second pause)) [um] and for us it’s it’s not yet legal? so I think it’s more exciting because of that?

<sup>1</sup> In the transcription, the square brackets denote talk that overlaps with that of the other participant and the equal sign signals a latched turn

Hiroyuki [Ah huh]. (3.76)

Edwin: Um and then I mean (1.22) I guess you just hit on people.

Hiroyuki: (1.72)

Edwin: Do you do you do you know what 'hit on' means?

Hiroyuki: (2.60) hidon? ((tilting his head to the side))

Edwin: HIT ON?

Hiroyuki: (1.81) No no.

Edwin: Ok ok cuz it it doesn't mean like it's not like like that ((punching gesture)) It's like.

Hiroyuki: Un=

Edwin: =Do you know the word 'flirt'?

Hiroyuki: (6.78)

Edwin: Do you do you know the word 'flirt'?

Hiroyuki: (1.81) No(h). ((embarrassed laughing))

Edwin: Ok. Um. Let me let me try to find the Jp. word for it then quickly ((checking online dictionary)) Um  
(2.23) 彼女にになりたいことだ。

Hiroyuki: (1.72) Mmm huh. ((nodding deeply))

Edwin: Yeah like words you say when you want someone to be your girlfriend. (2017:197)

The failure of the dyad to communicate is blamed partly on intercultural factors such as the fact that the participants "could not deal with the complex interplay of culture, face, and the power differential that comes along (sic) native vs. non-native status" (2017:199). We would argue that the language proficiency divide is what prompts the need for Hiroyuki's prolonged silences in the first place. Our interpretation of Hiroyuki's silences is that he has difficulties understanding Edwin in general and specifically the highly specialised vocabulary he uses such as "hit on" (silence lasting 2.60 seconds) and "flirting" (silence lasting 6.78 seconds).

In the second dyad, the American student, Benjamin, has a Japanese mother but had not been exposed to the Japanese language within his family. Tomoya, Benjamin's partner, is only slightly more proficient and motivated than Hiroyuki, according to the test results, but is reported to have far more intercultural experience than the latter, having travelled abroad and having had international friends. Benjamin and Tomoya (see example 2 below) employ "high involvement strategies such as expressive responses and cooperative overlaps to show conversational rapport" (2017:199) and "interturn listener responses" (2017:200). Benjamin's output, in the two extracts we are shown, amounts to 244 words whereas Tomoya's comes to 223 –a very small difference compared to that found between Hiroyuki and Edwin:

#### Example 2

Benjamin: Barefoot is what we call it. I don't know. Do you know? that word? barefoot?

Tomoya: Barefoot? Un=

Benjamin: #Ye(h)[ah].

Tomoya: [I don't know] barefoot.

Benjamin: It means no s- no s- shoes or socks. [So] just just your foot. ((laughing))

Tomoya: Ah huh huh huh [huh huh]. (2017:200)

Regarding the differences between the two pairs, there are two variables that might have had some influence on the interaction that the author does not seem to consider. The first, interpersonal compatibility, is not contemplated although Benjamin and Tomoya do seem to get on very well together, as seen in the laughter they share in both excerpts whereas no such signs are observed in the Edward and Hiroyuki conversation. Perhaps knowledge of

each other's culture could be one of the reasons Benjamin and Tomoya seem to get on and why the interaction between this dyad is more successful.

#### Example 3

Benjamin: =And it's I don't know. To me it seems a little dirty but [(laughing)]

Tomoya: [Oh] ((laughing))=

Benjamin: =I don't know [I don't know]

Tomoya [xxx]

Benjamin: What do YOU think?

Tomoya: So you mean that in your in your room in your California room you always, eh with um walk around without shoes.

Benjamin: Yeah. ((uttered while chuckling))

Tomoya: Ah, really.

Benjamin: (Because) my mom doesn't like us wearing shoes around the house.

Benjamin: [I guess]

Tomoya: So [how about] how about if you invite your some friends in [your] in your [room]. What's the reaction [of] your friends. (2017:199)

Nevertheless, the second and, by far the most critical aspect of the interaction, which is somewhat downplayed, is language proficiency. Although Tomoya is supposed to be only marginally more proficient than Hiroyuki, according to his test scores, his discourse is much richer and sophisticated than the latter's (see example 3 above). Tomoya hesitates much less, which can be seen in the overlapping, denoted by the square brackets and seems to achieve uptake much more quickly. The use of the equal sign to denote latching, that is, the lack of pauses between the interactions evidences the fluid nature of the discourse. Tomoya uses backchanneling such as "Oh" and "Ah, really" to acknowledge that he has understood Benjamin's interventions. Compared to the Edwin and Hiroyuki exchange, in which nearly every intervention by Edwin is followed by a pause, there are no pauses at all in the Benjamin and Tomoya exchange.

In encounters, such as the two dyads of native- and non-native speakers above, we would argue, like Byram himself (1997:41), that the influence of language proficiency can outweigh that of intercultural competence in facilitating successful interactions.

In the second study, Liaw (2019) focuses on the intercultural dimension in oral, synchronous communication in videoconferences and virtual worlds. Liaw (2019:47) claims to have found eleven instances of different types of intercultural competence in seventeen recordings. The article features seven extracts amounting to 1,004 words. During the study, Taiwanese students meet anonymous interlocutors using the VR software *vTime*, so it is impossible to say whether these are native- or non-native speakers but the language used is English. In the first three extracts, the participants simply familiarize themselves with the VR software, and there is nothing of note from an intercultural perspective. We are shown four interactions of the eleven that are identified as containing examples of intercultural competences. They contain, according to the author, occurrences of four aspects of Byram's (1997) cultural competences.

The first intercultural interaction (Liaw, 2019:47) is purported to exemplify "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram, 1997:50).

#### Example 4

Interlocutor A: You like living in Taiwan?

Ruby: Yes, I enjoy my life in Taiwan because this is my hometown. I would love to come to America to travel because every year in my school we will met some people from America, maybe from different states. I will add friends on the Internet and we can know their lives in America. I think this very good. It's very different from my school. So, I'm very curious about the life in America.



Interlocutor A: That sounds like a great idea. Didn't you have chance to meet someone from the U.S. before?

Ruby: When I was a senior high school student, we just kept having tests. However, I think the students in America don't have so many tests, right?

Interlocutor A: Oh, we have tests too but you seem to have many.

Ruby: Yes. Are you college students or senior high school students?

Interlocutor B: I graduated from college many years ago.

Interlocutor A: Me too.

Ruby: And what are you? Can I ask you? Are you working now?

Although there is some curiosity about the other participants' cultures, there is no evidence of suspension of belief in their own. The author describes the participants as being aware of the "otherness" of their interlocutors and willing to connect their own experiences to those of their partners (2019:47). This seems to be an accurate portrayal of what happens, but awareness of otherness is not limited to encounters between people of different cultures (see Silvia & Christensen 2020 for intracultural examples). Moreover, Ruby seems to be equally interested in her interlocutors on a personal level as she is in their culture, as she asks if interlocutors A and B are students or what the former does for a living.

The second intercultural interaction (Liaw, 2019:47-48) instantiates, according to the author, what Byram (1997:36) describes as the importance of being aware of how one's social identities are acquired and how this skill helps to achieve successful social interactions with others. Christine and Carol certainly give their interlocutor information on the cultural importance of food in Taiwan, that is, the relationship between eating well and stability in life. However, it is not clear if the participants become aware of how social identities are acquired:

#### Example 5

Interlocutor: So tell me something about Taiwan.

Christine: I think the most interesting one is that if you go on a street and meet people, they won't ask you how you are. They will ask you, have you eaten yet? Because in Taiwan culture if you eat well means that you have a stable life and you have a nice day. So they will ask you have you had the meal or not.

Interlocutor: I love that.

Carol: Eating is very important in our culture. So there are very famous local food in Taiwan. Do you like Chinese dishes?

Interlocutor: Yes! There's a Chinese restaurant which I've been to several times.

Carol: I think that will be similar. So you understand how much we love food.

The third interaction (2019:48) professes to illustrate the use of "intercultural communication skills of discovery and interaction" in a conversation between Taiwanese nationals, Leslie and Claire, and their interlocutors. Leslie first tells Interlocutor B that mistaking Taiwan for China is a sensitive topic, and then Claire "teaches" him or her "some geography". However, the author overlooks a very insightful comment from Interlocutor A "Why do you have this map so handy?", which is not addressed by Leslie and Claire. Subsequently, the conversation switches to food. The exchange involves discovery and interaction, but it is no different from an English person explaining the north-south divide in England to an American (Jewell, 2013), for instance.

#### Example 6

Interlocutor A: ...(inaudible) China.

Interlocutor B: He wants to see a picture of China. Are you guys in China?

Leslie: No, that would be a sensitive topic if you are talking to a Taiwanese.

Interlocutor B: I'm glad I didn't say it! Alright? In the background, I hear different language somewhere.

Leslie: That's Claire.

Claire: Okay, I'm going to teach you some geography. This is Taiwan and next to Taiwan is China. We're not the same.

Interlocutor A: Why do you have this map so handy?

Leslie: Both of you have tasted or eaten some kind of Chinese food before. Right?

Interlocutor B: I have had Chinese food before. Soup sour chicken. I don't think I have tasted any Taiwanese food.

Leslie: If you have time you can visit all countries and taste the local one that is more delicious. The friends we met last week here said the dumplings they ate in Taiwan is the most delicious

Interlocutor A: Will you show me around?

Leslie: If you come to visit our country. If I have time, I will try to be a good host to introduce our country to you.

Interlocutor A: OK. Alright. That's cool.

Interlocutor C: What country did she come from?

Interlocutor A: Taiwan! Taiwanese! Right?

Leslie: You know Taiwan! Claire, show him the map.

Interlocutor B: Let's refer to the map in case you don't know where Taiwan is. (laugh)

Interlocutor C: Right! (laugh)

Interlocutor A: Taiwan is the one with the red rectangle around it. (laugh)

Interlocutor C: It's the size of a bullet! (laugh)

The fourth interaction of 182 words, about trains in the UK and Taiwan, according to Liaw (2019:48-49), is an example of what Byram (1997:52) calls the skill of acquiring "new knowledge of culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction". However, calling the exchange of information about trains the acquisition of "new knowledge of culture and cultural practices" stretches the meaning of culture somewhat as the exchange seems to be limited to conveying encyclopaedic knowledge regarding trains in two countries and has nothing to do with cultural practices. Moreover, this type of interaction happens intraculturally as can be seen in the FUG file in the British National Corpus (BNC) (2001).

#### Example 7

Interlocutor: Train is probably the way I get around first by. Well, have you ever heard of Eurostar?

Karen: No.

Interlocutor: It's a train coming from France and going back again everyday. I started to collect my trains in 1994. I got 20 early models. Let's have a look.

Kiera: Oh! It is like we are just inside the train. Hear the music? Wow! Beautiful! It's just like a reality! Wow! Beautiful! Do England trains really look like this?

Interlocutor: Yes, madam.

Karen: Wow! This must cost a lot!

Interlocutor: There are four trains with different styles.

Karen: I hope one day I can really take it. It's so beautiful!

Interlocutor: Tell me about the trains in Taiwan.

Kiera: There are different kinds of trains. One is local. It stops at every stop. The other one is Tzichiang Train. In Chinese, it means the best. It's the fastest one and it looks like a bullet.

Interlocutor: There's a bullet train. Yes, I once was sitting in one and I was studying.... I was writing about bullet trains.

Karen: A special thing about Taiwanese trains is that are meal boxes for sale.

Interlocutor: Wonderful!

Liaw (2019:52) concludes that video recordings of the VR encounters reveal occurrences of what Byram (1997) calls ICC. These findings, according to the author, are supported by the results of a questionnaire.

In the third publication, O'Dowd (2006) carries out an ethnographic study of oral/synchronous and written/asynchronous communication in a tandem constellation through videoconferencing and emails. The exchange involves twenty-five German and twenty-one American students. The five extracts taken from interactions between the national cohorts are all in English and add up to 1821 words. The first extract (2006:98-99) is not analysed from an intercultural perspective although it contains cultural issues such as women in the armed forces.

The second interaction (2006:102-103) revolves around September the eleventh and the Iraq war and reveals differences of opinion among the American and German students. One of the German students, Sylvia, calls the war in Iraq a war of revenge, but Teresa, an American student, intervenes to voice her disagreement. A Polish girl living in Germany, Ana, states that nothing justifies a war. Mary (USA) replies that sometimes war is necessary, such as a war to abolish slavery or to combat Hitler. The exchange becomes very emotional when one of the American participants starts to cry. An essay from one of the German students on this interaction shows, according to the author, that she has become aware of how "social, historical, and personal issues can influence cultural perspectives during the videoconferences" (2006: 103). O'Dowd (2006:104) claims that the students identify the values which underlie the behaviour of their American counterparts, that is, what Byram (1977:53 cited in O'Dowd, 2006:104) defines as the ability to "identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one's own and other cultures".

#### Example 8

Mary (USA): This is Mary. I know where I'm from everyone was in support of the war because we all have a military unit in our home town. We are just very supportive of the soldiers. The whole country in general, we don't, this is a real emotional topic for me.

Robert (teacher in Germany): Ok, thank you Mary.

Sylvia (Germany): This is Sylvia again. Would you relate this decision pro-war to what happened Sept 11? That is something I would understand. That happened in your country and this was a war of revenge which made you feel better. Would you agree with that?

Teresa (USA): I'll answer that. I don't think that it was so much revenge but everything changed on September 11th. This is the first time in a long time that the USA was an aggressor in a war and that's an example of how things have changed in this country since that day.

Robert: We have a Polish lady here too.

Ana (Germany): My name is Ana and maybe you know that Poland was the first country to be attacked by Germany and very many people died. For me war is the worst thing and there can be no reason to explain it.

Mary: This is Mary again. I know that this is not a popular opinion. I think the other day I said that war is necessary sometimes. I guess where I'm coming from is if we didn't step in during the civil war we would still have slavery. If we didn't step in during the Nazi time-frame, Hitler would have killed many more people. I feel like we get blamed a lot of times for stepping in, but a lot of times we are asked to step in and then we get blamed for it. That's where I'm coming from with my feelings, my emotion, my anger 'cos a lot of boys have died (Mary begins to cry) for a cause we had no business being there but we were asked to be there and we were blamed for it later (Mary continues to cry and then the session is disconnected).

Evidently, although there is identification and interpretation of explicit or implicit values in example 8, this also occurs intraculturally (Uhlmann, et al., 2011).

The third interaction (2006:104-105), of which we offer an extract, deals with multiculturalism. O'Dowd describes its cultural content as superficial (2006:105), which he suggests may have to do with the synchronous mode, which gives participants little time to think, thus generating awkward moments. The participants discuss multiculturalism in the United States, Germany, and France and the possibility of different cultures coexisting but



not mixing, which Janet (USA) calls “a salad bar arrangement”. One participant from the German cohort suggests that the Arab community in France is more integrated than the Turkish population in Germany because the former already speak French. Here we see individuals trying to make sense of different situations, but the cognitive tools they employ could be used to tackle any type of conceptual problem.

#### Example 9

Hans: You spoke about co-cultures. Are they integrated in your society or are they just this co-cultures living side by side?

Janet: We have a kind of salad bar arrangement. We have many cultures that live side by side and are mixed together in every day settings

Hans: I think that’s the same in Germany. Living side by side but I have no example for this.

Eva (Germany): As a French, I have the feeling that it is not the same as in Germany. Here there is a big Turkish community but I never saw a German student speaking to a Turkish student. It is very rare and I am just wondering why there are such differences between the two communities.

Robert (teacher in Germany): Is it different in France than in Germany?

Eva: I think we have a big Arabic community and they are much more integrated, much more adapted than the Turkish community here. I was wondering maybe it is because the African community already speaks French.

The fourth interaction (2006:109-110), of which we include a short extract, involves the topic of guns and gun control in the USA. O’Dowd (2006:108) points out that the German students seem to be unable to “maintain an ethnographic stance” and so what is meant to be an attempt to learn about the American perspective on the topic turns, almost immediately, into what O’Dowd calls a “debate” (2006:109). In the second sentence of her intervention, Monica, one of the German students, states that she couldn’t understand why American citizens were allowed to own guns (example 10 below) and thus forces the American students to either defend the possession of guns or accept that they are wrong. This triggers Alice’s (USA) reply that it is people who kill people, not guns. This adversarial attitude is diametrically opposed to Byram’s (1997) tenets. Without a doubt, ideological differences are patent in the extract but it is also true that this type of antagonistic rhetoric can also be found within the same culture.

#### Example 10

Monica (Germany): I want to ask you a question which might be a bit tough and it came up to my mind when Tony asked about the shootings. One thing I could never understand about America was the right for U.S. citizens to possess guns. I thought this would stop after all the shootings you had in schools and so many innocent children died. This never happened and I would like to know what is the attitude of the society in general? Do you consider it as one of your natural laws to possess a gun? (Silence from Americans for 30 seconds as they discuss among themselves.)

Alice (USA): In our constitution we have the right to bear arms. I personally believe this. Guns don’t kill people, people kill people. It is the responsibility of that person if they take that gun and use it for violence. A lot of people use guns for sports such as hunting, competitions for shooting. I personally believe that people should be allowed to have guns as long as they are responsible. There are laws that protect the citizens. (She looks at Tony.)

Tony (USA): This is Tony and I’m going to give two viewpoints. The first one, I do believe we should have the right to bear arms for personal safety and for sport. But I’m a police officer also. And it’s hard as a police officer, everyone you pull over you wonder if they have a gun. So I can see both viewpoints. As a police officer, I don’t think they should be allowed to carry guns. As a regular citizen, I think we should have guns for sport.

The fifth interaction, (2006:113-114), is very short and consists of a question by a German student<sup>2</sup> to an American counterpart about the events of September the eleventh. O’Dowd (2006:113) describes it as offering an interpretation of the target culture and asking their partner to agree or disagree with it. Once again, this type of gambit can be found in discussions within the same culture.

<sup>2</sup> This example is taken from the first excerpt on page 102 but the speaker’s name we are given is Sylvia not Nadie. This can be attributed to a mistake made when anonymising the participants.

## Example 11

Nadine (Germany): This is Nadine again. Would you relate this decision pro-war to what happened September 11? That is something I would understand. That happened in your country and this was a war of revenge which made you feel better. Would you agree with that?

Teresa (USA): I'll answer that. I don't think that it was so much revenge but everything changed on September 11th. This is the first time in a long time that the USA was an aggressor in a war and that's an example how things have changed in this country since that day.

O'Dowd's (2006:113) explanation for the German students' unwillingness to act as ethnographers has to do with the strategies they use in their interactions. He quotes House (2000:162) who states that German speakers tend to interact in ways that can be seen "as more direct, more explicit, more self-referenced and more content-oriented". This line of argument is also backed up by a quote from Byrnes (1986:190), who puts forward that Germans are known for their "inflexibility, at times combative directness, and domineering way of always appearing certain they are right in a discussion". These affirmations do not seem to be supported by enough real data for us to be able to classify all the citizens of a nation as combative and domineering in their interactions with others.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Our meta-analysis revealed that out of an initial corpus comprising 410 studies, only three conformed to our criteria. Specifically, these studies were qualitative in nature and explored computer-mediated synchronous, oral interaction among geographically distant language learners, with a primary emphasis on the intercultural dimension. Thus, despite the distinctiveness of each study, these shared characteristics establish a strong connection among them.

In the first study, Akiyama (2017), the communication problems are attributed to a mismatch between the American participants' and the Japanese participants' interpretation of silence. However, our analysis shows that even if this were true, it could only apply to the first dyad as silence is not an important factor in the second encounter. Moreover, we would argue that our analysis of the first interaction shows that the Japanese partner's lack of language proficiency is a more likely explanation for silences, hesitations, and lack of comprehension. The paucity of the output of the first Japanese partner, one hundred words, compared to the second, 223 words, further supports this claim. Clavel-Arroitia and Pennock-Speck (2021) found that when asynchronous written communication is compared to synchronous oral communication, differences in language proficiency between cohorts are especially noticeable in the latter. They attribute this to the immediacy of oral communication that favours more proficient speakers over less proficient ones and leads to hyperexplanations on the part of the more proficient speakers and silences on the part of the less proficient ones. If communication issues are to be attributed to the lack of intercultural experience of the first Japanese partner, more evidence would be needed to back up such a conclusion. However, the data provided is limited to two short interactions. Other authors, such as House (1999) and Mauranen (2006) play down the influence of misunderstandings based on culture. We agree with House (1999: 85) that there should be less focus on intercultural competence and more teaching of "linguistically based 'ordinary' skill-based language teaching" together with pragmatic competence.

In Liaw's study (2019), the curiosity-and-openness competence in the first interaction is depicted as intercultural in nature. However, as we have shown, curiosity and openness are not limited to intercultural encounters. In the excerpt in question, the curiosity shown also involves participants being interested in each other as individuals. Regarding the ICC competence by which one becomes aware of how one's social identities are acquired, Liaw's claims are overstated in that there is no real evidence of acquisition of identity taking place—at least in the extract of just over 163 words that we are shown. We would put forward that only a longitudinal study with greater amounts of data could back up such claims. With respect to the third encounter, the discovery and interaction competence that Liaw (2019) focuses on is also found, as we have shown, in intracultural contexts. The fourth interaction of less than 200 words purports to show acquisition of culture and cultural practices but is limited to an exchange of information on trains. Once again, exchanges of information of this kind are not limited to intercultural encounters.

Of the four interactions in O'Dowd (2006), although the differences of opinions on the topics of September 11 and the subsequent Iraq war and gun control do seem to split neatly along national lines, they are not unlike those found within the United States itself (Holsti, 2011; Benton et al., 2016; Austin et al., 2020). Regarding the exchange on multiculturalism, this kind of discussion can also be found within individual cultures or countries (Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of any meta-analysis is “to assess a field of study beyond one particular study” (Timulak, 2009:591). Our meta-analysis aimed to elucidate the current state of the art regarding studies on the intercultural dimension of synchronous audio-visual computer-mediated communication in the field of language learning. Our first conclusion is of a quantitative nature, namely that, to date, there are very few such analyses. After painstaking research, we were only able to find three studies in which systematic intercultural analysis is applied to synchronous spoken interaction between learners from different countries. Such an exiguous amount of real data is insufficient to establish the usefulness of the concept of ICC. Thus, one of the most notable findings of our study is that there exists a real need for further qualitative research into the relevance of this term using empirical data.

One of the problems when gauging the importance of the role of ICC in intercultural encounters is the language proficiency factor. That is, are misunderstandings and communication breakdowns caused by a language deficit or the interlocutors’ inability to bring into play ICCs? From the results of our meta-analysis, we saw that differences in language proficiency only played a major role in the first exchange in Akiyama’s (2017) study. We were not convinced, given the evidence provided, that silence in Japanese culture was a deciding factor in the long lulls during the turns of the first Japanese interlocutor. A more obvious explanation was that the Japanese learner in the first exchange had problems understanding his interlocutor and expressing himself. Further proof of this is that the second Japanese speaker, who was able to communicate and understand his interlocutor, did not resort to long silences. On the other hand, the articulate communication between the native and non-native speakers in the studies by Liaw (2019) and O’Dowd (2006), aided by the proficiency of the latter, seems to prove that once the language factor ceases to be crucial, intercultural communication is very similar to that found in exchanges within cultures. This is, paradoxically, predicted by Byram (1997:41) when he highlights the importance that a lack of language skills has in intercultural encounters as opposed to those of an intracultural nature. The evidence in the three studies scrutinised seems to show that for successful communication, the better the learner’s language proficiency is, the smoother the communication will be, as seen in the second exchange in study one and the interactions in studies two and three. This is true even though the participants differ in nationality and age. However, until more studies are carried out, our conclusion that language proficiency is more decisive in intercultural exchanges than ICCs will remain a tentative one.

Regarding competences, if those found in intercultural encounters also exist within cultures, they must be, in essence, interpersonal competences. If this, as we suggest, is true, the emphasis should be on interacting with others who are different from us whether this happens within our own culture or outside it. This does not mean that differences among cultures do not cause misunderstandings, but supplying learners with encyclopaedic knowledge of the cultures of their peers together with training regarding interpersonal competences might suffice for successful communication to take place between learners from different cultures.

To sum up, our meta-analysis sheds light on the current state of research on the intercultural dimension of synchronous audio-visual computer-mediated communication in language learning. The scarcity of studies applying systematic intercultural analysis in this context highlights the need for further qualitative research with empirical data to explore the relevance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Further studies are required to validate these findings, which we anticipate will serve as a starting point for future research in this area.

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