Developing Intercultural Awareness and EFL Writing Skills of College-Level Students through Email Interaction

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the efficiency of email exchange in developing intercultural awareness between the Saudi and non-Saudi EFL students and EFL native teachers of English from USA, UK and Canada. Qualitative content analysis was used to assess the participants' use of email-based writing to develop both their intercultural awareness and their linguistic competence such as word-choice, collocations, and phrases of apologies, condolences, congratulations, exclamations, clichés, discourse fillers and the like. Analyzing the participants' data obtained through their email exchange over eight weeks of the first semester in 2017 along with the EFL teacher's reflective reports and the researcher's observation notes, the study revealed that both of the study groups developed their intercultural awareness and enhanced many of the L2 sociocultural issues. The project was proved to be a positive experience which may open doors for further pedagogical considerations. The study is also a communication channel for both groups to redress any sociocultural misunderstandings, biases or misconceptions. Both groups displayed supportive and constructive communication with each other.

Intercultural awareness is a catalyst that leads teachers and learners of a second language to discover how the context of language learning is always in a state of flux. In recent years, students have not been anymore expected just to perfect their main language skills as learning modes and preferences are tailored in such a way so as to develop their intercultural competence and awareness (Zarate, 2004; Fenner, 2008; Knapp & Seidlhofer, 2009; Hammami & Esmail, 2013). With the components of intercultural awareness now embedded in language learning curricula, both teachers and learners are expected not just to be *bilingual* but also *bicultural*. In the same vein, language learning cannot be confined to a geographical area nor can it be tethered to one way. Excluding other pedagogical approaches conducive to enhancing intercultural

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awareness language is best described as a fully loaded train that many people board and alight from at different sociocultural backgrounds.

Acculturation and globalization are among the main aspects of modern age. Both have ushered in the start of a new era remarkably characterized with culture prioritized over language (Stanley, 2013; Shuai, 2014; Smith, 2015). Language learning *per se* is associated with intercultural awareness. Modern technology is an appropriate medium that highlights how intercultural awareness and language learning can be developed through email communication skills (Byram, 1997; Stockwell & Levy, 2001; Byram & Alred, 2002). Education now has opened up to online intercultural exchange and is no longer tied to books; it extends to new channels of language learning (Sellami, 2000; Andrea, 2006; Zhang, 2008; Heafner, 2014; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

The pedagogical focus which was once heavily placed on the academic or more specifically educational goals has now been expanded to include pragmatic goals. In other words, components of the target culture now make up much of the mainstay of language learning materials, resulting in intercultural awareness that is part of the curriculum design (Knapp & Seidlhofer, 2009; Jackson, 2012; Byram & Hu, 2013; Boye, 2016). First language interference can be minimized and the main skills of the target language can be further enhanced when intercultural awareness is brought to focus (Fenner, 2008). This also helps in neutralizing the cultural shock that learners often suffer when using English as a foreign language due to the unabridged gap between the source culture and language on the one hand and the target culture and language on the other hand. Therefore, language learning where intercultural exchange is prioritized is *how* and not *what* the other culture communicates (Ismail, 2004). The educational goals of language learning foster the idea of accepting others, understanding variances and extending the common areas learners could share. Learners will ultimately develop a wider sense of intercultural tolerance and awareness and reduce their communication differences as much as possible.

This research draws on a number of topics including the role of email in enhancing writing skills, and in developing intercultural awareness and competence in the EFL context. The motive behind the current research is attributed to the increasing importance of the use of email for business correspondence purposes as well as educational objectives at various levels namely; regional and international level, learner-to-learner level, teacher-to-learner level, friend-to-friend level, group-to-learner level, employee-to-employer level, employee-to-employee level, and employer-to-employer level and the like. The paper investigates *how* EFL learners' intercultural awareness can be optimally developed through writing skills and using emails. This also includes reducing their first language interference and understanding the other's culture (Sinicrope et al., 2007; Niżegorodcew et al., 2011; Zou, 2012).

Email-based writing skills and intercultural awareness are interrelated; they eliminate the first language interference. The source culture and the target culture should be brought closer to operate in tandem (Byram et al., 2001; Castro et al., 2004; Ammon, 2005; Boye, 2016). Using emails does not only enhance the language writing skills, it also provides a strong basis to develop intercultural awareness in that emails provide authentic language communicative experience (Zou, 2012).

2. Literature Review

By definition, intercultural awareness (ICA) is the conscious understanding of the culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference and the ability to put these conceptions into practice in such a flexible way (Baker, 2015). Language learning comprises four major skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, in recent years the concept of the "fifth skill" was introduced to refer to intercultural awareness as a language learning skill (Tomlinson, 2014). Intercultural awareness is achieved once the learners take an *informed* decision of accepting the other's culture and cease to hold their own culture as most superior. Intercultural awareness is not necessarily mutual process as indeed it is one-sided process that starts with

the learner of a foreign language. However, the one–sided process is bound to create eventually mutual understanding, reciprocated toleration and reduced edging out the other's cultural values. Unlike cultural awareness, intercultural awareness is an overarching theme that aims to minimize the gaps left between the cultures of other countries, ethnicities and nationalities (Risager, 2007).

With computer-aided language learning (CALL) leading pedagogical approaches in the EFL context, there have been an increasing number of studies focusing on email-based communication (phrases, wording, word-choice, clichés, expressions, style and register) as a catalyst enhancing not only competence but also intercultural awareness. Carney (2006) describes how their email communication can enhance the ways in which learners develop their competence of the target language and their intercultural awareness of the target culture, as well. The study shows how email users interact with others via emails. The increased popularity of the computer-mediated communication (CMC) in improving both language learning and intercultural awareness in the EFL, and has also proved that email discussion has the potential to boost the learner's intercultural awareness as an important requirement for improving their competence (Gray & Stockwell, 1998; Stockwell & Harrington, 2003). In the same vein, Gorjian (2008) conducted a research study in Iran to investigate how emails can improve the learner's competence and intercultural awareness. The results manifested a variation in terms of the written output and level of intercultural awareness between those who used emails or email discussions and those who did not: the experimental group who used email discussion did much better than the control group who did not use email discussion and the output of their intercultural awareness was noticeably better.

There is a growing body of literature on the integration of CALL and CMC in language learning but it is still scant on how email-based writing skills can be seminal to developing the learner's intercultural awareness hand in hand with linguistic competence (Belz and Thorne, 2006; Carney, 2006). Despite the shortage of literature on this topic yet the existing literature unanimously indicated its effectiveness in enhancing intercultural awareness mainly because email technique secured a virtual healthy cross-cultural platform for people from different backgrounds to interact. The fact is that language learning and intercultural awareness advance in parallel; i.e. a learner's improvement in the second language necessarily means improvement of his/her knowledge of the culture of that language. Every new vocabulary, every detail a learner acquires adds to his/ her cultural knowledge simply because vocabularies in a language carry not only meanings but also habits, traditions, beliefs, customs, etc. Since the inception of e-learning, technology-based EFL writing classes for Hawisher and Selfe (1991) is a productive way for learners and teachers alike to develop the components of their intercultural awareness of L2 and not just keep the source culture components silhouetted. Again, language learning based on email discussion can also result in social construction of knowledge, learner-based approach, heuristic modes of intercultural competence, self-paced learning preferences and more opportunities for learners to mutual learning (Murphy, 1997).

Liu (2016) carried out a research study on cultivating intercultural awareness in EFL in China. Liu argues that the Chinese sampled learners' weak intercultural awareness hinders their communication competence because the focus is placed usually on grammar and language skills, ignoring the intercultural dimensions. Liu suggests creating a productive environment conducive to language learning: the traditional methods and attitudes of teaching should be changed and the exam should not be the only decisive standard of the learner's language competence because intercultural awareness is another core standard that measure the learner's progress in the EFL context. This may be valid because language and culture are closely related and what lies *behind* and *before* language is culture (Sapir, 1921; Gladstone, 1972). For Shu and Zhuang (2008), language is an inalienable part of culture and culture *per se* is what completes language: learners understanding *only* their foreign language can *only* trudge through communication; while, learners understanding *both foreign* language and their target language culture can breeze in their communication, so to speak (Al-Daqs, 2012).

However, developing one's intercultural awareness is not challenge-free; Porto (2009) argues that it is always challenging for learners to reconcile their own ingrained cultural beliefs to the culture components of the other. It is of great significance for EFL learners to be well equipped with a good level of metalanguage: this is the key to making them able to develop their cross-cultural analysis and intellectual engagement, as well (Straub, 1999). It is not language learning *per se* that helps the EFL learners to develop their critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness; rather, it is their readiness to confront their culture components with those of the target culture and make the overlapping area(s) their operating stage. In (2002) Nutta and Cohen carried out a research project on an email exchange between Israeli college students as EFL students from Tel Aviv University and American teacher trainees as native speakers of English from the University of South Florida. The project participants spent two months learning about the components of each other's culture via email exchanges. As a result, the email-based communication project was a real success for both groups: the Israeli students, for instance, succeeded in communicating with many native English speakers. In the same vein, the American teacher trainees had also the opportunity to look closely at non-native writing and they helped in improving it a lot.

Kourova and Modianos (2013) conducted a research paper on an interesting international partnership where intercultural awareness is focal to understanding language in the EFL context *Connecting Classroom Project*. EFL learners of seven-to-twelve years old were encouraged to communicate with one another through emails to realize a whole host of objectives, including developing students' cultural/intercultural awareness, clarifying cultural identities, and challenging preconceptions. Students examine the inter-relations among language and other cultural expressions. American students who are studying the Russian language interact through videoconferencing and social media tools with a classroom of students in Russia. Together they worked on projects that increased their understanding of the language and culture of the target language and so, built   a richer appreciation of their own culture.

The intercultural experiences through email-based writing communications that students get often engaged in can make them independently aware of how much overlapping their culture and the other's culture are and how to bring closer the components of the two cultures and bridge the gap naturally created. This also paves the way to further enable the students to open the scope to be researchers and use research tools and resources, which can also help them to develop a high level of thinking skills of analysis, reflection, and evaluation.

3. Methodology

This research study was carried out in Saudi Arabia, building on the previous studies on how email-based writing practices can improve the intercultural awareness of native and non-native students of English across different countries. The practical part was based on two main sources: a ten-item questionnaire designed to gauge the non-native students' intercultural awareness and the native teachers' perception of how email exchange can be seminal to students in an EFL setting; and the students' and the teachers' official and academic email-based communication for about 8 running weeks. To analyze email-based communication skills in writing of the sample participants', a methodology based on qualitative content analysis of the EFL students' emails was used in this study. In addition, the questionnaire distributed to the native teachers of English was a designed to assess the trajectory of how the EFL students' intercultural awareness was enhanced in terms of cultural components and lifestyle (similarities and differences), word-choice, clichés, phraseology, grammatical patterns and sentence structure. The focus was placed on the Saudi EFL students as those made up the target of the development of intercultural awareness in email-based writing skills.

3.1. Research Questions

The study attempted to answer the following two research questions:

1. To what extent does email exchange enhance UQU students' writing skills?
2. To what extent does email exchange enhance the development of intercultural awareness and competence in the Saudi EFL context?

3.2. Participants

The randomly selected participants of the study were 38 male students from two classes, first term of first semester 2017, Umm Al-Qura University. The students intended to major in various fields: Engineering, Computer science, and Business Administration but studying English Communications Skills as a prerequisite core module at the Preparatory Year. The population ages range between 19 up to 24 years old of different nationalities who speak English as a foreign language: 28 Saudis, 4 Syrians, 3 Jordanians, 1 Yemeni, 1 Sudanese and 1 Iraqi. The EFL native teachers of English sampled for the study were two from the United States of America, three from Britain and two from Canada, who were from the staff members at Umm Al-Qura University. The email-based exchange between the students and the teachers took place as a means of academic method of Communication Skills, which is a core module for all students. As such, the course involves verbal and written communications skills and sub skills.

3.3. Instruments

For the purpose of this study, the following instruments were used:

1. A ten-item questionnaire was designed and administered to the native teachers of English after the two-month period of the study to assess the improvement of EFL students' intercultural awareness and writing skills through email communication. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the first part is concerned with intercultural issues relating to modes of thinking, intercultural differences and similarities and issues of mutual interest; the second part is designed to gauge the EFL students' writing skills in terms of word-choice, grammatical patterns, sentence structure and writing style.
2. The email-based communication between the native teachers of English and the sampled students was observed closely by the native teachers to mark any development on the students' side in terms of better intercultural awareness, comprehension and writing skills, as well. The meticulous observations made by the native teachers on the sampled EFL students' email-based writing skills were reported through informative notes and constructive feedback that proved the two research questions put forward as the study hypotheses.

3.3.1. Tasks

In Communication skills, the students were required to voice their opinions and inquires by means of email-based communication regarding the social norms of the other's culture; ceremonies, attending parties, making friends, family relations, public holidays, marriage conventions and traditions, in addition to other debatable issues relating to intercultural understanding. The students would meet with their teachers in face-to-face classes daily to receive the fundamentals of writing skills and intercultural components of differences and similarities of the source and the target cultures. To obtain a better result of the study, the teachers made out a rating scheme that included both linguistic and cultural components and they analyzed the email-based sample exchange, using an expert validated scoring guide. The students were required to do two tasks as mapped out:

3.3.2. Task One

Students were required to communicate with their teachers using their academic emails on the customs, traditions and conventions of engagement, marriage, parties and social visits in their culture and what they know about those of the other's culture. The students were required to send at least one email to their teachers per day for a period of 4 weeks: each topic would run for one week. The teacher would respond the same day and share cultural and linguistic ideas to better develop the student's intercultural awareness.

3.3.3. Task Two

Students were required to choose, on a daily basis, a socio-cultural issue currently taking place in their community and explain it to the teacher. The email discussion also included possible solutions as seen from the perspective of the other culture -, the teacher's culture in this case, and how the same issue would be addressed had it happened in that culture. Again, the teacher would also pick up a sociocultural issue from his /her culture and see how the students would respond to it. This task lasted for 4 weeks. The purpose of Task Two was to familiarize the students with the benefit(s) of email-based collaboration in the development of intercultural awareness.
To make the task easier, a group email was created so that all the study population would have the opportunity to interact and comment on every topic chosen by the other students with the teacher orchestrating and facilitating the students' writing skills. By the end of the week, each student was required to send an individual email to the teacher summing up the whole sociocultural topic along with the suggested solutions.

3.5. Data Collection

The email-based writing skills of the students were retrieved and maintained by the concerned teachers for an intercultural and linguistic in-depth analysis. The teachers provided, through their close observation, painstaking comments on the students' development of intercultural awareness. Using the student's email exchange was instrumental for ensuring the reliability of the study findings, and also important diversify the interpretations of the reflections noted by the teachers and the researcher. Of note, some of the sample students were individually interviewed to check *how* and *why* email-based communication helped them improve their writing skills and enhanced and fostered their intercultural awareness and competence, as well. In addition, the questionnaire also was a helpful way to assess *how* and *where* exactly email-based writing practices helped to develop the students' intercultural awareness as explained later in the study.

4. Results & Discussion

Based on the two tasks, the 38 students were required to work for 8 weeks. In the beginning, the students misused their words resulting in a little blurred meaning; they simply failed to use the *mot juste* for the first two weeks or so. They also avoided important socio-cultural issues due to their limited knowledge of the terminology of the subject. On the topic of engagement, 19 participants had difficulty fumbling for the right word such as dowry, fiancé, fiancée, henna, necklace and other trousseau items. Over the second week, students showed more courage in expressing their cultural awareness of marriage customs and how they are practiced in the target culture. Nevertheless, terminology continued as a major difficulty in their writing

particularly in terms of certain expressions such as bride, bridegroom, nuptials and wedding dress. In week three, the students explained to their teacher the way parties are made in their culture, what activities are they engaged in, how invitations are sent and what refreshments can be served to their guests during parties. The students also had the opportunities to inquire how their native teachers make parties and what is expected to be seen or done in their parties.

The majority of the students were curious to know much about dos and don'ts in the USA, the UK and Canada. Over the fourth week, the students perfectly discussed how visits are arranged and what visitors are expected to do or receive by the host. They felt more convenient to ask their teacher important questions about visits in the target culture such as: How often does a married brother visit his married sister? Where do family members meet? Do family members gather on public holidays? When a family member travels abroad and comes back home, do his or her relatives visit them? In the same vein, the students found their email exchange practices a helpful window to look through to the outside world of Saudi Arabia and reflect on their sociocultural side of life. The many questions which the EFL students asked their teachers helped them to develop their intercultural awareness more and more. Likewise, the native teachers also knew much about the students' Islamic and sociocultural holidays, traditions, customs and beliefs such as Ramadan, Eid Al Fitter, Eid Al Adhaa and the special food and how Saudis, Syrians, Jordanians, Yemenis and Iraqis eat and serve food.

As for Task Two, the students were curious to choose everyday a contemporary topic for group discussion. The teachers knew a number of sociocultural issues of great significance to the source culture. They discussed intercultural issues such as unemployment and the role of the governments in supporting job seekers. They also discussed the role of *Zakat* in the Islamic World and how it should be equally distributed to the poor and other eligible categories. One interesting topic was the Islamic Hijab, the students discussed the importance of the head cover for women and reasons behind preventing coeducation. In addition, they curiously asked their teachers about their opinion on the role of the wife at home and how children may help at home in the USA, the UK and Canada. The students discussed the activities the family members do in their free time. The students discussed what business activities are possible in their countries in comparison with the teachers' countries. In addition, the students discussed the traffic regulations and fines imposed on those who flout the law.

The results of the study confirmed that the email-based discussions were an eye-opener to the students both to intercultural awareness as well as linguistic competence (Hayati, 2005; Hitotuzi, 2008; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2003; Lowe, 2001, Choi, 2008, Gorjian, 2008). The teachers were more of facilitators for the discussions because they set a time for each online meeting – one hour daily except for Fridays and Saturdays (8 – 9 PM). The teacher also provided the students with immediate feedback, including word-choice, grammatical structure corrections, style and other linguistic issues. at the same time, the teachers also guided them all the way long to better understand how the other's culture operates and placed more inquiries into how the student's culture looks into certain issues. The previous research studies confirmed that appropriate feedback is priority number one for the students' email-based writing practices (Cook, 2003; Sokolik, 2001). The findings of the study are in line with those of Fregeau, 1999;Lowe, 2001 reiterating that email-based writing and communication constitute a robust and vibrant engagement that enhances the participant's intercultural awareness on the one hand and develops their own linguistic competence in terms of word-choice and grammatical patterns and style of writing, on the other hand.

The study also used a ten-item questionnaire to reaffirm that the effectiveness of email-based writing plays a vital role in developing the student's intercultural awareness and facilitates the development of the student's L2 cultural components. As shall be detailed below, the EFL teachers strongly believe that email-based communication is an effective tool to enhance the EFL students' intercultural awareness: email exchange is an efficient tool or medium that enables the students to discover beyond their cultural environment and get more familiar with the other's culture. This student-to-student and student-

to-teacher online interaction as revealed by the teachers and the researcher took the two parties (EFL teachers and students) further steps into in-depth understanding of intercultural awareness of L2. Table 1 shows how EFL teachers responded to the ten-item questionnaire:

Table 1
EFL Teachers Beliefs about Email Exchange Role in Enhancing Writing Skills

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Intercultural awareness can be enhanced by email-based writing.	-	-	28.6%	71.6%
2. Intercultural awareness can be enhanced only by mingling with native speakers of English.	-	71.4%	28.69%	-
3. Email-based writing can partially develop the student's intercultural awareness.	71.9%	28.6%	-	-
4. The EFL students practicing email-based writing receive less feedback.	-	57.1%	42.9%	-
5. Email-based writing can enhance the student's word-choice.	-	-	14.3%	85.7%
6. Email-based writing should be integrated into the school curriculum as a core module.	-	28.6%	-	71.4%
7. Students can have more freedom to voice their opinion through email-based writing.	-	-	28.6	71.4%
8. Student group discussion is conducive to teaching writing about intercultural awareness.	-	-	-	100%
9. The teacher's feedback which the students receive through email is sufficiently constructive to develop their writing skills.	-	42.9%	57.1%	-
10. Email-based writing practices deskill speaking as a key language skill.	57.1%	-	42.9%	-

As shown in table 1, all participants (100%) agreed strongly that student group discussion is conducive to teaching writing about intercultural awareness. The next statement to which most of the participants agreed (85.7%) is the statement: Over 71% of the participants responded almost equally to three statements: intercultural awareness can be enhanced by email-based writing; email-based writing should be integrated into the school curriculum as a core module and students can have more freedom to voice their opinion through email-based writing. The majority of the participants (99.9%) disagreed to the statement: 'email-based writing can partially develop the student's intercultural awareness'. Around (71%) disagreed to the statement that 'intercultural awareness can be enhanced only by mingling with native speakers of English'. In the same vein, (57.1%) disagreed that 'the EFL students practicing email-based writing receive less feedback' and they also disagreed that 'email-based writing practices deskill speaking as a key language skill'. Around (42.9%) disagreed that 'the teacher's feedback which the students receive

through email is sufficiently constructive to develop their writing skills'; while, (28.6%) disagreed that 'email-based writing should be integrated into the school curriculum as a core module'. The participants agreed with relatively different percentages to the rest of the statement used in the mini-questionnaire. In sum, email-based writing exchange and practice play a vital role in enhancing writing skills and bi-cultural and bi-linguistic awareness.

The EFL teachers' reflection on the questionnaire can be summarized as follows:

1. **Enhancing intercultural awareness by email-based writing:** 7 EFL teachers are in agreement that email-based writing is an effective tool to enhance the student's intercultural awareness at the individual level and at group level. Students learn more about the other's cultural values and feel how they should respect and deal with the sociocultural values of L2 through email-based writing practices.

2. **Enhancing intercultural awareness by mingling with native speakers of English:** Seven EFL teachers revealed that face-to-face communication with native speakers of English is not the only way for EFL students to develop their intercultural awareness. The teachers claim there are possibly other effective ways to enhance EFL students' intercultural awareness, such as writing practices and email exchange. Some teachers confirmed that there are many students who have not mingled with native speakers, yet they display an advanced level of intercultural awareness obtained through writing, reading, speaking, or listening.

3. **Student's intercultural awareness can be developed partially by email-based writing**: The majority of the teachers (71%) were in disagreement to this statement because *much* and not *partially* of the student's intercultural awareness can be enhanced. In addition, the little areas that require face-to-face discussion or mingling can be tiny or of little importance for them for this stage.

4. **Less feedback is received by the EFL students practicing email-based**: In as much as email-based writing is practiced through two-way communication, the students should receive constructive feedback almost on every point they make. Sometimes, the person himself or herself may be lazy to provide feedback. The feedback is both sociocultural (ideational orientation, beliefs, practices) and linguistic (word-choice, genre, register, grammatical patterns and style). This accounts for the role of the EFL teachers: they are orchestrators of and participants in the communication at the same time.

5. **The student's word-choice can be improved by email-based writing**: the EFL teachers were in agreement that when the students are exposed to L2 culture components, they would use the correct words and learn more new words and concepts, such as the ones relating to religion, food, clothes, customs and ethics.

6. **Email-based writing should be integrated into school curricula as a core module**: the teachers were in agreement that the suggestion was a welcome step. The teachers who were in disagreement to this suggestion stated that email-based writing can better practiced as an extracurricular activity. In addition, they argued that the information the EFL students receive from their L2 counterparts may be unauthenticated and unreliable. However, other teachers stated that the suggestion is wholeheartedly welcome as it leaves the door wide open to digital learning to develop more channels that enhance the student's intercultural awareness.

7. **More freedom to voice opinion through email-based writing**: the EFL teachers were in agreement that using emails helps students to form the sentences and place their ideas or inquiries. They can also have more time to understand the L2 comments and feedback on the L2 sociocultural components. This creates a better room to improve the students' input and better understand their

output. In addition, they can think of more suitable connectors and discourse fillers to better make their statements easily understand.

8. **Student group discussion is conducive to learning writing skills about intercultural awareness**: the EFL teachers were in agreement to this statement. Teachers state that some students may need their classmates to encourage them to write something. Some EFL students need a student acting as a leader to go ahead of them to open the discussion. In addition, the study confirmed that EFL students can generate more ideas for writing about intercultural issues when working in groups or in pairs. This also helps them to retain and recall their ideas firmly.

9. **The teacher's email-based feedback is constructive writing skills**: The respondents argued that the email-based feedback may not be well-detailed; the teacher may just provide laconic feedback because of lack of time. This means that the students may require detailed feedback relating to mechanics of grammar, such as connectors and punctuations. More face-to-face engagement and discussion is required to provide the EFL students with appropriate feedback. They argued that writing cannot be a stand-alone skill developed through email practices to enhance intercultural awareness and other language skills should come into play to show their support to writing.

10. **Email-based writing practices may deskill speaking as a key language skill**: the respondents who were in agreement stated that when EFL students depend more on writing to enhance their intercultural awareness, they will likely deskill their pronunciation, speaking and listening skills. In addition, students will tend to use short sentences and fragments to express their opinions. However, the respondents who were in disagreement stated that using email practices to enhance the EFL students' writing skills will not be at the expense of other skills; it will be given a limited period of time and will be supported by in-class discussions, as well; striking a balance between the language skills ensures that no skill overshadows the other.

The EFL teachers stated that five students did not write a lot about the selected topics nor did they ask many questions to their EFL teaches to know more about L2 culture; they preferred to be taciturn or reticent about their culture-specific issues or perhaps did not feel motivated to do so or did not know how to do so and remained for much of the time reading the ideas flooding into the group email by their classmates albeit repeatedly encouraged to get engaged in the discussion like others. Again, the majority of the students (32 students) felt like telling their teachers about their own culture more than knowing about L2 culture. Furthermore, the students seemed to prefer talking about the sociocultural differences and allotted a little time to consider the similarities. This helps them to avoid being uneasily involved in any impropriety such as faux pas, blunders, gaffes, foul-ups and solecisms. Of note, several students tried to ensure their first-hand and vicarious experience (field visits, TV shows, watching videos and reading stories from L2 culture) about L2 culture through writing short notes and comments supported and corrected by their native teachers.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The degree of intercultural awareness to which the EFL students sampled in the study reached was realized to a great deal by the telecommunication writing practices and email exchange. Such free-time writing practices can be seminal to enhance the student's intellectual and linguistic competence. One cannot ensure the participants can display the same enthusiasm all the way long; 4 students grew gradually disinterested in or even indifferent to knowing more about L2 culture or introducing their culture to the other: they just dropped laconic comments and did not like to take the issue under discussion any steps further. However, most of the students felt most willing to keep discussing such sociocultural issues and exchange their ideas with their teachers even for a lengthy time. Set as such, the results of the study would

recommend email exchange as a productive teaching tool that develops the EFL student's intercultural awareness along with linguistic competence provided constructive and immediate feedback should be provided. L2 culture can be easily accessed and better understood by different channels, and email-based writing practices and exchange are seminal to fostering the EFL student's intercultural awareness (Corbett, 2003; Liu et al., 2003; Sercu, 2006; Guilherme, 2007).The feedback the EFL students receive through email exchange gives more efficiency, flexibility and warmth in communication. In a study that included EFL teachers and students in Honk Kong, Hoffman (1996) stated that email-based exchange provided the students with more timely, more usable information and more complete about their writing than written comments; it is also less stressful and more expressive than face-to-face feedback. Now at the age of digitalisation, it is *how* to optimize technology in bringing closer L2, which does not mean only linguistic competence; intercultural awareness is the dynamo that creates the smooth flow of EFL.

It is more conducive to place EFL students through email-based setting where they feel more encouraged to participate in a more equal social opportunity to develop their intercultural awareness (Fotos and Browne, 2004). Interestingly enough, Kiernan and Aizawa (2004) conducted a research study to see the efficiency of phone-based email communication and PC-based email communication as valuable tools for EFL in a task-based learning setting: "Whereas both devices seemed conducive to facilitating outside of class communicative exchange, the use of mobile phones appeared to be more popular than PCs for Japanese EFL learners" (Zheng, 2015: 1258). This indicates that email-based exchange, (writing, audio clips and video clips) can be an effective tool to enhance EFL students' writing as a key language skill and can be pedagogically developed to showcase how intercultural awareness can be developed to further steps. In the same vein, Uzunboylu et al. (2009) concluded that integrating mobile phones in classroom curricula is well-suited to project-based learning, including reporting and documenting environmental issues; the same can be used to develop EFL students' intercultural awareness.

Based on the close and detailed observation of the present research study, the majority of the participants, both EFL teachers and students, displayed individual and collaborative participation which guided and bolstered their intercultural awareness and competence: many blurred conceptions were further explained, deeply ingrained misconception were redressed and rectified and attitudes towards L2 sociocultural components were better consolidated. In addition, the participants enhanced their writing skill and sub skills: word-choice, culture-specific idioms, phrases, clichés and collocations. The Saudi and non-Saudi students along with the British, American and Canadian EFL teachers discovered more about each other's culture and did understand how similar and different their cultures are. They also discovered the sociocultural overlapping issues, conducts and beliefs and cemented their relations based on the common grounds they share and enhanced their authentic cultural knowledge and language skills. Most notably, both parties (teachers and students) improved certain phrases and expressions through writing such as greeting words, compliments, polite request, condolences, apologies, anger, sadness and exclamations. Taking all these positive results into consideration, email-based communication would add a new dimension to writing which is a an interactive window to better understand L2 culture and better expose L1 culture to the other. Admittedly, the participants (teachers and students) found that because of the factors of age difference (EFL teachers: 24 to 45; while EFL students: 19 to 26 years old), certain sociocultural issues were not fully investigated and they did not touch upon in detail such as sexology and religious beliefs.

Further, the researcher focused on the participant's spontaneity in email exchange through self-exploring guidance into the development of intercultural awareness; other language skills are fortunately not marginalized in that writing supports thinking skills, as well. With the efficiency of email-based writing as a skill tool to develop EFL students' intercultural awareness and linguistic competence, EFL teachers can also design email-based projects to utilize such digital exchange to improve the EFL students' language skills.

The majority of the participants suggested similar social media such as a WhatsApp group for easier communication and discussion: the participants who supported this recommendation argued that this includes speaking and listening skills. This requires control over the time management, topics to be discussed, ethical codes and other technical issues to avoid any possible sociocultural misunderstanding, which can potentially lead to misconceptions on both sides. This also requires pedagogical plans and objectives to be incorporated into the academic curricula or be part of selective courses. There are other considerations before placing the L1 culture learners and the L2 culture learners into the project such as avoiding offence, ridicule, scorn, harassment, disrespect, profanity, execration and political cynicism.

6. Suggestions

Based on the findings, the research study has come up with some suggestions and recommendations. Such insights can be taken into consideration in the education policy by decision-makers. The following suggestions are open to further discussion:
1. Email-based writing course(s) should be created and integrated in the school curricula at an early stage in the primary classes, intermediate classes and the secondary classes.
2. EFL Teachers should encourage their students to find their friends who are native speakers to exchange sociocultural information while practicing writing.
3. EFL teachers should provide their students with good examples of email-based writing skills.
4. Email-based writing course can be designed by specialists and run it as a pilot study across carefully selected regions.

7. Conclusion

Amid the age of digital education and optimal communication tools, EFL educators open the doors wide for students to enhance their intercultural awareness through email-based writing practices and to explore L2 sociocultural issues and to better introduce their culture to L2 native speakers. Motivated by the possibility of using email exchange of writing practices to enhance EFL students' intercultural awareness and linguistic competence, the present research study attempted to explore the efficiency of the two-hypothesis question on the population sample of the (38) EFL Saudi and non-Saudi students at Umm Al-Qura University and (7) American, British and Canadian EFL teachers. The study used qualitative analysis to assess the participants' email exchange and discussion over 8 weeks in a row. The students were in their Preparatory Year, studying English as a requirement to major in the study field they prefer. The study findings were positive and both the teachers and the students enhanced their intercultural awareness and improved their linguistic competence, as well. The project was also a new experience as an extra-curricular activity.

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