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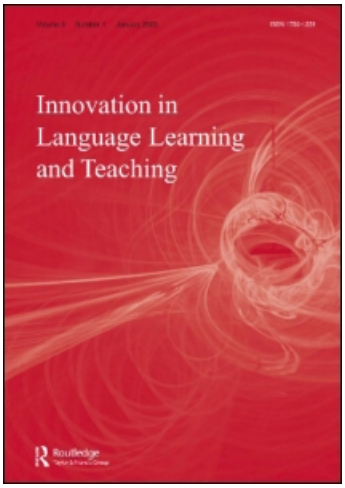

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Jianqiu Tian[a]; Yuping Wang[b]
[a] Department of English, Peking University, Beijing, China [b] School of Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD, Australia

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Taking language learning outside the classroom: learners' perspectives of eTandem learning via *Skype*

Jianqiu Tian[a] and Yuping Wang[b]*

[a]*Department of English, Peking University, Beijing, China;* [b]*School of Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD, Australia*

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The paper examines the potential of eTandem learning via *Skype*, a desktop videoconferencing tool, with a focus on the learners' perspectives of what they had gained in the eTandem in terms of their improvements in language proficiency and intercultural understanding. The research data come from an online language exchange project conducted between English language learners from Peking University (PKU) in China and learners of Mandarin from Griffith University (GU) in Australia, in semester 1, 2009. The findings indicate a consensus from both groups of students that the exchange had improved their linguistic and intercultural competence, and that eTandem via *Skype* could be a sustainable mode of learning outside the classroom. However, students from PKU held a more positive evaluation of the learning outcomes and the project as a whole, in comparison to that held by the GU students. We conclude that this dissimilarity was primarily caused by the differences in their language proficiency. It is suggested that in future research, more efforts should be made to manage differences in language proficiency in order to maximize learning outcomes.

Keywords: desktop videoconferencing; *Skype*; eTandem; learner perspective

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Introduction

The use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) to facilitate a partnership between L2 learners and native/expert speakers of the target language has received increasing attention in the last decade. Thorne (2003) terms this kind of partnership Internet mediated intercultural foreign language education (ICFLE) and Thorne (2006) categorizes it into four models: telecollaboration; eTandem; partnerships between local expert speakers and foreign language students; and learners' participation in online communities. Among them, telecollaboration and eTandem learning are the most frequently used models.

According to Thorne (2003, 5), telecollaboration often refers to 'international class-to-class partnerships within institutionalized settings,' in order to facilitate collaborative learning. Examples of this approach can be found in the studies conducted by Belz (2003), Kinginger (2004), Belz (2005), and Belz and Thorne (2006), among others. Although it has been occasionally used interchangeably with telecollaboration, Tandem or eTandem learning often involves the pairing of individual language learners learning each other's native language, in dyads, for

*Corresponding author. Email: y.wang@gu.edu.au

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the purpose of improving linguistic and intercultural understanding of the target language (see Appel 1999; Appel and Gilabert 2002; Appel and Mullen 2000; Brammerts 1996, 1999, 2003; Cziko 2004; Kötter 2002, 2003; O'Rourke 2005). eTandem learning is usually individually based and often requires less instructor mediation and more learner autonomy (Thorne 2006). The current study falls into this category of ICFLE.

In terms of mode of learning, until recently, ICFLE has mostly been asynchronously and/or synchronously text-based, usually in the form of email exchanges or synchronous chats (e.g. Appel and Gilabert 2002; Belz and Thorne 2006; Darhower 2002, 2006, 2007, 2008; Kinginger 2004; Lamy and Goodfellow 1999; Lee 2004; Sotillo 2000, 2005; Thorne 2003; Tudini 2003). The dimension of oral and visual interaction in ICFLE is still lacking, with a few exceptions such as the studies by O'Dowd (2000) and Lee (2007). O'Dowd (2000) reports a telecollaboration on intercultural learning via videoconferencing between learners of Spanish and learners of English as a foreign language, while Lee (2007) describes a project that paired learners of Spanish with expert speakers through desktop videoconferencing for the development of speaking skills. Both studies were carried out in a classroom environment with teacher instruction and intervention. To our knowledge, language exchange outside the classroom using desktop videoconferencing between learners learning each other's first language has not been reported in the literature. The current study aims to bridge this gap by reporting an eTandem project conducted outside class, via a videoconferencing tool called *Skype*.

In terms of research focus, the majority of the existing studies on ICFLE report linguistic and intercultural benefits by analyzing the discourses that the learners had produced (e.g. Belz and Vyatkina 2005; Darhower 2002; O'Dowd 2005). In comparison, studies on learners' perspectives of ICFLE are less voluminous, often with a focus on the perceptions collected from one side of the partnership. Woodin (1997, 23) regards this as a weakness in her email Tandem study by pointing out that 'it was not possible to study both sides of the partnership.'

In recognition of the above limitations in ICFLE literature, this study will take a different approach and explore the perceptions of *both* groups of learners in our study in relation to their linguistic and intercultural gains. Thus in this article, following a critical review of the existing studies on the benefits and learner perspectives of ICFLE, we discuss findings from our *Skype*-supported language exchange project between Chinese students learning English in China and Australian students learning Mandarin in Australia. Through a comparison of the perspectives held by the two groups of students, we seek to contribute to understanding the linguistic and intercultural potential of videoconferencing-supported tandem learning. We also identify challenges in the effective implementation of eTandem learning outside class.

The benefits of Internet mediated intercultural foreign language education (ICFLE) to language learning

Underlying our approach to the use of videoconference tools to support Tandem learning are two goals for meeting the essential needs that we had identified among our students. These goals are to help improve both their communicative and intercultural competence in an authentic learning environment. Studies in ICFLE have, to various degrees, established its benefits to the promotion of these two principal aspects of language learning.

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One of the most significant contributions of ICFLE is its facilitation of interaction among learners and/or between learners and expert/native speakers (NSs; see Lee 2004). Through network text-based collaboration, learners employ a wide range of discourse structures and modification devices to interact with their online partners (e.g. Blake and Zyzik 2003; Kern and Warschauer 2000; Toyoda and Harrison 2002; Tudini 2003). At the same time, they also receive timely corrective feedback and authentic input from expert/NSs (Sotillo 2005) and are forced to produce output (O'Rourke 2005). As the result of negotiated interaction, learners improve their grammatical competence (Lee 2002; Pellettieri 2000), generate syntactically complex language structures (Sotillo 2000) and develop their lexical capacity (Dussias 2006). More importantly, such interactions also help to develop learners' oral communication skills (Blake 2000; Lee 2002). For example, Abrams (2003) and Payne and Whitney (2002) found that the communication skills the learners acquired in the text-based chat were transferrable to oral communication skills.

As intercultural contact does not naturally lead to cultural understanding, researchers have developed various models to help the learners gain cultural understanding (Belz 2002, 2003; Coleman 1998; Fischer 1998; Kern 2000; O'Dowd 2003; Ware 2005). The most noteworthy one is the Cultura model developed by Furstenberg and colleagues (2001), which was later adopted by other researchers in Russian–English and Spanish–English exchanges (see Bauer et al. 2006). Belz and her colleagues also conducted a series of studies by using parallel texts for cultural comparison (Belz 2001, 2002; Belz and Kinginger 2003; Belz and Müller-Hartmann 2003; Belz and Thorne 2006). On balance, most researchers view ICFLE as an effective medium for developing learners' intercultural competence (e.g. O'Dowd 2005; Thorne 2003; Ware and Kramsch 2005).

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Studies on learner perspectives of Internet mediated intercultural foreign language education (ICFLE)

Learner perspectives are an important source of information that provides language educators with an opportunity to reflect on their intended pedagogical efforts, and modify teaching strategies to meet the needs and interests of learners (Lee 2006). However, relatively few studies have addressed learner perspectives, with some exceptions such as O'Dowd (2000), Lee (2004, 2007), and Darhower (2008).

Lee's studies (2004, 2007) place a focus on learners' perspectives of learning with Internet technology. When exploring the learner's view on the effectiveness of text-based chat with expert speakers, Lee (2004) finds that the learners valued the unique learning condition of being exposed to authentic target language produced by NSs and of being challenged to produce coherent discourse that went beyond grammatical accuracy through scaffolding on the part of the NSs. In her 2007 study, Lee asked the learners to write reflections to report their experience of using desktop videoconferencing and interviewed the students upon completion of the project to collect the students' perspectives on the project. The results indicated that desktop videoconferencing has great potential for developing the learners' language ability, including linguistic, pragmatic and paralinguistic skills, and for supporting collaborative learning.

In the above discussed studies by Lee, there is no comparison of learners' perspectives except for a table presenting the means of Likert scale items rated by

both the learners and expert speakers. This is probably because there were expert speakers on the other side of the partnership, instead of language learners. In contrast, although O'Dowd (2000) and Darhower (2008) didn't focus on learner perspectives in their studies, they compared the perspectives of the learners on both sides of the partnership.

O'Dowd (2000) compared the Spanish and American learners' perspectives of a class-to-class videoconferencing-supported collaboration for developing the learners' cultural awareness. The finding indicates that the Spanish learners didn't report that they had learned much new vocabulary and had enough opportunities to talk because of the large number of students in class, while the American students were more positive about their experience because they had more opportunities to speak as a result of a relatively smaller class.

The study by Darhower (2008) reports the linguistic affordances that emerged from a telecollaborative text chat project between Spanish-speaking learners of English and English-speaking learners of Spanish. The questionnaire result indicates that both groups felt the chat experience was a valuable part of their language course and that they would continue chatting with NSs of their L2 in the future. However, the two groups differed in their views of the frequency with which the NSs had provided them with affordance, and the frequency with which they noticed their errors and the extent to which the chat experience resulted in the improvement of their speaking, writing, and reading skills.

The above discussed researches have contributed to our understanding of the benefits and learners' perspectives of ICFLE, in many significant ways. However, most of them concern themselves with text-based, asynchronous partnerships. The two videoconferencing-supported collaborations reported by O'Dowd (2000) and Lee (2007) were both classroom-based. Up to this date, we are still unclear to what extent videoconferencing-supported language exchange outside class has affected learners' perspectives on their linguistic and intercultural gains.

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The study

This study aims to evaluate and compare the perspectives of the learners on both sides of a videoconferencing-supported language partnership. In so doing, we aim to answer the following three research questions:

(1) What are the linguistic benefits gained by the two groups of learners from this eTandem?
(2) In what ways was the learners' intercultural understanding promoted?
(3) Are there any differences in their perceptions of the online language exchange?

Procedure

In Semester 1, 2009, 15 learners of English from Peking University (PKU), China and 15 students learning Mandarin from Griffith University (GU), Australia, were paired randomly to conduct language exchange via a videoconference tool called *Skype*. The aim of the project was to find a sustained approach as a complement to classroom teaching for the improvement of students' communicative skills and understanding of the target cultures. Thus, the pairs were required to engage in a

one-hour session each week for nine weeks, half an hour in Chinese and half an hour in English, outside class time. Although we encouraged the students to engage in discussions with their partners about anything in regard to each other's culture, we did provide a list of suggested topics mainly to ensure that the discussions would not exceed the Mandarin students' (MSs) linguistic ability.

For the MSs, following each online exchange session, each student was given two minutes in class to present an oral report in Mandarin on his/her language exchange for that week. This presentation formed part of an assessment item for the course. The English language students (ESs) were asked to write a brief report after each online exchange session.

Both groups of students were provided with the following resources at the beginning of the study:

(1) A student Handbook containing instructions on how to install the various components for the online exchange, weekly suggested topics and a reflection sheet for each online session.
(2) A webcam for students to see each other on *Skype*.

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Technology used in this research – Skype

Skype was chosen for this project for its affordability, reliability, ease of use and, more importantly, its pedagogical soundness. Economically, it is a freeware that can be downloaded from the Internet. Therefore as far as technology is concerned, learners will not need to invest in much except a webcam and a broadband connection. Technically, it is a very reliable and user-friendly tool that students can learn to use by themselves. It is also constantly maintained and upgraded by its developer to support good quality video and audio transmission and user friendliness. Last but not least, pedagogically, *Skype* has several features supporting language learning. It is available in 28 languages and is used in almost every country around the world. It supports group text chat for up to 100 people and group audio conferencing for up to five people. The one-to-one live video transmission feature can also add a touch of reality and authenticity to task performance by language partners.

The participants

Most of the MSs from GU were native English speakers and all the ESs from PKU were NSs of Mandarin. As there were double the number of students in the English class compared with the Mandarin class, the ESs were invited to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. Those who wanted to participate in the project were asked to submit a brief self-introduction in English. The 15 MSs then each chose one ES as their partner from the ESs' self-introductions, which their instructor showed them in class.

The MSs were all from a third year Mandarin class. They had learned Mandarin as a second language for four semesters (13 weeks per semester) at the university, with an average of 5.5 contact hours per week. Their Chinese proficiency varied but most of them could conduct basic conversations relating to everyday topics. Survey data indicate that only three students had used a videoconferencing tool before the study.

Participants from PKU were invited from the first year college English program. Although their English proficiency levels also varied, most of them had learned English since primary school and could speak fluently almost on any topic.

Data collection

A combination of data collection methods was adopted to capture the richness of the affordances of the online language exchanges. The students from both sides were asked to complete a reflection sheet for each online session, and to record each session with *Camstudio*, a free screen recorder software. The PKU students were also asked to save and submit text chat scripts produced in their *Skype* sessions. Upon the completion of the project both groups of students completed a survey emailed to them. The return rate of the survey for both groups reached 93% (14/15). To further clarify issues that were not sufficiently or clearly explained in the written survey, the PKU students were interviewed. For the purpose of this paper, the majority of data is from the survey and the interviews.

The survey consisted of three major sections. The first section asks general questions about the students' experience with the project before, during and after the online exchange. Section Two of the survey consists of Likert scale items designed to assess the students' perception of the linguistic and intercultural affordances provided by online language exchange. Most of the items concerning the linguistic aspects were designed by the researchers in accordance with the initial data analysis of the affordances noted in students' classroom reports and video recordings of their online exchange sessions. Some questions were adapted from Darhower's (2008) study and were reworded to reflect the characteristics of the *Skype*-supported language exchange. The items on intercultural benefits were composed by the researchers based on Byram's (1997) classical account of intercultural communicative competence (O'Dowd 2003, 121). The last section contains open questions in relation to the greatest benefit of the project, the most difficult part of the online exchange and students' suggestions for improvement.

In view of the inadequacy of a written survey in capturing the complexity of advancement in intercultural understandings, one of the authors conducted a 20-minute half-structured interview with each PKU student immediately following the initial analysis of the collected surveys. The purpose of the interview was to gather further information about the students' perception of the online exchange. Topics covered in the interview included the learners' overall evaluation of the project, their linguistic and intercultural gains, especially regarding the understanding of Australian culture and reflections on Chinese culture, the greatest difficulty in the exchange and their suggestions for future projects. The interview was audio recorded for data analysis.

Data analysis

Data from the written survey and the interview were employed to report the findings relating to the research questions of this study. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed to triangulate learner perceptions.

The Likert-scale items in the written survey were computed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 17.0 software. After a trial of *t*-test with SPSS and Excel, the *p* values in the *t*-test were calculated using Excel. To complement the

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findings derived from the Likert-scale items, the learners' perceptions of the linguistic and intercultural benefits from the project were also extracted from the open questions and the interview transcripts using content analysis. These two sources of data were qualitatively analyzed to support the quantitative data contained in the Likert-scale items.

Results

Linguistic benefits of the online exchange

This section begins with the discussion of the results from two groups of Likert-scale items contained in the survey. This discussion will be further verified by students' answers to the open question in regard to the greatest benefits of the online exchange.

Table 1 presents the responses by both the ESs and MSs to the survey question that asked them to rate the frequency of 10 types of actions that occurred during their online exchange. Included in the table are the mean score and *t*-test result of each item for the purpose of comparing the responses made by the two groups of students. The value *p* of less than 0.05 from the *t*-test results indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups and the items with such a difference are marked with an asterisk.

Table 1 shows a high average mean score of 3.62 for the ESs and 3.43 for the MSs. This result suggests that, overall, both groups of learners agreed that there was a variety of affordances offered by the exchange and they responded to the affordances frequently. To be more specific, Statement 3 attracted the highest mean scores for both groups of students with 4.36 for the ESs and 4.42 for the MSs, indicating that both groups frequently or always asked for clarification when they didn't understand their partner's utterance. They also frequently noticed new words/expressions, as

Table 1. Mean scores and *t*-test results in regard to the frequency of occurrence in the online exchange ($N = 28$).

Statement	ES Mean	MS Mean	*p*
1. My language partner provided feedback on my language use.	3.79	3.00	0.0493*
2. I provided feedback on my language partner's language use.	3.93	3.00	0.0142*
3. When I did not understand my language partner's utterance, I asked for clarification.	4.36	4.42	0.8178
4. I noticed new words/expressions used in my partner's utterance.	3.71	4.08	0.2164
5. I noticed new grammatical structures in my partner's utterance.	3.43	3.54	0.7669
6. My language partner and I used text chat for clarification.	4.07	3.46	0.1618
7. My language partner and I used body language via the video for clarification.	3.43	2.67	0.0756
8. I noticed the difference between my pronunciation and intonation/tones and those of my language partner.	3.71	3.92	0.5761
9. I could not understand my language partner's English/ Chinese because of my English/Chinese proficiency.	2.36	3.17	0.0054*
10. I prepared for my online exchange before each session.	3.36	3.00	0.3451
Mean average	3.62	3.43	N/A

*Statistically significant difference between ES Mean and MS Mean (*t*-test, $p < 0.05$).
Note: 1, never; 2, seldom; 3, sometimes; 4, frequently; 5, always.

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shown in the means for Statement 4 (3.71 for the ESs and 4.08 for the MSs), and new grammatical structures (Statement 5, with ES mean reaching 3.43 and MS mean 3.54) in their partner's utterances. The mean scores for Statement 8 also indicated that both groups frequently noticed the differences between their pronunciation and intonation/tones and those of their language partner (3.7 for the ESs and 3.92 for the MSs). More importantly, the mean scores for Statements 6 (4.07 for the ESs and 3.46 for the MSs) and 7 (3.43 for the ESs and 2.67 for the MSs) confirmed the linguistic affordances of *Skype* as both groups frequently used text chat and body language via the video in *Skype* for clarification.

What merit our further attention here are the differences in the two groups' perceptions as indicated by the *t*-test results in Table 1, in particular, the significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in the answers to Statements 1, 2, and 9. Learners in the two groups differed significantly in their views as to whether their partners provided feedback on their language use (Statement 1), with the ESs being more positive than the MSs (mean scores of 3.79 and 3.00, respectively, with a *p*-value of 0.0493). Statement 2 – I provided feedback on my language partner's language use – also witnessed a significantly more positive response from the ESs than from the MSs, with means of 3.93 and 3.00 and a *p* value of 0.0142. The most noticeable difference in the two groups' perceptions was found in Statement 9, which asked them to rate how often they could not understand their partner's utterances because of their own language proficiency. The ESs' rating leaned more towards 'seldom' with a mean of 2.36, while the MSs' more towards 'often' or 'frequently' with the mean being 3.17. The *p* value between the two reached as high as 0.0054. The reason for such a huge difference will be discussed in the discussion section.

Table 2 summarizes the responses made by both the ESs and the MSs to the survey question soliciting their agreement with 10 statements about their linguistic benefits from the online exchange. The table displays the mean scores and *t*-test results of each item. The value *p* of less than 0.05 was marked with an asterisk to indicate a statistically significant difference in the two groups' perspectives.

Table 2 indicates a strong consensus that both groups had benefited linguistically from this form of learning, with the average mean score of 3.82 for the ESs and 3.35 for the MSs. Students reported varied degrees and aspects of linguistic gains except for grammar (Statements 2 and 7, with Statement 2 being the only item that received a negative rating from the MSs). In more detail, both groups almost unanimously agreed that the online exchange had helped to improve their listening skills in English/Chinese (Statement 4, with a mean of 4.00 for the ESs and 4.08 for the MSs). Most students later used the new words/expressions they had learned from their partners in other situations (Statement 1, with a mean of 3.50 for the ESs and 3.69 for the MSs). Both groups further confirmed that the online exchange had helped to improve their pronunciation and intonation (Statement 5, with a mean of 4.07 for the ESs and 3.38 for the MSs). When rating Statement 3, students concurred that the online exchange had helped to improve their fluency in speaking English/Chinese (4.14 for the ESs and 3.08 for the MSs). Moreover, they felt they could speak in longer sentences in English/Chinese after the online exchange as shown in Statement 8 (3.43 for the ESs and 3.15 for the MSs). As a result, both groups of students believed that 'online language exchange is a good way to improve speaking skills **outside class**' (Statement 10 with a mean of 4.57 for the ESs and 3.85 for the MSs), despite the fact that the ESs were much more affirmative than the MSs.

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Table 2. Mean scores and *t*-test results in regard to the linguistic benefits of the online exchange ($N = 28$).

Statement	ES Mean	MS Mean	*p*
1. I later used the new words/expressions I learned from my partner in other situations.	3.50	3.69	0.5842
2. I later used the new grammatical structures I learned from my partner in other situations.	3.00	2.92	0.8102
3. The online exchange has helped to improve my fluency in speaking English/Chinese.	4.14	3.08	0.0007*
4. The online exchange has helped to improve my listening skills in English/Chinese.	4.00	4.08	0.8102
5. The online exchange has helped to improve my pronunciation and intonation.	4.07	3.38	0.0351*
6. The online exchange has helped to improve my spontaneous/reflex replies in English/Chinese.	4.07	3.31	0.0039*
7. The online exchange has helped to improve my English/Chinese grammar.	3.50	3.00	0.1268
8. I feel I can speak in longer sentences in English/Chinese after the online exchange.	3.43	3.15	0.3343
9. Because of the online exchange, I feel more confident in speaking English/Chinese.	3.93	3.00	0.0186*
10. Online language exchange is a good way to improve speaking skills **outside class.**	4.57	3.85	0.0045*
Mean average	3.82	3.35	N/A

*Statistically significant difference between ES Mean and MS Mean (*t*-test, $p < 0.05$).
Note: 1, strongly disagree; 2, disagree; 3, neutral; 4, agree; 5, strongly agree.

The *t*-test result reveals some significant differences in the answers to Statements 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10, with the ESs being more in agreement with the statements than the MSs, across the spectrum. In terms of the gains in specific linguistic aspects, the ESs and MSs differed in fluency in speaking (Statement 3, with a *p*-value at 0.0007), pronunciation and intonation (Statement 5, with a *p*-value of 0.0351) and spontaneous/reflex replies (Statement 6, with a *p* value of 0.0039). In comparison with the MSs, the ESs were much more positive about the increase in confidence in speaking the target language (Statement 9, with *p* as 0.0186), and hold a more positive attitude toward the online exchange as a means to improving speaking skills outside class (Statement 10, with $p = 0.0045$), although both groups were very positive. Worthy of special attention here are the MS means in Statements 3 and 9. The MSs' perception of their improvement in fluency as demonstrated in Statement 3 is just a bit more positive than neutral with a mean of 3.08, and their responses to Statement 9 about the increase in their confidence in speaking Mandarin through the language exchange were rated neutral with a mean of 3.00.

The qualitative data collected from the open questions in the written survey complemented the above discussed findings. Several ESs mentioned linguistic benefits as their greatest gains from the online exchange project. Three of them said they appreciated the chance to practice their oral English and/or to improve their spoken English. In particular, ES1 said she benefited from her partner 'correcting' her 'pronunciation and structure errors' and she learned to 'communicate and express my view in pertinent words.' Three ESs reported gaining confidence in speaking English as their greatest benefit from the online exchange.

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Similarly, the MSs' responses to the open questions also indicate that most of them considered their linguistic gains as the greatest benefits from the online exchange. MS13 reported the benefit of 'listening to some modern expressions' and MS8 regarded 'being able to hear a NS use their language in everyday conversational language' as a benefit from the online exchange, which 'greatly improves listening skills and understanding.' MS11 singled out the benefit of being 'exposed to a lot more vocabulary words and grammatical patterns' from her partner's emails and text chats 'typed in Chinese,' which she 'wouldn't have understood, noticed or even paid attention to if I was to only have heard it.' She further confirmed that 'this project is quite helpful in ... learning new words and patterns.' Four students considered it beneficial to have the chance to speak to a NS. In particular, MS5 mentioned that her partner provided effective scaffolding, saying that 'if she did not understand then I could explain and she helped me to get it right before we moved on.' Another benefit that she pointed out was that her partner 'made speaking seem more natural' and gave her 'the chance to just chat with her in Chinese and that really helped.' Three students mentioned that they had become more confident in speaking Chinese. Furthermore, two students revealed that they realized their limitations in the Chinese language, and one of them said: 'I have realized the need for immersion in the language is going to be the only way to learn it properly.'

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Intercultural benefits of the online exchange

In this section, we first present and compare the results from the Likert scale items in the written survey. This will be followed by an account of the students' answers to the open questions in the survey and to the interviews with the ESs.

Table 3 presents the means and *t*-test results of the two groups of students' evaluation of the intercultural benefits they gained from the online exchange. Statistically significant differences between the two groups' perceptions are marked with an asterisk ($p < 0.05$).

Both groups of students indicated that they had a strong interest in each other's culture (see Statement 9, with a mean of 4.43 for the ESs and 4.15 for the MSs and Statement 10, with 4.29 for the ESs and 4.38 for the MSs). They also strongly agreed that the online exchange improved their understanding of each other's culture (Statement 1, with 3.86 for the ESs and 3.77 for the MSs), especially of young people's life (Statement 3, with 4.21 for the ESs and 3.92 for the MSs). Moreover, they agreed or strongly agreed that their understanding of their own culture had also been improved (Statement 2, with 3.71 for the ESs and 3.15 for the MSs). They agreed or strongly agreed that in the process of the online exchange, they made efforts to overcome possible obstacles caused by cultural differences (Statement 6, with a mean score of 4.29 for the ESs and 3.92 for the MSs); they also concurred that when there was a culture difference, they tried to think from their partners' perspectives (Statement 7, with 3.93 for the ESs and 3.92 for the MSs), and asked their partner the reasons behind their perspectives (Statement 8, with 3.79 for the ESs and 3.73 for the MSs). They not only gained confidence in interacting with Australians/Chinese (Statement 4, with 4.29 for the ESs and 3.31 for the MSs), but also began to understand the Australian/Chinese way of thinking (Statement 11, with 3.57 for the ESs and 3.92 for the MSs). Therefore, they, especially the ESs, strongly believed that the online exchange was a good way to improve intercultural understandings **outside class** (Statement 5, with 4.57 for ESs and 3.92 for MSs).

Table 3. Mean scores and *t*-test results in regard to intercultural benefits of the online exchange ($N = 28$).

Statements	ES Mean	MS Mean	*p*
1. I understand Australian/Chinese culture better after the online exchange.	3.86	3.77	0.8008
2. The online exchange has improved my understanding of my **own culture**.	3.71	3.15	0.1545
3. I learned more about **young** people's life in Australia/China.	4.21	3.92	0.2710
4. Through the online exchange, I gained confidence in interacting with Australian/Chinese people.	4.29	3.31	0.0004*
5. Online language exchange is a good way to improve intercultural understandings **outside class**.	4.57	3.92	0.0005*
6. I tried not to make cultural differences an obstacle in our exchange.	4.29	3.92	0.2164
7. When there was a cultural difference, I tried to think from my language partner's point of view.	3.93	3.92	0.9723
8. When there was a cultural difference, I asked my partner why s/he thought so.	3.79	3.73	0.8460
9. I was interested in my partner's perspective of Chinese/ **Australian** culture.	4.43	4.15	0.3343
10. I was interested in my partner's perspective of Australian/ **Chinese** culture.	4.29	4.38	0.7133
11. I began to understand some of the Australian/Chinese ways of thinking.	3.57	3.92	0.3213
Mean average	4.09	3.83	N/A

*Statistically significant difference between ES Mean and MS Mean (*t*-test, $p < 0.05$).
Note: 1, strongly disagree; 2, disagree; 3, neutral; 4, agree; 5, strongly agree.

Among the 11 statements, statistically significant differences between the two groups' perspectives were found only in Statements 4 and 5. In Statement 4, although both groups confirmed that they had gained confidence in interacting with Australian/Chinese people, the *p* value of 0.0004 suggested that the ESs were much more affirmative than the MSs. A similar difference ($p = 0.0005$) was also present in the results for Statement 5, in which both groups regarded online exchange as a good way for improving intercultural understanding outside class but again, the ESs were much more certain than the MSs.

The above findings find support in the replies by both groups to the open questions in the written survey. Two MSs mentioned cultural understanding as their greatest benefits from the online exchange. Following an account of the linguistic benefits of the online exchange, MS11 continued that 'I must say in overall, I think this project is quite helpful in learning about Chinese culture.' To MS16, the online exchange had not only increased his confidence in 'speaking Mandarin to NSs,' but had also enabled him to gain 'a great insight into how some of the current wealthy young Chinese live their university life' and 'the perspectives they hold.' MS11 also extended her reflection by saying that the project had provided her with a 'chance to know a new friend, and that when I go over to visit China in the future, I've actually got a friend there that I would definitely like to meet and spend time with. :D.'

Corresponding to the enthusiasm felt by the MSs, half of the ESs also regarded cultural learning as their greatest benefits from the project. They stated that they had

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become more knowledgeable about Australian culture and their daily life. For example, ES8 reflected that she had obtained 'better knowledge of the country and its people' and ES14 'learned more about … how university students think or act in Australia.'

Data from the interviews with the ESs further attest the improvement in intercultural understanding as expressed in the written survey. ES7 confessed that he had never paid much attention to Australian culture before the online exchange, and that through this project he had discovered that Australian people lived 'a life of openness and relaxation' and that they were peace-loving people. ES14 felt Australian people were 'friendly, warm-hearted and outgoing.' ES8 stated that the exchange eliminated some of her misunderstandings of the Australian culture and its people, elaborating that although Australia was a sparsely populated country and the competition was not as fierce as it was in China, there was not much difference between the Australian and Chinese way of life.

Interestingly, ES3 perceived the benefits of online exchange from a different angle. When talking about the significance of the project, she elaborated that there was a difference between interacting with overseas students already in China and interacting with her online language partner. With the former, their relationship was somewhat imbalanced as she often found herself offering information about Chinese culture but not receiving information about the other party's culture. However, this project provided an opportunity for equal exchange of information and knowledge as both groups of students were in their own culture and they were keen to learn about each other's culture. As a result, she had discovered 'a different life, or even a different world.' This appreciation of the equal and balanced relationship between her and her partner further supports the principle of reciprocity in eTandem learning (O'Rourke 2007). Moreover, she had become more open-minded about other cultures because of the language exchange.

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Discussion

The linguistic benefits gained by the two groups of learners

Data discussed above indicate that online language exchange could be an effective and sustained venue for the improvement of learners' speaking skills outside class. Overall, both groups of learners thought highly of their online exchange experiences through *Skype*, with the ESs being more positive than the MSs. Aspects of improvement with the highest ES means are fluency, pronunciation and intonation and spontaneous replies; and items with the highest MS means are listening skills, new words and expressions, and pronunciation and tones. In other words, the ESs had benefited from their improvements in speaking skills in all aspects, from the basic speaking proficiency of pronunciation and intonation to the intermediate proficiency of spontaneous replies and the advanced level of fluency, while MSs accumulated vocabulary and expression and improved listening skills and basic speaking proficiency at the pronunciation and tone level. However, although they had noticed new grammatical structures in their partner's utterances (Statement 5 in Table 1), neither group, on the whole, was very positive about their gains in grammar. This is consonant with findings in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature that lexical items tend to spark negotiations of meaning more than structural items (Blake 2000; Lee 2006 cited in Darhower 2008). The low rating of grammatical

improvement could also be attributed to the short duration of the study that did not allow the students to see the transfer of new grammatical knowledge into visible results.

Another important finding from this study is the confirmation of the pedagogical values of *Skype* as an effective tool for language exchange outside the classroom. The frequent use of the text chat and the video in *Skype* as reported by both groups of students suggested that they were important features in a videoconferencing tool for the facilitation of negotiation of meaning. The need for a text-chat feature in a videoconferencing tool was also mentioned by Lee (2007, 637), who believes that the learners 'may not be able to pay attention to certain aspects of discourse due to the absence of written discourse displayed on the screen.' The importance of videoconferencing in supporting the aural/oral and visual aspects of communicative language learning has also been highly valued in the literature. For example, O'Dowd (2000, 59) found that the visual aspects of videoconferencing 'contributed to making the exchange lively and exciting and perhaps much more "life-like" than a written project would have been.' In addition, the fact that *Skype* is a freeware also makes it a sustainable tool for language learning outside the classroom.

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Improvements in the learners' intercultural understanding

In comparison to the findings relating to the linguistic benefits of the *Skype*-supported online language, data about the learners' improvements in intercultural understanding indicate an even more positive attitude across the two groups. The learners were interested in their partner's culture and their partner's views of both cultures. They made efforts to overcome barriers of cultural differences, and actively sought their partner's perspectives. These results concur with the findings by Jin and Erben (2007) that students in their study had increased their intercultural interaction engagement and attentiveness, and developed greater sensitivity and respect for intercultural differences.

It might not be feasible to assess learners' development of knowledge and skills in intercultural communication in a short period of time, as recognized by O'Dowd (2003) and Jin and Erben (2007). However, our students did confirm that they had learned much about each other's culture, especially about young people's life, clarified some misconceptions, and reflected on their own culture. In fact, they were more affirmative about the intercultural benefits gained from this research than about their improvements in their language proficiency.

Differences in the perceptions between the two groups

Despite the overall confirmation of the linguistic and intercultural gains from the online language exchange, the ESs were more positive than the MSs about almost every aspect of the learning. Probing into the reasons behind this disparity, we believe that the mismatch in language proficiency between the two groups played a crucial role in their perceptions.

At an advanced level of English with a large vocabulary and solid knowledge of grammar resulting from around 12 years of English language learning, the ESs took great advantage of the online exchange. This high level of proficiency not only enabled them to use English whenever there was a communication breakdown, but also made it easier for them to answer or ask questions with sufficient complexity

and depth. In contrast, the MSs found it very hard to express themselves freely in grammatically correct Mandarin sentences, despite the fact that they had learned the language for two years. This low speaking proficiency may be attributed to the limited exposure to an authentic Chinese learning environment in Australia. Consequently, they didn't produce as much Chinese as the ESs did English. This was further verified by the video recordings of the online sessions, which demonstrated that English was often the dominant language in the exchanges. O'Rourke (2005, 458) calls the phenomenon 'lingua franca effect' and O'Rourke (2007, 58) further points out that it is a particular risk in synchronous interactions, where the need to keep communication flowing takes priority over considerations of linguistic accuracy and pedagogy. Our findings also confirmed O'Rourke's (2005, 2007) contention that the 'lingua franca effect' could result in the learner with less proficient L2 benefiting less than the learner with more proficient L2.

It was also clear from our data that such a difference in language proficiency also affected the confidence level of the learner with lower proficiency. In their weekly oral report in class, the MSs often mentioned their partners' excellent English and their relatively poor Chinese. Their lack of confidence in linguistic proficiency led to their lack of confidence in communicating with Chinese people, and in turn their not-as-positive evaluation of the online exchange. As it is not always possible to find a good match in language proficiency for eTandem learning, it is thus a challenge for language professionals to properly manage the differences in proficiency, especially when it comes to language exchange outside the classroom.

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Conclusion

Through the examination of the perspectives of learners on both sides of the eTandem learning via *Skype*, this research has promoted our understanding of this type of learning in several ways. First of all, while we recognize that a one-semester long investigation is limited in scope and depth, the project had succeeded in developing both groups' linguistic competence and intercultural understanding, although with a difference in the degree of improvement. Secondly, our findings indicate that eTandem supported by *Skype* has great potential in becoming a sustainable mode of language learning outside the classroom. Used effectively, it can be an important supplement to classroom teaching in that it takes part of the learning outside the classroom and into the real world. Thirdly, this research has brought our attention to the importance of managing the differences in learners' proficiency levels. Future research needs to address this issue adequately to maximize the potential benefits of videoconferencing-supported language learning.

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Notes on contributors

Jianqiu Tian is a lecturer of English language and literature at Peking University, China (http://www.pku.edu.cn). Her research interests are CALL and language assessment.

Yuping Wang is a senior lecturer of Chinese language at Griffith University, Australia (http://www.griffith.edu.au). Her research focuses on the use of Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC) and Synchronous Learning Management Systems (SLMS) in second language learning. She has published journal articles on the use of Internet-based videoconferencing tools and SLMSs in distance and cyber face-to-face language learning.

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