The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media: exploring images of others in telecollaboration

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The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media: exploring images of others in telecollaboration

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Positioned against the background of the Council of Europe’s interest in developing intercultural competence through education, the study presented in this paper investigates the impact on intercultural visual literacy of the Council of Europe’s Images of Others – An Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media (AIEVM). In our study, the AIEVM was used within the context of an online intercultural exchange between pre-service language teachers. Findings indicate increased intercultural awareness as students at universities in Germany and Spain engaged with the visually ‘mediated other’ through working systematically with the AIEVM. Multiperspectivity and critical cultural awareness in particular were shown to be enhanced through discussing ‘images of others’ in culturally diverse tandem teams.

Keywords: intercultural communication; intercultural competence; telecollaboration; visual literacy; multiliteracies

Introduction

At the heart of the qualitative enquiry discussed in this paper is the Council of Europe’s Images of Others – An Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media (AIEVM) (Barrett, Byram, Ipgrave, & Seurrat, 2013a). The AIEVM is an educational tool that has been designed to encourage learners to engage critically with the myriad of images from all over the world with which they are confronted every day. Through structured reflection on the encounters with otherness that take place through these images, intercultural competence and visual literacy skills may be activated, which help users of the AIEVM to deconstruct the image of ‘the other’ and to understand their reaction to it in relation to their own sociocultural context(s) (Barrett, Byram, Ipgrave, & Seurrat, 2013b).

The paper describes an online intercultural exchange between pre-service English teachers at Jaén (Spain) and Dortmund (Germany) Universities in which the AIEVM both served as the pivotal tool of the tasks undertaken by participants as well as provided the conceptual framework for analysing intercultural learning demonstrated in the exchange. We position the discussion against the background of the Council of Europe’s interest in developing intercultural competence to help citizens live together in culturally diverse
societies (Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoint-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2014). The Council attributes to educators – and particularly language educators – special responsibility in this endeavour. It has consequently created educational tools such as the AIEVM and encourages methodology such as online intercultural exchanges (or ‘telecollaboration’) that may facilitate the development of intercultural competence both in and beyond the classroom. Barrett (2012, p. 4) points out, however, that the effectiveness of such activities and resources needs formal evaluation. In the case of the AIEVM, which was published on the Council of Europe website in 2013,¹ no research has as yet been conducted in language education to our knowledge. It follows that, although there is a body of research into the methodology and learning outcomes of telecollaboration, there is none in which the AIEVM has been used both as the central task and for the analysis of its outcomes. The qualitative research we report on here documents students’ responses to working with the AIEVM during the online exchange in question. Our findings suggest the positive potential of using the AIEVM in telecollaborative dialogue for developing intercultural and media awareness within the context of language education.

The role of language education in promoting intercultural competence in Europe

The Council of Europe’s White paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) defines intercultural dialogue as the, ‘open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect’ (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 9). Such dialogue, it argues, is essential for promoting tolerance, preventing conflicts, enhancing societal cohesion and thus supporting the core principles of human rights, democracy and rule of law on which the Council of Europe was founded. If intercultural dialogue is to be fruitful, however, those who engage in it must possess intercultural competence, the acquisition of which must be nurtured by educators (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 25, 2011, p. 37).

Foreign language education (FLE), according to the Council, plays a special role in promoting mutual understanding through intercultural dialogue because of its mediating function in encounters between people from other cultures (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 23). However, achieving ‘mutual understanding’ in FLE is meant here to be not so much a question of negotiating linguistic meaning with native speakers of the language (as in common understandings of communicative competence); it is, above all, the result of respectful intercultural dialogue in which participants are able and willing to adjust their own attitudes and cultural perspectives in order to understand ‘the other’ (Fenner, 2008, p. 278). The focal point of language learning thereby shifts from ‘standardised native speaker norms’ (Alpte-kin, 2002, p. 59) towards helping learners to become ‘intercultural speakers’ with the skills for mediating or interpreting any interaction between persons with significantly different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Byram & Zarate, 1996).

Frameworks and tools for facilitating intercultural competence

Various models have been formulated to describe the processes involved in acquiring intercultural competence in a range of disciplines across the social sciences.² The model that has been most widely drawn on in FLE, however, is Byram’s ‘savoirs’ framework (Byram, 1997; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Byram & Zarate, 1996), which foregrounds reflective, critical and analytical skills and attitudes (see Figure 1).
This framework informs a number of Council of Europe educational tools, including the intercultural component of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) and the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP). The framework has been further developed to constitute the theoretical underpinning of the Council’s *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (*AIE*) (Byram, Barrett, Ipgrave, Jackson, & Méndez García, 2009) and its sister tool *AIEVM* (Barrett et al., 2013a).

**The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters**

The *AIE* invites users to reflect on a specific face-to-face intercultural encounter that they have personally experienced, that is, a meeting that takes place between people who are significantly different from each other in terms of cultural identities, worldviews and practices. By focusing on the personal level of the encounter, the learner is encouraged to see the interlocutor in all their cultural complexity and less inclined to the simplification of generalisations that engender stereotyping of any kind.

Structured as a series of questions and prompts, the *AIE* guides the learner in verbalising their chosen encounter, moving from description to interpretation and evaluation of the encounter experience in a metacognitive awareness-raising process that encourages increasing depth of reflection. The conceptual framework of intercultural competence on which the questions draw comprises 11 competences grouped into 4 sub-sets (Table 1), with the last sub-set in particular – action orientation – signalling the participatory dimension of the Council of Europe’s understanding of intercultural competence, by which learners are empowered to become global citizens able to play an active part in democratic life (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 21).

In comparison with other conceptualisations of intercultural competence, the framework underpinning the *AIE*, drawing as it does on Byram’s ‘savoirs’ framework, explicitly addresses the role of language competence in facilitating reflection on verbal and non-verbal communication conventions (particularly in a foreign language), their effect on
Table 1. Framework of intercultural competences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-sets</th>
<th>Competences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Respect for otherness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respect for otherness is manifested in curiosity and openness, readiness to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>suspend belief about the naturalness of one’s own culture and to believe in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the naturalness of other cultures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>The ability to project oneself into another person’s perspective and their</td>
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<td></td>
<td>opinions, motives, ways of thinking and feelings. Empathetic persons are able</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to relate and respond in appropriate ways to the feelings, preferences and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ways of thinking of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement of identities</td>
<td>The ability to take full notice of other people’s identities and to recognise them for what they are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance of ambiguity</td>
<td>The ability to accept ambiguity and lack of clarity and to be able to deal with this constructively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge is understood in terms of general knowledge and specific knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>While general knowledge refers to knowledge of social processes and their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>products, specific knowledge refers to illustrations of those social processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and products that are part of general knowledge. Specific knowledge includes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>knowledge about how other people see themselves as well as some knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>about other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Skills of discovery and interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the restraints of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>real-time communication and interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills of interpreting and relating</td>
<td>The ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative awareness</td>
<td>The ability to recognise different linguistic conventions, different verbal and non-verbal communication conventions – especially in a foreign language – and their effects on discourse processes, and to negotiate rules appropriate for intercultural communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural flexibility</td>
<td>In interaction with others, behavioural flexibility is needed to adjust and adapt your behaviour to new situations and knowledge as they emerge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical cultural awareness</td>
<td>The ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action orientation</td>
<td>Action orientation involves possessing the willingness to undertake some activity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>alone or with others as a consequence of reflection. Action orientation has</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the aim of making a contribution to the common good and as such, it is also an</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>important aspect of Education for Democratic Citizenship. In the AIE, action</td>
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<td></td>
<td>orientation is related both to the encounter itself (i.e. did the user take any action as a result of the encounter) and, at a meta-learning level, it is related to having reflected on the encounter (i.e. did the user undertake any action as a result of working with the AIE).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Byram et al. (2009).

discourse patterns and the ability to negotiate with the interlocutor the rules for communicating between cultures (Table 1, ‘communicative awareness’). With regard to the AIEVM, the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is particularly significant as the prevalent
language of the internet which dominates so much of human exchange (Alptekin, 2013; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2003; McArthur, 2003; Seidelhofer, 2001, 2003). As such, it is the language in which many intercultural encounters through visual media are embedded and which may therefore influence the interpretation of such images.

**AIEVM**

Perceptions of otherness are not only shaped by face-to-face intercultural encounters, but also by mediated encounters that may be experienced through print media, television, multi-media, social media and so on. Because visually mediated intercultural encounters have become so very pervasive in our everyday lives due to widespread use of multimodal internet, the Council of Europe has produced a sister tool to the *AIE* that aims to facilitate the development of intercultural competence at its intersection with visual literacy by focusing on encounters with otherness through images.\(^5\) Like the *AIE*, the *AIEVM* is a cross-disciplinary resource aimed at any area of education in which these competences are needed. This includes FLE, which has a long tradition of using visuals in the classroom, though this has, with few exceptions (e.g. Corbett, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), been more for supporting linguistic development in the form of prompts for language production than for visual media literacy or intercultural education.

Like intercultural competence, visual literacy may develop on its own to a degree, but pedagogical guidance can activate the higher-order skills needed for critical engagement with images (Averginou & Ericson, 1997; Eilam, 2012; Stokes, 2002). The *AIEVM* therefore adds visual media literacy to the *AIE*'s conceptual framework, addressing awareness of the following aspects of visual media literacy in relation to intercultural contexts:

- different types of media discourse and the expectations that audiences bring to them;
- the audiences whom images address;
- specific registers;
- media production processes;
- different sources; and
- how narrative context can influence the interpretation of images by audiences.

The user of the *AIEVM* is guided in critical reflection on an image depicting a person from another culture that they have encountered in the media. By documenting their reflections, learners may become aware of the implicit messages about people from other cultures that are transmitted through visuals, consider how these may influence their thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards people from other cultures and reflect more deeply on their own cultural identity/ies vis-à-vis the cultures perceived in the images they select. The idea is that, if used repeatedly over time, learners will be able to look back at their evaluation of a range of images, thereby learning about themselves (Barrett et al., 2013b, p. 5). This metacognitive process of self-evaluation in relation to the intercultural encounter facilitates in the first instance intercultural awareness, which may be seen as the prerequisite for intercultural competence. Indeed, in the framework of intercultural competence underpinning both the *AIE* and the *AIEVM*, metacognition of the kind required for critical cultural awareness (Table 1) is treated as a component of intercultural competence in its own right and is central to the development of further competence components. Furthermore, since being visually literate involves being able to both ‘decode’ (analyse) as well as ‘encode’ (create) visuals (Ausburn & Ausburn, 1978), working with the *AIEVM* may also facilitate in learners an awareness of what is needed to create or use images in an interculturally mindful manner.
Telecollaboration, intercultural dialogue and multiliteracies practice

In the research discussed in this paper, we looked for evidence of intercultural awareness when using the AIEVM in a telecollaboration project between pre-service teachers of English. Telecollaboration in FLE refers to online intercultural exchange between students in geographically distant locations (Dooley, 2008). From the perspective of a communicative approach to FLE, telecollaboration provides opportunities for ‘meaningful communicative interaction with highly competent speakers of the language’ (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 27). In earlier forms of telecollaboration, this often involved learners of English and native speakers of English communicating in writing in each other’s language as they engaged in culturally based projects. However, many examples of telecollaboration reported in the literature use ELF, either between learners of English and native speakers of English (Lindner, forthcoming) or between groups of non-native speakers (Lindner, 2011; Prieto-Arranz, Juan-Garau, & Jacob, 2013). In these projects, it was found that the use of ELF as a shared language within a virtual environment created conditions for bonding between participants in intercultural communities of practice that seemed to favour the development of critical awareness.

Most studies on telecollaboration foreground the intercultural dimension of FLE, reporting on institutionalised exchanges between student groups in different countries. Commonly, exchange partners work together on scaffolded tasks with cultural themes in a blended learning context that allows for classroom input and reflection in each of the participating cohorts (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O’Dowd, 2003; Woodin, 2001). Intercultural learning objectives have been combined with a language development aim (Ho, 2000) and intercultural competence has been interpreted through language data (Belz, 2003, 2005). Importantly from the Council of Europe’s perspective, Starkey (2002, p. 17) reminds us of telecollaboration’s potential for linking language and intercultural learning to democratic citizenship education. Correspondingly, Helm (2013) notes that facilitators of telecollaboration should keep in mind the humanistic goals of intercultural competence proposed by the Council of Europe in an approach that promotes intercultural dialogue. Online exchanges might therefore purposefully take participants out of their comfort zones because, according to Schneider and von der Emde (2006, p. 183), ‘the open and egalitarian forms of communication imagined by the model of intercultural competence can only take place when members of different cultures learn to acknowledge and respect differences.’ By encouraging acknowledgement of difference, critical awareness is developed in a manner sometimes lacking in online exchanges that attempt to smooth out any potential misunderstanding that might lead to breakdown of communication.

A model for online exchange that has emerged in recent years, ‘telecollaboration 2.0’ (Guth & Helm, 2010), focuses on the intersection of language, intercultural and media education and explores the multiliteracies that define the communicatively competent individual in a networked, globalised world (Guth & Helm, 2010; Lindner, 2011; Lindner, forthcoming). Drawing on insights from a telecollaboration project, Hauck (2010) suggests that multimodal communicative competence – ‘i.e. the ability to understand the combined potential of various modes of meaning making’ (Royce, 2002, p. 226), including written and spoken language and visual resources – is directly linked to the ability to analyse the cultural make-up of a learning environment and the acquisition of intercultural competence (as defined by Byram’s ‘savoirs’). This is a challenging mix, which, as Hauck points out, needs to be taken into account both in learner and tutor training for telecollaboration and in the design of telecollaboration tasks.
This last point brings the discussion to the rationale behind the present study, in which the AIEVM was used both as the central task and as the tool of analysis in an online exchange aimed at facilitating multiliteracies development with particular focus on the intersection between intercultural learning and visual media literacy. The rest of this paper presents the exchange context, the research conducted on the exchange and the study’s findings.

Exchange and research rationale, participants and procedures
Byram’s ‘savoirs’ framework for intercultural competence has been implemented in several studies of telecollaboration for the quantitative and qualitative analysis of exchange data gathered from online protocols (Belz, 2002; O’Dowd, 2003) and research diaries (Helm, 2009; Woodin, 2001) as well as in qualitative analysis of interviews and questionnaires conducted during and after exchanges (O’Dowd, 2003, 2006; Lázár, 2014). The further development of that framework, that is, the model underpinning the AIEVM, has not been previously applied to telecollaboration.

The authors of this paper, both of whom were involved in the development of the AIEVM, were interested in investigating its effectiveness in facilitating intercultural awareness in response to both Barrett’s advice that such tools must be formally evaluated (Barrett, 2012) and the White paper’s recommendation that intercultural education should be introduced in the initial training of teachers (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 25). Furthermore, as the piloting phase of the AIEVM had been conducted in face-to-face teaching environments only, the authors wanted to explore whether its implementation in a multimodal telecollaborative setting might enhance learning, for example, through more opportunities for multi-perspectivity. With this in mind, a two-week exchange was set up between students at Jaén and Dortmund Universities, all of whom were studying English with a view to entering the teaching profession. English was used as a lingua franca, with all participants being native speakers of other languages (mainly Spanish and German). The proficiency levels of participants ranged from an upper-intermediate to an advanced command of the language.

Through data collected during and after the exchange, the authors looked firstly for evidence of intercultural awareness specifically through working with the AIEVM, and secondly at whether the online exchange built around tandem discussion of students’ AIEVMs added another layer of critical insight into ‘self’ vis-à-vis the mediated ‘other’. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. Does the AIEVM facilitate critical thinking about and understanding of implicit messages in the images of otherness portrayed by visual media?
2. Is there evidence of intercultural learning through the use of the AIEVM?
3. Does working with the AIEVM benefit from intercultural exchange?
4. Does telecollaboration enhance working with the AIEVM?

Working within a blended learning framework that allowed for in-class reflection, discussion and debriefing in the participating cohorts and using a Wikispaces wiki as the main medium of exchange between the two student groups, participants engaged in a series of tasks aimed at raising awareness of the role of visual literacy in intercultural learning. During the first week of the project, all participants (12 from Jaén and 11 from Dortmund, 18 women and 5 men aged 20–25) worked together on tasks in which they introduced themselves, explored the learning environment and the principles of telecollaboration, then completed preliminary visual literacy awareness-raising activities. They subsequently moved on to the main task,
which involved individually completing the AIEVM, then working in tandems in the wiki to discuss perspectives on each other’s AIEVM images. Finally, the tandems were asked to submit a joint reflection on their insights gained from the project. The joint reflections constituted one source of data for the analysis. Other sources were:

- the preliminary forum discussions in the wiki about images in a cultural context;
- the tandem discussions about each other’s AIEVMs;
- a post-project questionnaire about students’ experience of the project (anonymous feedback);
- the authors’ notes on the in-class debriefing carried out face to face in each institution at the end of the exchange.

The data sources provided a wealth of information for qualitative analysis that was first analysed by the authors individually, then by comparing results to reach a joint understanding of the issues that surfaced. These issues are discussed in the next section.

Discussion of findings

Critical thinking about visual literacy and the AIEVM

Visual literacy in the AIEVM is considered an integral component of intercultural competence. The first research question aimed to find out whether the AIEVM’s encouragement of structured reflection on an image of a person from another culture prompted critical thinking about otherness portrayed in visual media. Students’ comments during the exchange and responses in the post-exchange survey show instances of critical thinking about the affordances of the AIEVM for developing visual literacy in various ways (Table 2).6

Table 2. Critical thinking about visual literacy and the AIEVM.

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<tr>
<td>[1] You learn to analyse every single thing shown in a picture. Sometimes, there are some hidden things that can be discovered when you answer the question. (S.R.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>[2] Through working with the AIEVM I kind of sharpened the way of ‘reading’ and regarding different pictures that show people from different cultural backgrounds. (S.R.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>[3] I was kind of shocked by all the different and detailed questions. As I answered (most of) them I got an impression of how to ‘read’ different pictures and to look on their background and the people who are shown. (T.D.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>[4] The AIEVM offers a great opportunity to ‘look behind’ a given image, i.e. to think about it, reflect the information that it gives us and investigate further. (T.D.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>[5] It was interesting to see how Spanish students see the depiction of their culture! That made me think of the depiction of Germany/Germans – always punctual, very hard working, grumpy (which is true! ;)), love sauerkraut, etc … these prejudices are quite funny, however, when having negative depictions of political or social realities of a country, misrepresentation can become a very dangerous tool. Information spreads fast and it’s hard – almost impossible – to put things right after half of the world. Thus, by a project like this, one learns important tools/ways of looking at things which are generally very important – it’s important to teach/learn certain ‘Bildkompetenzen’. (S.R.1)</td>
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<td>[6] It gives one new ideas and raises questions that inspire you to think productively about it, question it, put it into a new context, etc … The AIEVM inspires you to think critically and is thus a very helpful tool. (T.D.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>[7] The AIEVM is really useful to make pupils aware of their representation and the other. It invites them to critical thinking. If one wants to think about the representation of another group of people, it is really important to be self-reflective to think critically about the representation of one’s own. (T.D.7)</td>
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The structure of the AIEVM with its guiding questions and prompts facilitated in-depth scrutiny of the chosen image and thus enabled participants to ‘discover’ aspects of the image and the media production processes involved in its creation that might otherwise not have surfaced (see [1]). Furthermore, as indicated in [4], it can motivate learners to develop their knowledge of these processes through further exploration. Although one learner was ‘shocked’ by the AIEVM’s many questions, the process of systematically working through them can enhance the learner’s ability to analyse the image and the cultural context of the people portrayed in it ([2] and [3]). This scaffolded process of ‘reading’ images is enhanced through comparison. Reflecting on the partner’s depiction of their culture, for example, seems in [5] to set in motion a process of introspection as the learner questions how their culture may be perceived by others, the ease and danger of misrepresentation in visual media and the difficulty of overriding stereotypes about a community once spread by the mass media. The affordances of the AIEVM in developing ‘Bildkompetenzen’ (visual literacies) are therefore perceived to be important in raising awareness of these issues. This point is supported by [6] and [7], which state the value of the AIEVM in encouraging the learner to think critically about the cultural positioning of images – both by the creator and by the different people who will view the image from their own sociocultural perspectives. The comments made by students therefore generally demonstrate how working with the AIEVM led to critical reflection on the relationship between visual media and perspectives of culture. Furthermore, in keeping with the Council of Europe’s belief that educators have a role to play in facilitating intercultural learning, the student in [7] is even prompted to project beyond her own learning about the visually mediated ‘other’ to her future responsibility as an educator with pupils for whom she thinks the AIEVM could be a useful tool for developing critical thinking about ‘self’, ‘other’ and their portrayal in visual media.

Developing intercultural awareness through working with the AIEVM

Writing within the context of FLE, Driscoll, Earl, and Cable (2013) note that, if education aims at developing tolerance, empathy and promoting global citizenship, ‘the level of reflection needs to be raised beyond discussions of the tangible and recognisable, so that children develop a deepening awareness of how culture impacts on their lives and the lives of others’ (Driscoll et al., 2013, p. 156). The AIEVM is intended to initiate thinking beyond the ‘tangible and recognisable’, engendering in the learner awareness of themselves not only in relation to the specific encounter with ‘the other’ represented by the image they select for the AIEVM, but also beyond that, through critical reflection, a deeper understanding of their own cultural identity in relation to others more generally.

Students’ accounts of working with the AIEVM in the research reported here do suggest that the AIEVM supports the development of intercultural awareness beyond the tangible. When asked in relation to the second research question which aspects of the AIEVM were particularly useful for intercultural learning (Table 3), one student noted that writing about the encounter and, guided by the prompts, reflecting on the original narrative ‘triggered’ critical thinking [1]. This tallies with Kilianska-Przybylo’s (2012) observations on using the AIE in narrative enquiry. She suggests that, in the process of narrating an intercultural encounter, aspects may surface that are otherwise indiscernible and the values underlying the original narrative may be challenged, thus leading to insights that activate intercultural learning – or, in the case of [1] below, particularly critical cultural awareness regarding the media processes involved in image-making. Holmes and O’Neill (2010) suggest that, in documenting the intercultural encounter as a written narrative, the AIE facilitates self-assessment of
intercultural competence and an understanding of self in relation to other. Correspondingly, students in this study foregrounded the significance they perceived in the AIEVM section ‘same and different’ [2 and 3], which draws on skills of interpreting and relating, critical cultural awareness, behavioural flexibility, empathy and respect for otherness, all of them being elements of intercultural competence as defined in the AIEVM Notes for Facilitators (Barrett et al., 2013b). Similarly, the other sections students considered particularly useful for intercultural reflection and learning – ‘the feelings of other people’ and ‘your feelings’ [4–6] – draw on the attitudinal competence sub-set of respect for otherness, empathy, acknowledgement of identities and tolerance of ambiguity (Table 1). The repeated shift in focus – from the AIEVM user to the person depicted in the image and from how the user felt at the time of the encounter compared to how they feel in retrospect when doing the AIEVM (as in the section ‘Thinking back and looking forward’, referred to in [3]) – seems to have been particularly useful in raising intercultural awareness through comparison of self and other at different points in time.

### Table 3. Aspects of the AIEVM considered significant for intercultural learning.

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The parts where you write about yourself, then you answer the questions – and then you are asked to think about yourself again – in connection with the raised questions/thoughts. And questions where you are asked to think about your reaction – why did you react in that way, what influenced you, etc. This triggers critical thinking, which is very important nowadays, since we are constantly confronted with influential and manipulative images. (S.R.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Same and Different [...] made me think of all the things I might have in common with the woman on my picture. It is important for the students to learn that they have something in common with people they don’t know (living standard, character traits, clothing, hobby...). (S.R.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Same and different. It makes the user compare the image to his/her own community and put things into perspective. Thinking back and looking forward. It summarises many of the questions spread over previous parts. (S.R.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The feelings of other people and Your feelings. You can find out more about yourself and you become aware of what makes you to be the human you are and in which way your cultural and ethnic background influences your way of thinking and your subconscious mind. (S.R.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The feelings of other people. I tried to stay away from my mind and my views and attempt to be as open-minded as possible. It is a great effort to make, but very worthy and tolerant. (S.R.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The part where you have to image being the person on the photo is very useful for intercultural reflection since you have to empathize with the person on the photo. (S.R.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I became aware of why I am the way I am, because through working with the AIEVM, one had to automatically reflect about this and so one can reach a state of understanding in how far the cultural background influences one’s way of thinking and acting. (S.R.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The AIEVM not only made me think about the image, but also about myself and my relation to the culture I was raised in. Thinking about a striking image is something that probably everybody does. However, the difference between doing it on your own and going through the AIEVM is the extent to which you do it. Being confronted with all those questions makes you connect your direct impressions with issues seemingly far away from the image. (T.D.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>If you know how to define yourself, you are able to define other people. A definition always needs another which is different to one self. I also think that the AIEVM contains the self-reflective part due to that reason, because it is much easier to define others if you have a clear definition of yourself. Some might think that I’m referring to the process of Othering, but in my opinion, having self-awareness that helps to define other cultures can also have a positive connotation. You should appreciate otherness and differences like flavours in meal :) (T.D.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Through empathizing myself with the people in the image, I got a better understanding of their situation. (S.R.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The AIEVM and other methods that promote intercultural relations might be the perfect ‘weapon’ to break up with racist perceptions that just harm our society. (S.R.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students’ comments suggest that the way the AIEVM generally encourages thorough reflection stimulated critical thinking that started with self-definition in relation to the person portrayed in the image ([7–10]) and moved on to issues beyond that immediate relationship ‘seemingly far away from the image’ [8]. The concept of ‘Othering’ mentioned in [10], for example, is generally understood to imply purposeful creation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ categories, exclusion of ‘them’ (e.g. ethnic minorities) and power relations between different cultural groups. Here, however, the respondent equates ‘Othering’ positively with diversity, analogous to savouring different yet complementary flavours in a meal. Taking this idea further, the respondent in [11] touches on the bigger political picture, ascribing to the AIEVM a role in dispelling harmful racist perceptions, which is, as discussed above, central to the Council of Europe’s objectives in creating educational tools like the AIEVM.

The findings with regard to the second research question, whether there is evidence of intercultural learning through the use of the AIEVM, can therefore be positively confirmed insofar as students’ accounts of their experience of working with the AIEVM particularly triggered intercultural awareness that transcended the image itself and prompted critical reflection on the wider implications of intercultural understanding.

The impact of telecollaboration on working with the AIEVM

Research questions (3) and (4) were based on the underlying hypothesis that working online in culturally mixed tandems might enhance multiperspective reflection on the AIEVM images and hence impact positively on learning outcomes. Five main themes emerged from the data in relation to these questions: motivation, perception of similarity, perception of difference, the importance of respect for otherness and the affordances of the online environment in facilitating dialogue.

Motivation

Working on a project with a group of students at a different university in another country proved overall to be a motivating experience, as shown by the comments in Table 4, and was described in the wiki and the post-project questionnaire as ‘enjoyable’, ‘amazing’, ‘pretty good’, ‘positive’, ‘nice’, ‘great’ and ‘interesting’. However, the tight schedule for completing tasks proved difficult for some tandems to manage, so that in a couple of tandems there was uneven contribution to the exchange or even complete breakdown of communication, as reported in [5].

Problems of this kind, from issues of participatory behaviour to socio-institutional misalignments, are reported in many discussions of telecollaboration, signalling the challenges

Table 4. Impact on motivation.

[1] I would also love to repeat it because it is always nice to be in an exchange with students from different countries. (T.D.6)
[2] I really liked our project because getting to know other people from different countries sounds always great to me. (S.R.8)
[3] Working online with people from a different country is amazing, still it was hard to schedule the whole thing. (T.D.7)
[4] I like the idea of the project because it gave us the opportunity to get to know people from another culture. It was a pity that most of us had problems with the time management. (S.R.9)
[5] Unfortunately, we didn’t exchange any reflections. (S.R.4)
it poses students and teachers alike – see, for example, Ware (2005), O’Dowd and Ritter (2006), Thorne (2003), Belz (2002, 2003) and Müller-Hartmann (2000). However, given that the intention of the facilitators of the exchange reported here was to provide pre-service teachers with an initial introduction to telecollaboration as an activity they might implement in their own future classrooms, the overall positive resonance shows that it was a stimulating intercultural learning experience for most participants.

Perceived similarity

A striking aspect of the project was that there was some similarity in both groups in the choice and interpretation of images and also that students claimed cultural similarity, suggesting a shared mindset (Table 5). This may be explained by the fact that the participants were indeed affiliated to at least one common culture (e.g. all being students of English of roughly the same age, the majority being female and with a view to entering the teaching profession). It may also be explained by theories of relationship and trust-building which suggest that identification of similarities can play a critical role in the development of intergroup relationships. Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, for example, states that people tend to be less prejudiced with regard to those from other groups when they come into contact with each other under conditions conducive to intergroup interaction. These include being of equal status, having common goals and intergroup cooperation, all of which were present in the telecollaborative situation. In a similar vein, Tajfel (1981) shows that, without perceived similarities, there is a tendency for members of different groups of the same kind (e.g. ethnic groups or football supporters from different teams) to look down on each other, and to compete with each other. Looking for similarities may therefore be interpreted as a mechanism intuitively used by students to facilitate the exchange.

Guerrero and Gudykunst (1996) on the other hand, argue that, in order for effective communication to occur, individuals must be aware of the similarities and the differences they have with strangers. Focusing on perceived similarities such as cultural background, lifestyle and attitude can reduce the anxiety and uncertainty often present in the early stages of a relationship (Guerrero & Gudykunst, 1996, p. 65). Lindner (forthcoming) also observes that, in telecollaboration that is conducted by written exchange (e.g. in a wiki) as opposed to visual exchange (e.g. video conferencing), awareness of difference may be reduced, which enables project teams to focus on team collaboration and complete set tasks ‘successfully’. However, while mutual understanding through perceived similarity may well be ‘motivating’ [7] and conducive to collaboration, it may not, ultimately, be conducive to intercultural learning, for which awareness of difference is also required (Schneider & von der Emde, 2006). In later stages of the exchange, observations of difference did indeed emerge, as the next theme shows.

Table 5. Perceived similarities.

[1] If the tandem partners did not have Spanish names and uploaded pictures from Spain, they could have come from anywhere in Germany as well. I did not have a feeling of speaking to totally different people. (S.R.4)
[2] In my experience with German students, ideologies are not that different and the impressions on images have been quite alike. (S.R.3)
[3] I wonder if the fact that we are from different cultures really made such a big difference […] Though, it was a little motivation-boost to work with people one doesn’t know – at least to me. I can’t really explain why, it just made it more interesting! (S.R.1)
Perceived difference

In comments [1] and [4] in Table 6, students acknowledge the idea that people in an encounter – here the encounter of the tandem partners – may have both similarities and differences in ways of being, ways of doing and ways of thinking. The corresponding AIEVM section ‘same and different’ draws on the skill identified in the theoretical framework underpinning the AIE(VM) of ‘interpreting and relating’ in order to identify and understand similarities and differences between the perspectives, practices and products of different cultures. This may lead users to question their own perspectives, as shown in [2] and [6], which involves exercising critical cultural awareness. Comparison of similarity and difference in telecollaboration may also involve acquiring new cultural knowledge ([3] and [7]) and the development of multiperspectivity [5]. Notably, comment [1] links the micro perspective of the exchange to the wider perspective of the global citizen. While the student recognises cultural and identity differences, she also points out that all people share basic human needs that transcend these differences. This is significant insofar as Council of Europe tools for developing intercultural competence, including the AIE, have been criticised for focusing too much on individual-level interpersonal skills that cannot possibly address the larger political concerns of discrimination and oppression (Hoskins & Sallah, 2011). The critique is valid and the Council recognises that, ‘the development of intercultural competence through education needs to be implemented in conjunction with and alongside measures to tackle inequalities and structural disadvantages’ (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 24). At the same time, focusing on the micro level of encounter can also engender reflection on the broader political level, as comment [1] shows, and this may be seen as a first step towards developing the intercultural awareness required by the global citizen who is capable and willing to participate in the kind of intercultural dialogue that is essential for promoting tolerance, preventing conflicts and enhancing societal cohesion (Barrett et al., 2014; Council of Europe, 2008).

Table 6. Perceived differences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[1]</td>
<td>Both of us reflected equal feelings towards similar emotions such as fear or despair in also similar situations such as war, confrontations, etc. Both German and Spanish people (and probably the rest of the world) conceive some concrete feelings (especially negative ones) in a similar way, and consequently our reactions towards them. Of course, the equalities imply that we are not as different as we appear, that we probably differ in logic terms such as country, language or culture. Nevertheless, naturally, we are all human beings with a series of basic thoughts or vital needs, no matter the ethnicity or secondary differences. (T.D.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[2]</td>
<td>I have enjoyed a lot with the contributions of my partners and sometimes they have made me think about something that I did not think before. (S.R.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[3]</td>
<td>The discussion forum revealed some differences in our cultures which I did not know before. (S.R.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[4]</td>
<td>It was interesting to see that we have a lot of things in common but that there are also some differences. (S.R.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[5]</td>
<td>This kind of activity is very enriching. The interpretations of these images are an even better way to understand our similarities and differences. (T.D.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[6]</td>
<td>This kind of activity helps you to realise how different people’s ideas can be and it also makes you either question or reinforce yours. (S.R.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[7]</td>
<td>The exchange is great because we have learnt so much about different cultural backgrounds. (T.D.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respecting otherness

Being interculturally competent, according to the *AIEVM Notes for Facilitators* (Barrett et al., 2013b), includes respect for otherness, which involves the willingness to suspend one’s own cultural values, beliefs and behaviours and to enter into respectful dialogue even when there is difference or disagreement. The comments recorded in Table 7 show students’ awareness of the importance of this aspect of intercultural competence both on the interpersonal level and, again, on a broader cultural level.

Comment [2] links respect for otherness to the integral role that language skills play in facilitating intercultural dialogue. In fact, comments on language and communication were relatively infrequent in this data-set, the majority of them made in response to the affordances of the online learning environment in facilitating dialogue, as will be discussed in the next section.

Affordances of the online platform in facilitating dialogue and intercultural communication

For this project, the facilitators asked students to conduct discussions in the dedicated wiki, on the one hand, so that they could follow the development of the exchange more closely and, on the other, to keep the exchange focused. Generally, participants agreed that the wiki facilitated communication (see [1] and [6] in Table 8). It may have seemed strange entering into dialogue about the *AIEVM* in the open wiki [5], but this fact did not prevent exchange, as seen in [5] and [7] in Table 8. The wiki was also suited to recording the process and outcomes of the task [1 and 2] and its affordances supported the participatory, cooperative work culture [3], which engendered a feeling of team responsibility in completing the set tasks successfully [4], even if this was stressful at times due to time pressure. Above all, it was the wiki that enabled students to exchange perspectives on a subject beyond the walls of their regular classroom and learning culture. It has the potential, as comment [6] suggests, to ‘make people open-minded and tolerant with the rest of the world’. Finally, the affordances of the online platform in facilitating dialogue can be summarised by learners’ involvement with otherness and their willingness to work with their tandem partners again in the future [7].

The affordances of the wiki in supporting the willingness to collaborate together with the use of English as the lingua franca of the exchange might again be seen as evidence supporting the Allportian theory that equal status (here in terms of the language) and common goals (the project conducted in the wiki) can enable different groups to work together successfully and without prejudice. The asynchronous nature of telecollaboration in the wiki, both in the wiki pages themselves and in the forums, allowed participants to read and process information at their own pace and to carefully explain and edit their responses without the pressure of synchronous face-to-face communication, which might have engendered misunderstandings despite students’ upper-intermediate to advanced

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Table 7. Respect for otherness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[1]</td>
<td>This project showed me that all our opinions have a valid and respectful reason or background we must accept and understand, no matter if we disagree about them. (S.R.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[2]</td>
<td>I learnt that we can be quite receptive when we have to talk to people from different countries; and the most vital element, to respect one another. It does not only favour our use and level of English, but also our attitudes, behaviours or manners to the rest of people. (S.R.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[3]</td>
<td>No culture or country is superior to the rest. (S.R.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
command of English and shared affiliations (e.g. all being students of English of roughly the same age and with a view to entering the teaching profession). Indeed, the general lack of communication problems, as already observed above, was evident throughout the exchange. The only instance when the English language is specifically mentioned by a student is to state that projects like this ‘favour our use and level of English’ (S.R.2).

Conclusion

The research findings from this study show clear instances of students demonstrating intercultural awareness and critical thinking about the implicit messages in the images of otherness portrayed by visual media. They do so on a metacognitive level as they comment on their experience of selecting, narrating and reflecting on a visually mediated intercultural encounter, first on their own with the AIEVM and then in tandem discussion of each other’s AIEVMs. Their comments also show that the telecollaborative framework enhanced working with the AIEVM firstly through more opportunities for multiperspectivity; secondly insofar as participants seemed motivated to work with the AIEVM in tandem – a task that can be initially daunting because of the ‘shocking’ number of questions and prompts (Table 3 [3]); thirdly in endeavouring to understand the other’s assumptions, attitudes and perspectives and to explain one’s own; fourthly through preliminary forum discussions about visual literacy; and finally through articulating joint reflection on the whole process. To this extent, the research questions guiding the study can be confirmed.

The authors of this study acknowledge, however, that the results are subject to limitations. Possibly due to the tight schedule, communication was unsuccessful in a couple of tandems in terms of quality and quantity of input or even broke down completely. It is remarkable, though, that participants whose tandem discussion was less successful said that it was due to the difficulty of coping with the task within the scheduled periods rather than being an issue of intercultural miscommunication or deficient language competence. Indeed, the same tandem partners who were unwilling or unable to complete the tandem exchange demonstrated a high command of English in the in-class sessions. For this reason, the fact that the AIEVMs themselves were in some cases shallow or sketchy
could also be attributed to time rather than language constraints, either because it was time consuming to answer all the questions in the *AIEVM*, or because more time was needed to introduce the *AIEVM* and its principles, to select an ‘encounter’ that could be usefully analysed and to prepare the ground for discussion of perspectives. Despite these limitations, useful insights could be gained into the potential effectiveness of the *AIEVM* as a tool for promoting intercultural learning within language education. With regard to the White Paper’s recommendation that intercultural education should be introduced in the initial training of teachers (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 25), it can be said that the use of the *AIEVM* within an intercultural exchange proved an effective experiential framework for providing pre-service teachers with an introduction to the principles and practice of and tools and methodologies for intercultural education.

Notes
1. Both the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE)* and *AIEVM* can be found on the Council of Europe website in the standard version and a version for young learners. The website also provides accompanying Notes for Facilitators, which explain the relationship between the questions in the *AIEVM* and the underlying framework of intercultural competence, as well as access to an introductory online course for educators who would like to work with the *AIE*: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default_en.asp)
2. For an overview, see e.g. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009).
3. The Council of Europe’s *ELP* website is at: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/)
5. Intercultural encounters through social media will be addressed in a separate Council of Europe Autobiography.
6. T.D. refers to Telecollaboration Discussion and S.R. refers to Survey Response. Both abbreviations are followed by a number indicating the T.D. or S.R. number in the data analysis.

References


Ware, P. (2005). ‘Missed’ communication in online communication: Tensions in a German-American telecollaboration. Language Learning and Technology, 9(2), 64–89.