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## **Shaping the teaching and learning of intercultural communication through virtual mobility**



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### **Abstract**

The globally mobile reality of today's world has made the field of intercultural communication increasingly relevant as people more often find themselves in intercultural situations. As a result, language teachers must be more prepared to work in intercultural contexts, and to teach their own students how to communicate across differences in intercultural situations both physically and virtually. The present paper examines this special issue's topic of physical and virtual mobility and intercultural competence through the lens of teacher education. Using narrative inquiry, two teacher educators in very different geographic and socio-economic contexts (US and Colombia) explore their own attempts at developing intercultural communication in teacher learners through a WhatsApp pen pal exchange project in their intercultural communication classes before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings reveal different ways in which virtual mobility and other affordances of WhatsApp can be harnessed to achieve various aims of intercultural education, but also how activities such as the pen pal exchange can be improved in order to align more with current theories of intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, WhatsApp, teacher education, virtual mobility, interculturality

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### **Introduction**

For a variety of reasons including increased migration and globalization, the world is more connected than ever before, with people moving between virtual and physical spaces. There is a shared sense in the field of language education that language teachers must be more prepared to

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work in intercultural contexts, and to teach their own students how to communicate across differences in intercultural situations both physically and virtually. The present paper approaches this special issue's topic of physical and virtual and mobility through the lens of teacher education. Using narrative inquiry as a method, we (teacher educators in two very different geographic and socio-economic contexts of the US and Colombia) explore our own attempts at developing the interculturality of our students (aka teacher learners) via a WhatsApp "pen pal" exchange before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a storied account of the WhatsApp exchanges, we also consider how other teacher educators can be more prepared to support intercultural communication through virtual mobility.

### **Core Concepts in Intercultural Communication Education**

Before describing our WhatsApp project, we need to define major overlapping concepts in this area such as *intercultural communication skills*, *intercultural communicative competence*, *critical cultural awareness*, and *interculturality*. *Intercultural communication skills* are the general abilities needed to communicate across differences (e.g., breaking down stereotypes, negotiating meaning, using nonverbal communication, and observing others [Jackson, 2014]). *Intercultural communicative competence* (ICC), and specifically Michael Byram's model (1997), emphasizes the importance of language in intercultural interactions as well as building relationships while valuing different perspectives and worldviews. At the core of ICC development is *critical cultural awareness*, which Byram defines as 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" (1997, p. 53).

Recently *interculturality* has been recognized as a more inclusive term since it "highlights the reciprocal interaction across cultures, mutual sharing, cultural creation and common growth, and captures the multiple dimensions of intercultural relations" (Dai & Chen, 2015, p. 102). Scholars in the field also use this term to emphasize that it is about more than just intercultural competence. *Interculturality* is about the development of effective communication with those who are different and about establishing harmonious and mutually accepting relations (Azhar, 2009, p. 76). As a pedagogical goal, developing interculturality in teacher/language learners means they will learn to be "intercultural beings with the necessary cultural understandings, intercultural awareness, and appropriate attitudes to function productively" in their own cultural contexts (Azhar, 2009, p. 70), and they will be able to "transcend differences for the development of intercultural harmony" (Dai & Chen, 2015, p. 108). Throughout our paper (and in our teaching) we align our work with this notion of interculturality, using the term to encompass ICC but also to emphasize the relationship building and dynamic nature of the process.

### **Critical Theories in Intercultural Education**

We draw on several critical theories and frameworks for approaching intercultural communication and mobility in this study. An important angle from which to approach intercultural communication teacher education is through decolonizing theory (Martin, Pirbhai-Illich, & Pete, 2017). Gorski's groundbreaking work on the decolonizing of intercultural education is especially important because it calls for "shifts in consciousness that acknowledge sociopolitical context, raise questions regarding control and power, and inform, rather than deferring to, shifts in practice" (2008, p. 522). Along with Dervin (2011), Moloney and Oguro (2016), and Sorrells (2016), Gorski recognizes that some practices of intercultural education have actually been counterproductive and lead to more simplistic comparisons, stereotyping, and essentializing of cultures. Furthermore, intercultural educators are often in danger of accentuating rather than undermining "existing social and political hierarchies" (Gorski, 2008, p. 516). This is because too many teacher educators introduce intercultural concepts

like discrimination while avoiding the problematizing of their and their students' own privilege. Gorski (2008) suggests that teacher educators actively work to resolve injustices instead of just talking about the injustices. He also discounts the idea that educators can be "neutral" and instead, suggests they take an overt stand "against domination and for liberation; against hegemony and for critical consciousness; against marginalization and for justice" (Gorski, 2008, p. 523), which means just tolerating or even accepting other cultural perspectives is not enough.

Dervin's (2016) work on 'simplicity' is also important in framing ways to improve intercultural education. Simplicity refers to "the experiential continuum that every social being has to face on a daily basis" and the need to "navigate between simple and complex ideas and opinions, when we interact with others" (Dervin, 2016, p. 8). In other words, intercultural pedagogy implies students go beyond essentialism and focus on the co-construction of discourses, identities, and dialogical positions, and this includes critical cultural awareness (which we discuss below). Dervin also critiques intercultural education for assuming that all intercultural goals will be immediately fulfilled and always successful, rather, he says we need to accept that sometimes we learn through failure as well. As such, we need to find more realistic aims for the field.

Related to Dervin's work, critical cultural/language awareness is also important to understanding current models of intercultural education (Byram, 1997; Kubota & McKay, 2009; Nugent & Catalano, 2015). Kubota and McKay (2009, p. 616) point to the role of critical language awareness in recognizing the "invisible symbolic power" of languages such as English (and other dominant languages of wider communication) while at the same time promoting multilingualism (Kubota & McKay, 2009, p. 616). Nugent and Catalano (2015, p. 17) suggest that not only do we need to provide opportunities for students to develop critical cultural awareness, we have to give students time to "identify and reflect upon their preconceived ideas, judgments, and stereotypes" when working across differences.

As regards language hierarchies, Holliday (2003, 2005, 2006) refers to the ideology in which native speakers (of English) are perceived as better language models and superior teachers than non-native speakers as 'native-speakerism'. Lowe and Kiczkowiak (2016) de-mystify these grand narratives which over-simplify and over-generalize strengths and deficits in teachers, examining the ways in which power, privilege, and prejudice interact in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Their duoethnographic study which explored the effects of native-speakerism on the lives of one 'native' and one 'non-native' speaker found that effects of native-speakerism can vary greatly depending on the individual, and that native-speakerism can influence the lives and careers of language teachers in different ways. This is because they construct a variety of perceptions, notions, and even stereotypes that may have a profound impact on their career trajectories, pedagogical practices, empathy with students, and consciousness of inequality in the profession. The authors encourage more work that explores the effects of native-speakerism and its relationship to stereotyping and 'Othering' with the aim of "promoting understanding" (Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016, p. 13).

Before moving on to discuss WhatsApp and the development of interculturality, it's worth noting that prior to the WhatsApp exchange, teacher learners had completed a variety of readings on critical theories of intercultural education (including some of the scholars cited above) and had class discussions about critical cultural awareness and other concepts discussed in this section and the previous one. As such, our teacher education classes and the activity presented in this study are rooted in critical understandings of what it means to communicate interculturality.

### WhatsApp: Affordances and Connection to Interculturality

To understand the use of WhatsApp in this study, we must consider the affordances of this digital application and how they align with intercultural aims. The term *affordances* originated in the work of James Gibson (1977) and generally refers to the “perceived and actual fundamental properties of a thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used” (Norman, 1988, p. 9). In essence, affordances tell us what we perceive we can do with things. In conjunction with mobile instant messaging (MIM) devices like WhatsApp, Tang & Hew (2017, p. 89) identify three different types of affordances: *technological affordances*, which relate to the tasks the application allows users to perform; *social affordances*, which involves the potential to improve how much one perceives the presence of the other user in the communication (known as *online social presence*) and to express feelings, mood, and emotions; and *pedagogical affordances*, which include teaching and learning activities that users are enabled to perform such as dialoguing about a topic or asking a teacher or peers for help.

In Tang & Hew’s (2017) review of research on MIMs (which includes WhatsApp), they found that the four most frequent technological affordances mentioned in the research were temporal (being able to access and create messages at any time anywhere there is Wifi), user-friendly (e.g., users can take a photo using the mobile phone built-in camera, attach it immediately to the app, type some text to accompany the photo, and send it to some other people very easily), minimal cost, and multimodality features (e.g., emojis, use of image or video) (Tang & Hew, 2017, p. 100). They also found that MIMs like WhatsApp aid in developing social presence and help users project themselves as “as real people” when using the device due to presence awareness and multimodality which helped them express emotions (e.g., emojis) (Tang & Hew, 2017, p. 101). In terms of pedagogical affordances, Tang & Hew found that MIMs can support language learning especially in terms of transmissive affordances (ease of delivery of information to teachers or students), dialogic activities such as focused discussion and question-and-response on specific topics, and they are particularly useful in the context of foreign or second language learning (Tang & Hew, 2017, p. 102).

Several studies have examined the affordances (and challenges) of WhatsApp specifically in developing interculturality of students. For example, García-Gomez (2020) studied WhatsApp interactions among British and Spanish university students and found many of the interactions to be hostile due to “failed attempts to understand and negotiate each other’s intended meaning in interaction” (García-Gómez, 2020, p. 27). Conversely, Keogh and Robles’ (2018) study on students in an International Relations class found that WhatsApp allowed language learners a space “where true dialogue and meaningful interaction may occur,” and they showed how it provided a space for “encouraging discussion, participation and enhancement of learner identity” (Keogh & Robles, 2018, p. 158). It also created opportunities beyond class time where “concepts covered in class” could be discussed “in relation to examples from the world they see around them” (Keogh & Robles, 2018, p. 158). This view of WhatsApp as a ‘safe space’ where students can share opinions has been supported by other research as well (e.g., Keogh, 2017).

Another interesting finding relating to WhatsApp use is the way in which it has helped students to see similarities when working across difference, as well as increase their intercultural awareness, and expand their cultural knowledge. For example, Mitchell and Benyon (2018) found that information systems students in South Africa and the United States using WhatsApp were surprised by similarities such as music preferences. Tulgar’s (2019) research on WhatsApp use of Turkish learners in a 3-week summer program in Turkey found that WhatsApp was an effective tool to promote intercultural interaction and help students learn about the history and cultural practices of their partners. For example, students learned about each other’s national holidays, and how they

celebrated similar holidays differently, and important social or political events happening at the time as explained through the perspective of their partner.

In short, MIMs have been found to be effective in promoting the use of language in context and the negotiation of cultural aspects for intercultural communication and cooperation (Li et al., 2011; Wirth et al., 2008). It is important to highlight that although the virtual worlds and digital platforms involve new communicative rules between individuals (Coste & Cavalli, 2015), digitally mediated intercultural communication has successfully augmented face-to-face communication, in which the traditions and habits of the physical reality remain the same and determine the type of relationships between people from different backgrounds. While the studies mentioned above inform us of the ways in which WhatsApp can develop interculturality, they did not focus on language *teachers*, who need to have this intercultural competence themselves in order to teach their students how to “communicate effectively with those who are different” (Azhar, 2009, p. 76). Hence our study centers on how teacher learners can develop interculturality using WhatsApp in order to improve their own praxis because in the process of developing interculturality themselves, they are able to access models and resources for them to develop it in their students. In addition, WhatsApp aligns nicely with our class goals of developing interculturality, particularly because of its ability to connect very different teacher learners to each other and provide an easily accessed, affordable, and user-friendly space for their intercultural interactions. It also is in line with critical theories in intercultural communication discussed in the previous section and included in class readings and discussions. This is because when teacher education and mobile technologies are seen from a critical and intercultural pedagogical approach, they imply the development of consciousness towards otherness through digital environments, based on the reading and understanding of experiences and subjectivities. In this construction of social communities, students and teachers’ voices are acknowledged and respected with the aim of building knowledge and transforming their own realities.

## Method

### Narrative inquiry

We adopted narrative inquiry as our approach since it enabled us to have an active role of co-constructing meaning from personal experience, and to view “experience as phenomenon under study” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Narrative inquiry is inspired by John Dewey’s view of human experience as a way in which humans lead storied lives, both individually and socially (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006). The idea behind narrative inquiry is that the researcher/participants come with diverse perspectives (in this case, the authors are from and currently living in two different countries- the United States and Colombia), and thus bring their own diverse assumptions and worldviews to the research process. Our stories of planning, creating, observing, and listening to/reading student accounts of the WhatsApp exchange (and then telling these stories to each other in our discussions) make up the data for our paper. Because the researchers are also the participants, institutional review board approval was waived for this study.

### Physical Mobility Brings About Virtual Mobility

We begin by telling the story of how our physical mobility allowed virtual mobility to happen. Theresa Catalano is an associate professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), a public university in the Midwest state of Nebraska in the United States. She specializes in linguistics, intercultural communication, and preparing language teachers. Andrea Muñoz Barriga is an associate professor at Universidad de la Salle (hereafter, La Salle), a private institution in Bogotá, Colombia, specializing in language didactics, intercultural communication, and preparing language teachers.

We met as keynote speakers at a symposium on research in applied linguistics in Bogotá, Colombia in November, 2019. We both (separately) gave keynote addresses which discussed various aspects of intercultural teacher education and critical discourse studies. Theresa's physical mobility (as a keynote speaker with the privilege of a paid ticket to Colombia) allowed this collaboration to happen in the first place, which highlights the importance of traveling to conferences and academic events because it is precisely through this kind of networking and social interaction that other fruitful endeavors such as this project can sprout up. After our talks we had a chance to be together on several informal occasions and we discovered that we both taught intercultural communication. We agreed that it might be interesting to try to do some kind of cultural exchange with our students, and after returning to the United States, we continued to stay in contact. In January 2020, Theresa contacted Andrea about trying out a project in our spring courses, even though our courses were on slightly different time frames with hers starting and ending after mine. We decided to establish pen pals and that WhatsApp might be the best way to get students together. We then created lists of WhatsApp numbers, names, and partners and matched students together. The U.S. class had 20 students while the Colombian class had 24, hence there were some students with two partners from Colombia. We decided that we would each do our own activity and requirements for the project since we were late in planning the activity (Theresa's class had already started) and we did not have much time to collaborate on a unified requirement for each class that suited our own needs. In addition, we felt that we each had different learning contexts and we needed to plan the activity around the needs of our own teacher learners.

The students in the United States were informed that the goal of the project was to develop interculturality by taking strategies they had learned in class (e.g., speaking slowly, using body language, avoiding stereotyping, prejudice/discrimination, etc.) and applying them to their intercultural interactions on WhatsApp. Colombian students had the same goal of practicing developing interculturality, but they were also asked to use the opportunity to develop their English. In addition, as part of their English development, they had to make a video that summarized what they learned about their partners, and then they presented information about Colombian works of art so their partners could learn more about Colombia. These videos were then sent to their partners in the United States to view at the end of the semester.

## **Background**

The pen pal exchange took place between our two different universities: The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) in the United States and Universidad de la Salle in Colombia. In the UNL graduate course on Intercultural Communication, students were all pre- or in-service teachers from a variety of teaching backgrounds. For example, while some were (or were going to be) world language teachers, others were elementary teachers pursuing an endorsement in English as a second language. Still others were secondary science teachers taking the course in order to better serve their multilingual students. All but one of the 20 UNL students were female, and 14 students identified as White, two as Asian, three as Latina, and one as Afro-Latina. Several of the students spoke languages other than English as their L1 and were originally from countries besides the United States such as Canada, Colombia, El Salvador, Vietnam, China, and Spain. Of the 24 students in the course at Universidad de la Salle, there were 16 Latinas and 8 Latinos, all originally from Colombia. They were all taking an undergraduate course on Intercultural Communication as part of their B.A. program in Spanish and Foreign Languages. Students in the Colombian group were in their ninth semester, were between the ages of 21 and 23, and had been born in the country's central region of Cundinamarca, where the capital (Bogotá) is located.

In the UNL class, students were required to participate in the six-week pen pal exchange as part of

their regular course activities (beginning March 3), including a discussion board posting about the project, and an oral class discussion, both on April 13, 2020. For the discussion board questions, students had to comment on what they learned from the experience, what the benefits were from this type of intercultural exchange, how had their thinking changed in the process, and how could the activity be improved in the future. We had originally planned to have a face-to-face discussion of the pen pal activity, but due to COVID-19 we did this in breakout groups and as a whole group on Zoom. At La Salle, students also participated in the pen pal exchange as part of their regular coursework. On April 19, 2020, students shared videos they created about their pen pal experiences via Moodle and gave each other feedback and shared perceptions about the project.

### **Data Collection**

As mentioned above, our data for this study consist of our own experiences creating, planning, and discussing the WhatsApp exchange together as well as listening to/reading what teacher learners told us about their experiences of virtual mobility through WhatsApp. This came through informal conversations we had with students (both universities), project presentations and discussions (La Salle), discussion board reflections (UNL), and class discussions (both universities). In all cases, we drew on our own observation notes from these stories/reflections in our discussions together which occurred on May 29, June 2, and on July 17, 2020 through WhatsApp and Zoom. In these conversations we discussed the activities, student reactions to them (through stories they told us conversations we had with them, and their reflections), and what we felt was successful, not successful, and why. Theresa took field notes on the Zoom and WhatsApp discussions and these notes were drawn on to aid in our re-telling of the experience in the findings section.

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to beginning our discussions about the exchange, we researched intercultural communication theories we felt would help us explain the experiences of the students as told/written to us and how to make them better. In our second discussion on June 2, we decided which theories/research were most useful in explaining the experience as told to us. For example, we found studies such as Tang & Hew (2017) to be helpful in explicating how the affordances of WhatsApp from our student experiences intersected with the development of teacher learner interculturality. We also drew on theories such as sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Gorski's (2008) work on decolonizing intercultural education, and research on translanguaging (García et al., 2017), which we had referenced in our observation notes of conversations with students because they had learned about translanguaging in their course readings. We used these notes and the transcriptions of our conversations to guide the way we re-told the experience in our findings section. In the final discussion between researchers/participants on July 17th and after reviewing the transcript of our conversation on June 2, we decided on the most important themes that emerged from our conversations about the exchange and which ones we should focus on in our re-telling of the WhatsApp exchange experience. The themes that surfaced in our account of the experience are *The Central Role of Language in Virtual Intercultural Exchanges* and *Applying Intercultural Strategies to Virtual Interactions across Differences*.

## **Findings**

### **The Central Role of Language in Virtual Intercultural Exchanges**

As we decided which themes to focus on in our re-telling of the exchange, we realized that even though the project was about intercultural communication and not language per se, language appeared to be front and center in the teacher learners' experiences. Many students from the US who had studied Spanish in the past (but never acquired proficiency) told us about the words they learned

in Spanish when their partner would send photos via WhatsApp. For example, they learned about daily meals such as *corrientazo* (rice, beans, meat, etc.) or other Colombian foods such as *arepas*, or *ceviche de camarón*, but they also compared expletives and idiomatic expressions across languages. Several students even pointed out things they learned through informal conversations such as the fact that “hahaha” is written “jajaja” in Spanish. In addition, some of the teacher learners from UNL who had some knowledge of Spanish mentioned how *translanguaging* (i.e., moving fluidly among languages to create meaning [García et al., 2017]) allowed them to fill gaps in their conversations and aided their La Salle partners who felt unsure or uncomfortable in their exchanges to turn the tables. This also aligns with Tang & Hew’s (2017) study which notes the pedagogical affordances of WhatsApp in promoting language development such as meaning negotiation, which happens when learners perceive problems while communicating. Translanguaging therefore served as an efficient means of meaning negotiation in their WhatsApp dialogs.

Because the UNL students whose first language was English felt more vulnerable during these multilingual exchanges, this acted as an equalizing force which then helped them understand the way their partners might feel when speaking English. These student reflections on language elements demonstrate how WhatsApp affords translanguaging, including non-standard varieties. It also shows the affordances of multimodal communication and how this connects to intercultural goals such as breaking down stereotypes and negotiating meaning (Jackson, 2014). For example, many of the students made short videos of their homes or typical daily routines or took photos of these things and shared these with their partners. In this way, the affordances of WhatsApp (easy photo and video sharing) made for enhanced authentic communication about daily life but also underscored the social situatedness of the technology because the messages they shared were embedded in their own individual cultural contexts (e.g., photos of their breakfasts, the city streets, their homes), and their partners were seen as individuals and not as part of a group which helped teacher learners deconstruct stereotypes. In addition, different modalities were clearly integrated (e.g., texting, sending emojis, images, videos, and audio recordings). Furthermore, through these different modalities afforded by WhatsApp, teacher learners made meaning “with respect to specific social identities” (Michelson & Dupuy, 2014, p. 41) such as their roles as mothers, university students, and/or elementary/secondary teachers. This meaning-making encouraged further discussion and development of their learner identities (Keogh & Robles, 2018). The teacher learners from La Salle took the WhatsApp exchange as an opportunity to practice their English languages skills. Many expressed to Andrea how excited they were about doing this, but also how uncomfortable it was, and how difficult it was to have these daily life conversations in English with their partner since they were more used to speaking English in academic settings. They also noted the pedagogical and technological affordances of WhatsApp because they could change the keyboard to English or Spanish and there were word suggestions given below the space where they typed. This helped them to choose a word and put in the right accents or spelling without having to go elsewhere to find the word or correct spelling. Students (from both universities) also recounted how WhatsApp provided a relaxed and low-pressure environment which helped them be more comfortable than they might have been face-to-face. This supports Keogh’s (2017) findings that one social affordance of WhatsApp is the way it can sometimes be a ‘safe space’ where students want to share opinions and learn from each other.

Another language-related affordance mentioned by UNL teacher learners, especially those who had never traveled before, was that trying to use Spanish and communicate led them to gain confidence in their ability to communicate across different languages. This confidence led several students to make plans to travel in the future because they felt less nervous about it, but also because they had so enjoyed meeting a new friend that they wanted to continue this experience.

However, as García-Gómez (2020) also found, not all intercultural exchanges were positive. This is because (as mentioned in the Methods section) some of the Colombian teacher learners were placed with UNL learners who were not native speakers of English. In these cases, some of the La Salle students became demotivated because they could not see that they could learn anything from non-native English speakers. The only Colombian UNL student found that her partner was disengaged because she assumed that because they were from the same country, she could not gain anything from the exchange, especially because one of the goals was to develop her English, and it did not seem natural for them to speak in English together. Neither of the pen pals felt they had anything to teach each other even though they were from different ethnicities (one was Afro-Latina) and they were from different regions of the country. The UNL teacher learner also suggested to Theresa after the exchange had finished that in the future she could be placed with someone from a different country, implying that she agreed with her partner that she could not gain something from the experience. In addition, neither of the students capitalized on the fact that the student studying in the United States could have shared her experiences as a Colombian in the United States and could have given advice to the other student that wanted to study or live there in the future. Another UNL student from Spain also expressed her partner's disappointment when she found out she was a native Spanish speaker, but in the end, they were able to still benefit from the exchange because they talked about what it was like to be an international student in the United States.

These examples of cultural stereotypes and monolingual ideologies related to native-speakerism (Lowe & Kiczkowiak, 2016) made us realize in our discussions that we made a mistake in not having regular check-ups on students in which we could have found out about these issues or provoked thoughtful debates that drew on class readings on native-speakerism. We should have also helped teacher learners process these critical incidents in order to break down stereotypes about what university students are like in the United States (something suggested by Lebedko (2013) and Ware (2005) in their work on missed communication). As teacher educators, we had failed to encourage them to focus on the benefits of intercultural exchange for developing intercultural communication skills and knowledge, which would have changed their perception of others and their exchanges positively. As a consequence, we learned (too late) that a crucial aspect in the use of WhatsApp technology for intercultural purposes is the teacher's mediation along the communicative process.

At the same time, this also reminded us of Dervin's (2016) point that we can also learn through failure. Even though many Colombian teacher learners have experienced native-speakerism in their own lives as English teachers, some were not able to see their own complicity in this ideology. Conversely, on the UNL side, in some cases, (with the exception of the student from Spain) teacher learners did not harness what they had read in their coursework about native-speakerism to push back against this ideology and offer other ways in which they could have had a fruitful intercultural exchange despite their perceived similarity in language or nationality.

In the discussions with the group of Colombian teacher learners, students expressed that the continuous use of English was positive for their professional training although it interfered with the flow of talk, because it was a challenge for them to express their ideas accurately when interacting in a foreign language. On the other hand, some UNL students told Theresa that they did try to translanguage with their partners, for example, by inserting Spanish words and expressions when they could. They did this to aid communication but also to make themselves vulnerable so they could understand what their partners went through. However, this experience was not the case for all UNL students, since some had little knowledge of Spanish and were less willing to use words the few words they did know. The international UNL students from China and Vietnam, for example, did not mention any language used other than English in exchanges, which seemed to us a missed opportunity for La Salle students to learn some Chinese or Vietnamese words, and for UNL students

to learn Spanish. Because of the already mentioned monolingual language ideologies, it did not occur to many students that any of their languages other than English could be involved in the exchanges.

A final language related issue in virtual mobility regards our own experiences as researchers/participants. Because the two of us first met physically in Colombia, in a setting in which most people we were around spoke Spanish, we began speaking together in Spanish and carried this through to our first conversation on May 29<sup>th</sup> when I (Theresa) asked Andrea, if she preferred to do our discussions in Spanish or English. She responded that either language is fine, and asked what my preference was. We then continued our conversations in Spanish. However, in our final conversation on July 17<sup>th</sup>, we talked about our observations of the monolingual language ideologies of our teacher learners (and in the case of La Salle students, perceived expectations of the goals of the exchange), as well as the way in which many of them utilized Spanish and English in their conversations and engaged in translanguaging across their repertoires to make meaning. It occurred to us at this point that although we were mostly speaking in Spanish to each other, at numerous points in the conversations one of us would use an English expression to fill in a gap in knowledge or when it made sense (like the words “Special Issue” or the name of this journal, which is in English) or to ask each other if what we had said was correct. Hence, we were also partaking in this common practice of sense-making that bilinguals engage in (García et al., 2017), and which our students had also acknowledged they were doing.

Another point of discussion was whether or not our choice of Spanish reflected or contested English dominant language hegemonies. On the one hand, my choice to continue in Spanish (a language I’m less comfortable in than English) was a conscious choice to disrupt the hegemony of English always being the go-to language when bilinguals in the United States are together. This is something I had been surprised by in Colombia when I attended the applied linguistics conference there. The conference was for students of English, so it is natural that English would be at least one of the official languages of the conference, but in fact (with the exception of one keynote speech and informal talk among participants), it was the only language of the conference. Furthermore, I remember being shocked when the only keynote speaker to give a talk in Spanish apologized and felt the need to explain that she was more comfortable in this language. I could not imagine a similar situation in the United States where a keynote speaker and native speaker of English would apologize for speaking in English. Furthermore, because I knew that our paper would be written in English (there was no choice in that aspect), I thought that it was only fair to be the one disadvantaged during our conversations. However, when reflecting on this together, we also realized that as a native speaker of English, I had the privilege of being able to make this choice, whereas Andrea almost never had this privilege. Throughout her academic career she had to write, present, and teach mostly in English, and it was a given. No one seemed to contest this or resist it, even though it clearly fit within the aims of decolonizing education, which was familiar to Andrea and her colleagues. It is in this act of working together to challenge language hegemonies (and to agree together that we would try to do that) that we began to address Gorski’s (2008) point that we cannot be true intercultural educators unless we awaken our own critical consciousness and decolonize our own interactions and teaching.

### **Applying Intercultural Strategies to Virtual Interactions across Difference**

We now focus on our observations of how teacher learners were able to apply intercultural strategies to their WhatsApp interactions, and then we move to a discussion of how the outbreak of COVID-19 contributed to intercultural learning in unexpected ways. In our conversations, discussion boards, and final presentations in Colombia with the teacher learners, we noticed that reflecting on the experience allowed them to see how the theories and strategies they had learned in our classes were

actually useful in real (albeit virtual) world interactions. For example, many of the students pointed out stereotypes their pen pals had about them (such as how the Canadian student was told that Canadians are friendlier than Americans). Others talked about how they tried to slow down their speech, repeat frequently, avoid slang and idioms, and use nonverbal signs if they did video chats in order to avoid misunderstandings (all strategies they had read about in our classes). Because they had read in their classes about interculturality being about forging links between individuals of different cultures “based on equity and mutual respect” (Leclercq, 2003, p. 9), several of them noted how they had done this in their reflections. For example, one student said that he tried not to ask questions that might be offensive while another wrote that she tried to be patient and understanding of the fact that her partner was balancing between several jobs and taking care of family and hence not able to communicate as much as she wanted. This shows how informal dialogs on Whatsapp improved student learning of intercultural communication (which Tang & Hew 2017 point out as an affordance of Whatsapp) because it gave them a chance to practice interacting in respectful ways.

Some students talked explicitly about how they tried to be “ethical intercultural communicators” (Jackson, 2014, p. 22), by making themselves vulnerable through their willingness to make mistakes in Spanish in their dialogs with their partners. We also observed from the discussion boards and presentations the way in which the experience made teacher learners more self-reflexive about judging others, especially before having a chance to get to know their partners. Additionally, we found that learning about teacher strikes in Colombia and corrupt politicians increased their awareness and expanded their “intercultural knowledge” (Tulgar, 2019, p. 17) making them reflect on their own governments, teachers’ unions, and other elements of their socio-political contexts. Although in our conversations we felt that we needed to do more deep reflection with our students, we agreed that these realizations might not have occurred if we had not given them time to “identify and reflect upon their preconceived ideas, judgments, and stereotypes” (Nugent & Catalano, 2015, p. 17). For example, stereotypes were often broken in class discussions because teacher learners shared the very different experiences of each of their partners and were hence able to see them as individuals and not solely part of a group. Students also reported to both of us that they learned a lot more about themselves and the kind of intercultural communicator they are because the WhatsApp exchange allowed them a space for meaningful interaction and for enhancing their own identities as intercultural learners and teachers (Keogh & Robles, 2018).

As a form of virtual mobility, WhatsApp became a tool for language use in real communicative situations. It was also motivating for them to participate in and articulate these communicative experiences alongside the intercultural content of the course as they were able to identify intercultural moments and principles in their exchanges. This helped them to go deeper into the relationship of language, diversity, and culture and to become more aware of the significance of these insights for language learning and teaching, a clear goal of intercultural communication that they could also pass on to their own students (Byram, 1997). It also aided them in taking one more step toward becoming “intercultural beings” able to function productively in intercultural situations (Azhar, 2009, p. 70),

A final aspect of intercultural communication strategies we noticed were relevant to the exchange involves the problematizing of learners’ own privilege, which Gorski (2008) points out all good intercultural education needs to include. When we began the project in January, we had heard about COVID-19 in China, but in both the United States and Colombia, the disease seemed a distant threat at that time. In fact, one of the La Salle students pointed out to the class in his final presentation that his partner was from China, but that because he had taken the class and was being careful about offending his pen pal, he had really wanted to ask her about COVID-19 in China but then decided to wait unless she brought it up (a decision which his classmates supported). Some time later the

pandemic hit the United States and Colombia at roughly the same time, and learning became remote (on Zoom in the United States and on Moodle in Colombia). This brought new realities and fears to the lives of all the teacher learners, many of whom were confronting the daunting task of teaching online themselves and all the challenges related to this. Because, as Keogh and Robles emphasize, “concepts covered in class” should be dealt with “in relation to examples from the world they see around them” (Keogh & Robles, 2018, p. 158), COVID-19 became a common topic of our class discussions and also of the WhatsApp exchange for the last three weeks of our pen pal activity. In discussion boards and reflections, teacher learners pointed out that being able to talk about COVID-19 with learners in completely different learning and geographical contexts helped them develop a sense of unity and a feeling that they were not alone. Some of their communications were delayed or panicked due to the virus, and many learners found themselves sharing tips to prevent the disease, talking about the importance of wearing masks, and complaining about their work conditions in crowded spaces and how they missed their students. Because of the temporal and multimodal affordances of WhatsApp, the teacher learners more easily communicated with each other because they could use their phones whenever they had Wifi, and they could easily insert images of what they saw, or emojis which were quick, but effective in expressing their fear or anxiety about the virus. Many of the UNL students said listening to their counterparts in Colombia made them reflect on their own privilege, such as their ability to stay home when others had essential jobs they could not do at home and their easy access to high-speed Internet.

Overall, we observed that the experience of COVID-19 helped the teacher learners in the pen pal activity to see similarities when working across difference (Mitchell & Benyon, 2018). Our conversations about the activity also highlighted the way that the WhatsApp experience aligned with theories that inform the development of interculturality such as sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the zone of proximal development in that it gave students the chance to work together and each contribute something different to the experience in a way they couldn’t have done on their own. Although they could hear about each other’s countries on the news, it was not the same as firsthand accounts which they were able to get from their partners. In addition, the social affordances of WhatsApp increased social presence (e.g., through being able to use emojis and pictures and videos), which helped them to feel each other’s existence or company and express emotions, something that has often been hard to do when students engage in online interactions (Tang & Hew, 2017).

### **Discussion & Implications**

In our discussions about the exchange, we (teacher educators/researchers/participants) found many things we wish we would have done differently, which leads us to several recommendations for those who want to try an intercultural project such as ours. For example, although we were happy with the results of the intercultural exchange, we felt we could have done so much more to make it align with intercultural theories mentioned in this paper had we been more thoughtful in our planning. This is especially true of the decolonizing aspects of the project in which we should have asked teacher learners to examine their own privilege and language ideologies much more and work with each other in class to disrupt these during the exchange instead of waiting until it was done.

In general, we would recommend more frequent check-ins with students to give them a chance to process and come up with solutions to conflicts or issues during the pen pal project: a finding also noted in Mitchell and Benyon (2018). Furthermore, teacher learners wanted more chances to talk with their peers about their experiences and learn from them, so we should have built in more introduction, intermediary, and conclusion time for groups to convene together on technologies like Zoom or Moodle and to check-in and work together with the class to process interactions that occur during the exchange. Had we done this, we believe we would have avoided some of the issues

related to language ideologies and disengagement of certain teacher learners. We also think it would be beneficial for teacher educators to integrate the intercultural experience more directly into the discussion of each week's readings. For example, when talking about intercultural topics of discrimination, racism and the media, or native speakerism, these conversations could involve a discussion with their pen pals, and then the pen pal discussions could become part of the class discussions on this topic.

### **Conclusion**

This study's findings align with other studies on WhatsApp exchanges for intercultural education (e.g., Keogh, 2017; Keogh & Robles, 2018; Mitchell & Benyon, 2018; Tulgar, 2019) which show the benefits of this digital technology in promoting intercultural exchanges that would not be possible without virtual mobility. Teacher learners took advantage of the technological, social, and pedagogical affordances of WhatsApp to achieve intercultural aims such as breaking down stereotypes, developing critical cultural awareness, recognizing their own privilege, and constructing and negotiating their own identities as multilingual speakers and sojourners.

Through the process of telling the stories of the exchange, we learned that we could have done more to reach deeper levels of thinking and disruption in students in order to truly decolonize intercultural communication. This includes directly addressing (in real time during the exchange) students' ingrained ways of thinking about language hierarchies/ideologies which in some cases prohibited interactions that could have been more fruitful because learners disengaged when working with those from a similar language background. We also found that doing the research for this project, and in particular, narrative inquiry, which required us to re-tell our stories of the exchange, has made us better intercultural educators. This is because researching critical theories in education for the study helped us realize how important it was to integrate them in our class activities and that we weren't doing this enough. Recounting the stories of the experience also gave us time to reflect on how we could do this better, and to really examine the theories and their application in order to pass this on to our teacher learners (who would then integrate this into their own teaching of language learners).

We hope that our project can inspire other teacher educators to take a chance on virtual exchanges (whether on WhatsApp or other technologies) that utilize mobile technologies to provide real, authentic experiences working across difference in teacher education programs. However, this comes with the understanding that the quality of the learning will improve in tandem with the more time and thought teacher educators put into the organization/planning of the project. Finally, we recognize that although teacher educators (like us) might not succeed in achieving all the aims of the intercultural activity (as Dervin [2016] suggests is sometimes impossible) it can be at least one more (virtual) step toward these goals. As we have seen, the benefits of doing this activity far outweighed the drawbacks, and we hope teacher educators reading this paper can use our failures to create their own successes.

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