

Facebook Movie-Based Discussions: Bringing Down Intercultural Barriers in English Language Education

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Abstract

The paper's main aim is to highlight the importance of underpinning English language education with intercultural competence. The authors describe and analyze the experience of the cross-cultural exchange in Facebook movie-based discussions as an innovative approach to English teacher preparation in Ukraine. The study examines the perceptions of American films regarding various social, educational, and cultural issues by American and Ukrainian participants. The authors address the following questions: 1. What are the intercultural differences in the perception of American movies manifested by the representatives of the American and Ukrainian cultures during movie club discussions? 2. What are the participants' attitudes to online discussions in a Facebook group? The research engages 83 participants, including university professors, their family members, and prospective teachers majoring in teaching English as a foreign language. The study applies Hofstede's cultural dimensions model and descriptive, comparative, and qualitative methods. Since the research is empirical and an exciting outcome of international academic collaboration in teacher preparation, its findings have proven the significance of cross-cultural communication for educational purposes. The emphasis on strengthening English language teacher preparation with intercultural awareness, values, and skills for service in the multicultural world has evident benefits for the quality of teacher training in the Ukrainian context. The research also signifies Facebook as a platform for future online educational collaboration.

Keywords: cross-cultural differences in values perceptions, English as a foreign language, Facebook movie-based discussion, intercultural competence, movie club, Ukrainian context

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Introduction

Over the past decade, globalization has affected the higher education system, creating favorable conditions for students and academics mobility, cross-cultural delivery courses, international curricula, and multinational collaboration (Powell et al., 2014). The new assets to English teacher preparation in Ukraine contribute to developing cultural awareness, which facilitates the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. The Council of Europe (2001) requires the integration of cultural competence in language teaching.

While a part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was denied the opportunity of familiarizing itself with the cultures of the peoples situated on the other side of the Iron Curtain; thus, it lacked access to live communication with foreigners, to studying their values and traditions (Matvienko & Kuzmina, 2020). Learning a foreign language outside the language and cultural environment was like learning to swim in a pool without any water. Although Ukraine gained its political independence in 1991, the Ukrainians still often view other cultures through their own cultural lenses, which may inevitably lead to misconceptions and stereotypes, which is inappropriate when training teachers of foreign languages. Accordingly, insufficient knowledge of the values of other cultures can result in cultural misunderstandings, ineffective communication, and even hostile national movements (Yezhitskaya, 2011).

Empirical studies demonstrate a low level of intercultural competence of foreign language teachers resulting in a lack of motivation to teach the students culture and the foreign language. Consequently, preparing students to understand cultural differences, treating other cultures respectfully, and avoiding harmful stereotypes require more attention to the preparation of teachers capable of instilling an interest in and respect for diversity (Perova, 2010). To address the issue with deserved scrutiny, English teacher education in Ukraine seeks innovative instruments for developing intercultural awareness in intending teachers to bridge the gap between the curriculum requirements and the actual situation.

Since the paper intends to describe the experience of cross-cultural exchange in Facebook movie-based discussions, the authors analyze the responses to social and educational issues and values perceptions by the representatives of American and Ukrainian cultures. The study reveals that the perceptions differ respectively of the country of residence. The desirable outcome of opinion variety is generating vibrant opinion sharing. The attitudes towards online discussions in a Facebook group are of great interest as the authors consider Facebook a good platform for future online collaborative projects.

Literature Review

The Movie as a Means of Fostering Cross-cultural Awareness

The analysis of numerous studies demonstrates that many scholars have investigated the film as a tool for foreign language skills development (Chaya & Inpin, 2020; Tran, 2022; King, 2002). Alongside this, the scholars pointed out the role of the film in increasing cultural

awareness (Nur, 2016) and intercultural skills training (Chaya & Inpin, 2020; Roell, 2010; Pandey & Ardichvili, 2015; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003). According to the researchers, the film is “a powerful medium that conveys the values and beliefs of contemporary societies” (Cloete, 2017, p. 1). Wang & Yu (2018) consider the film as “an international artistic language” (p. 681) and “one of the most important and most effective ways to promote international cultural exchange, transfer information, and emotion, and the output of national culture.” (p. 681). Cardon (2010) characterizes the film as “a valuable intellectual exercise in deciphering other cultures.” (p. 151)

Scholars explain how the use of films contributes to the effectiveness of developing cross-cultural awareness. In their opinion, the film is a very comfortable and familiar source of information for contemporary students: younger generations prefer video substitutes to text sources (Starostova and Piskunova (2016). The investigators add that owing to films’ technical characteristics, people “gain their deepest impressions through their senses – what they see, hear, and feel upon entering a new culture” (Cardon, 2010, p. 151). Films help people transfer to different countries and create an experience that they might miss in reality (Champoux, 1999). Moreover, Nur (2016) admits that the film provides rich opportunities for comparing cultures and is an excellent source for developing analytical skills.

The analysis of film-based studies indicates that researchers rarely engage representatives of the culture depicted in the film in their investigations of cross-cultural issues (Starostova & Piskunova, 2016; Wang & Yu, 2018; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003). As a result, the discussion about another culture is carried out by the students who come from the same cultural background, share common cultural values, and might not know much about the other nation's traditions, customs, and history. We assume there is always the risk that film content interpretation might become ambiguous under such conditions.

Based on film characteristics and research results, we suggest that film discussion can efficiently enhance students' cross-cultural awareness if it involves people who can explain cultural peculiarities firsthand and contribute authenticity to the discussion forum.

Facebook Discussion Group as a Platform for Cross-Cultural Communication.

According to recent studies, collaborative cross-cultural projects use various communication techniques for providing intercultural exchanges among students: computer conferencing with messaging (Kim & Bonk, 2002; LeBaron et al., 2000), email (Abedrabu, 2012), Facebook (Jin, 2015; Ozdemir, 2017; Raja Zainal Hassan et al., 2020).

The literature analysis indicates that researchers consider Facebook one of the most convenient social networking services for arranging online cross-cultural communication (Bray & Iswanti, 2013; Raja Zainal Hassan et al., 2020; Ozdemir, 2017). Among the opportunities Facebook provides, Bray & Iswanti (2013) point out creating a Facebook group, controlling membership and content, sharing video or audio, and posting notes at a suitable time.

Judging by the conclusions that Deng et al. (2017) have drawn based on their research, using the features of Facebook mentioned above to provide a free flow of online discussion is not enough. The researchers claim that it is essential for moderators to give the participants of virtual communication groups the topics to contemplate (Deng et al., 2017). Setting engaging questions to answer and stating problems can attract students' attention and urge their animated discussions. Zmiyevska & Glazunova (2018) point out that giving students a choice of topics for discussion on Facebook can turn their learning into a student-centered one, and minimizing the participation of group instructors can allow students to become more responsible for the quality of their posts.

Culture and the Hofstede Cultural Framework

According to recent studies, culture is a complex social phenomenon created in human societies during their long-term development. Researchers define it as “a system of shared beliefs and values” (Hurn & Tomalin, 2013, p. 5); “networks of knowledge, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world” (Hong, 2009, p. 4).

Hofstede (2001) views culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.” (p. 9) The word “mind” here means “thinking, feeling, and acting, with consequences for beliefs, attitudes, and skills” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 10). Chen (2020) gives a more generalized interpretation of culture: “the sum of material wealth and spiritual wealth created in the historical practice of human society, reflecting the basic quality and comprehensive state of a nation.” (p. 59)

Scholars look at culture as “a shared meaning system” which helps people within a nation understand each other's behavior (Rohner, 1984). The perception and interpretation of the same actions and events by different cultural societies can differ. Hofstede (2001) worked out a model of cultural variables, known as dimensions, to use them as criteria for comparing cultural differences and helping build appropriate strategies for developing cross-cultural awareness and tolerance of people of different nationalities. Figure 1 demonstrates the comparative scale of the American and Ukrainian cultural values according to six Hofstede (2021) dimensions: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty tolerance vs. uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint.

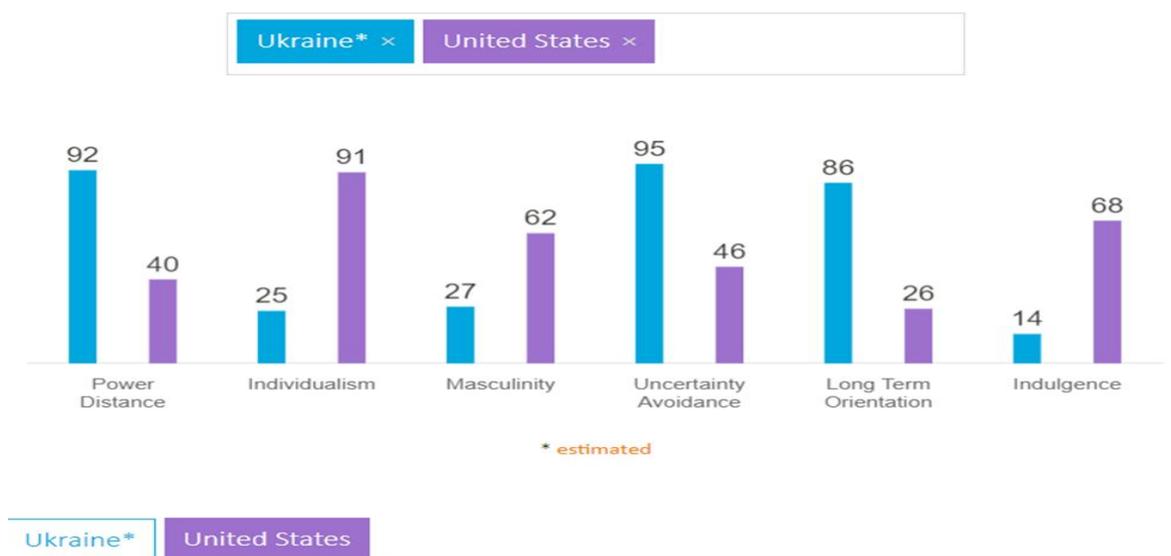


Figure 1. Country Comparison
Adapted from Hofstede Insights (2021)

The application of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions model for identifying and measuring the differences between the values of different national societies helps raise cross-cultural awareness of the participants.

Method

To bring down intercultural barriers, ruin stereotypes and develop a better understanding of the American and Ukrainian cultures, on the initiative of Dr. David Powell, Professor of Southeast Missouri State University, we decided to conduct a Movie-club discussion in a closed Facebook group. The discussion group consisted of Ukrainian teachers and students of Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Dr. David Powell, who acted as a moderator of the group, his family members, and American colleagues. The discussion touched upon the plot of the movies, experiences, and life stories of its members.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What intercultural differences in the perception of American movies did the representatives of the American and Ukrainian cultures manifest in the process of the movie club discussion?
2. What are the attitudes to online discussions in a Facebook group?

We have used an online group discussion and a review of written posts in the closed discussion group on Facebook as data collection tools to answer research question 1. We have applied a questionnaire (Appendix, Questionnaire) to answer research question 2. We have

chosen Hofstede's framework as a model for understanding cultures and explaining the possible reasons behind cross-cultural differences.

Participants

We collected the data from 83 participants: 2 American University professors from Southeast Missouri State University, two members of the Powells, and 78 Ukrainian members of the discussion; 96% female and 4% male, aged 17 through 65. Ukrainian educators (eighteen language instructors) and sixty sophomore students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language were the participants at Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University. The teaching experience of the professors varied from two to over 40 years.

Procedures

The Movie Club international project lasted five years as an extracurricular activity from 2015 to 2020 - when its members watched and discussed five American movies: *Pay it Forward* (2015), *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2016), *Places in the Heart* (2017), *Freedom Writers* (2018), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2019). For each online discussion which lasted for 7-10 days, the participants were supposed to write an initial post of 150-200 words and participate in the group discussion by posting at least two comments on the entries of their group mates. Table 1 shows the stages of the Movie-club discussion, the participants, and the number of entries reflecting cultural similarities and differences.

Table 1. *Stages of the Facebook movie-club discussion*

Movie	Year of Discussion	Ukrainian participants	American Participants	Male	Female	Comments Similarities	Comments Differences
Pay it Forward	2015	20	1	2	19	147	210
Freedom Writers	2016	15	2	1	16	53	77
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close	2017	14	2	3	13	149	67
Places in the Heart	2018	24	3	2	25	95	87
My Big Fat Greek Wedding	2019	23	4	2	25	60	68

Dr. David Powell provided the list of the movies for the Facebook discussion, and the Ukrainian teachers made a final choice of the film based on the following criteria: educational content, cultural elements, and content appropriacy.

Table 2. *Cultural representation in the movies*

Movies	Movies that deal with different patterns of behavior						Cultural stereotypes	Intercultural conflict, racism
	IDV	MAS	PDI	UAI	LTO	IVR		
Pay it Forward	✓		✓	✓	✓			
Freedom Writers	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close	✓	✓		✓				✓
Places in the Heart	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
My Big Fat Greek Wedding	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	

As seen from the table, the chosen movies demonstrate different patterns of behavior typical of different cultures, fitting within Hofstede's framework of national cultures and matching the following dimensions: Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), Long Time Orientation (LTO), Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR). The movies are also rich in the following cultural elements: cultural stereotypes, traditions, society problems (gambling, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, homeless people, special educational needs, intercultural conflicts, racism), family relations (single-parent families, latchkey children, single mothers); place of women in society and family, cultural values.

Discussion

Results of the Facebook Discussion

The authors have analyzed the content of 1013 posts and comments of American and Ukrainian participants in the Facebook Movie club discussion. Because Ukraine and the USA belong to the opposite extremes of Hofstede's theory continuum, bearing different values for the six dimensions, it is only natural that 50.2% of the comments revealed the differences between the two cultures. We will look at these differences through the lens of the resounding factors characterizing both cultures, developed by Hofstede.

Collectivism vs. individualism stems from the degree of dependence/independence the society members experience. Within Ukrainian culture, which scores 91 in collectivism, relations with friends, relatives, neighbors, etc., are fundamental and must be trustful, deep, and personal. Hierarchy in society and family is strict. The Ukrainians would refer to themselves as *We with friends* when discussing plans. The Americans would emphasize equal rights and opportunities for all. In the business world, managers are accessible, and low-rank employees assist with consulting. Communication is informal and constructive (Hofstede,

2011). The following glimpses of the Movie club discussion illustrate this dimension.

Latchkey children. The discussion of *Pay it forward* raised the social problem of children whose parents were busy at work and could not take proper care of them. The issue of abandoned children is solved differently in the USA and Ukraine.

David: *Trevor was an example of a latchkey child. According to a survey reported by Bloomberg, one American child out of nine comes home to an empty house. In 2013, this represented 4.5 million children home alone for an average of 6.5 hours per week.*

Ukrainian so-called *social orphans* are the children whose parents work abroad; in nine out of 10 cases, they are taken care of by their grandparents (91% in the Transcarpathian region). If one of the parents works abroad, 35% of such children are under the care of grandparents (Kichak, 2013), who teach them essential life skills, values, and traditions. Lena shares her experience of being raised by her grandparents: *“When I was 13, my mother began to work abroad, and I lived with my father. Thanks to my grandmother, I KNOW everything I know about cooking and keeping the house from her.”*

Another difference is *dealing with alcoholism*. Twelve-step addiction recovery program called Alcoholics Anonymous, which has aided its members to overcome alcoholism in the USA for more than 90 years, greatly impressed the Ukrainian participants of the Movie club. Ukrainian versions of such groups exist only in large cities and are not very popular. If Ukrainians face the problem of alcoholism, they are likely to rely heavily on their immediate family and friends rather than on the professional help of psychiatrists or support from Alcoholics Anonymous groups.

Proxemics. Variations in personal space correlated to culture are evident. In Ukrainian culture, the norm is to be physically close when talking and interacting. Max: *Queuing in a bank or a shop, the Ukrainians can be standing too close to each other, which can be very annoying.* For the Americans, personal space is critical. David: *“Generally, a casual conversation in America is at arm’s length (literally as a physical measure). For the most part, Americans are not huggers - certainly not in casual encounters.”*

The seating arrangement in American classrooms, where each student has an individual desk, reflects *the need for personal space*. Conversely, in Ukrainian schools, two students share a desk, which is typical of collectivist cultures.

Small talk. Shop talk. Personal space also extends to the sphere of verbal communication.

David: *Whether small talk or shop talk, light social conversation avoids anything that would be considered offensive, aggressive, or intrusive. A sense of personal space in conversation is present, and it is not polite to violate. Polite people do not discuss politics or religion.*

A similar rule applies to impersonal work topics to avoid inserting personal inquiries or comments without being invited to do so. If a Ukrainian begins a conversation with the question *How are you*, the answer can be pretty extended and detailed, far from being *small*. Talking about politics, religion, or money is not considered to be taboo in Ukraine.

Cheating. The collectivistic character of relations can explain *academic dishonesty in the exams*, which is widespread when Ukrainian students prompt, use notes and copy test answers. In American Universities, this kind of behavior is inappropriate.

Another impressive example of collectivist culture comes from the movie *Freedom Writers*, when Eva (a Latino student) felt compelled to lie to the court out of loyalty to her family and her group, knowing that this would send an innocent youth to prison.

The dimension of power distance reflects the idea of inequality among people in a society. As Ukraine scores high (92) in this dimension, there is a considerable distance between the people with power and the less powerful ones (Hofstede, 2011). Accordingly, the top-down approach is evident in all spheres of life. For instance, the Ukrainians attribute much importance to status roles and symbols. So it is natural that the boss displays a dominant attitude to his employees.

Dr. David Powel encountered this kind of cultural peculiarity during his visit to Ukraine when he could not use the previously allocated time for his report at the scientific conference, as they needed extra time for the presentations of some very influential persons. Consequently, he failed to present most of his carefully prepared material.

Attitude to people with special educational needs is also different in the two cultures. Ukrainian people with special needs received little care and attention until recently. As a matter of course, children with special educational needs got their education at home, lacking socialization and communication with peers as they barely left home. The Ukrainian government adopted the law about inclusive education in 2017. Until then, neither teachers nor students knew the essence of inclusive education and special needs. Natalie (a student) expressed an opinion that most of our (Ukrainian) teachers are not ready for this kind of law. One of the teachers supported this opinion:... *teachers of teachers know very little about SEN. I am one of them - until recently, I had not even thought about such things.* The story of Dr. Powel brings more light to the issue: *On my previous visit to Ukraine, we went to a small school for children with special needs, which was the only such place in the whole region of a country of 45 million people!*

From Dr. Powell and his spouse Sue Ann, Ukrainian students learned that all public schools in the USA have at least one specialized teacher to coordinate the Individual Education Plans for these students. Some larger schools have three or more such experts.

Masculinity-femininity. The USA, scoring 62 on this dimension, is a masculine society where the driving force is success and achievement (*The winner takes it all*). Feminine

cultures, on the contrary, value the quality of life, good relations, and caring for others (Hofstede, 2011). For example, talking about achievements is inappropriate and can be understood as bragging in Ukraine.

The movie club members also had different views on *the role of women in society (family)*. Vicky, a Ukrainian student (0.8%), believes that the woman's destiny is to give birth to children and keep the home: *The main thing in life - is a family! Your career will not wait for you at home, money will not wipe your tears, and the glory will not hug you at night*. Several other Ukrainian students (5%), although less categorical and realizing the importance of the career, still favored marriage over a job. Olena: *I plan to hopefully have my family, as nothing is possible without the support of your family, and I would like to work part-time instead of full-time if possible*. The American club members believe in equality of the sexes and the right of a person to determine the place in the world, be it the workplace, the family, or the home.

Some differences the participants expressed in the movie club discussions did not fit into Hofstede's model and required a closer look at the historical background.

Racism. Freedom writers triggered the discussion of racial abuse in various forms (chauvinism, holocaust, lynching) and organizations (Ku Klux Klan, Nazi, Neo-Nazi). David believes *racism is endemic everywhere in the USA. Even those who favored the rule of law and equal opportunity for black people did not necessarily regard them as equals*. The Ukrainian students were shocked by racial wars, gang rivalry, and segregation and claimed they did not have such problems in Ukraine.

Vika: *I believe that most people in Ukraine understand that people cannot hate others just because they are not their nationality. In my city, there are many students from different countries, and no one hurts me. Personally, there is no difference if people from America and Germany*.

After David pointed out that *racist divisions lie in origin, culture, religion, and appearance*, one of the Ukrainian teachers remembered a sad incident in the 70s. Komsomol activists cut her husband's modern pants into stripes on the dance floor, as they considered them *an element of the bourgeois culture*.

Culture is a profound and multi-faceted concept; comparing two cultures within an article is challenging. Dr. Powell produced a metaphor saying it is *like trying to empty a gravel truck with no hydraulic lift or shovel. You can pick up one piece of gravel at a time*. We hope the authors have removed some pieces of gravel in this analysis.

Questionnaire results

(Q1) The first question of the questionnaire was, *What was different about the Facebook class compared to regular classes?*

The student participants pointed out that working online, from home, at a convenient time, using various reference sources, and sharing links and pictures was comfortable. The teachers, in their turn, considered the online forum *a unique opportunity for them to participate actively in the discussion, in several threads simultaneously, enjoy themselves and practice co-teaching*. They also believed it was an excellent opportunity for shy students to participate and do their best. All the participants thought it was helpful that they *could control their answers and had the time to think everything over*.

(Q2) The responses to the second question, *Did you find the Facebook class instructive? In what particular way?* - were also positive.

All participants believed it was highly instructive, thanks to the participation of Dr. Powell, who provided extended professional responses, gave links, and recommended extra reading. University professors also mentioned the Grading Rubric, Tips about writing requirements, and a Model of an initial post, which Dr. Powell suggested at the initial stage and showed clear objectives to the students.

(Q3) The question *Would you like to have another Facebook class in this course or some future course?* - received positive responses: *Sure, I enjoyed the process! Yes, it would be great to have more Facebook classes*.

(Q4) Answering the question, *What should we do the same or different for a Facebook class in the future?* - most of the student participants wrote that they liked everything. Supervising teachers recommended that the students make the most of the situation and ask the American participants questions, which leads to more positive communication. They should also learn to express their opinion less directly; use good examples to illustrate writing and make it interesting for the reader; express a positive attitude; prepare for the discussion in advance. Several students thought they should be engaged in selecting the movie for discussion. Another student said it would be good to take a break from the conversation for the weekend as it was *potato season* in Ukraine, and she was busy helping her parents in the garden.

(Q5) The responses to the last question, *Did you find this format difficult to access or work with?* - showed that some students did not have regular access to the Internet. One of the students had problems with her computer and could not participate in the discussion. The rest of the participants did not have any difficulties.

To sum up, the research findings prove that the engagement of pre-service teachers and their professors in international collaboration and exchange is an enriching and rewarding endeavor that broadens the horizons (Powell et al., 2014, p. 34), making us global educators and out-of-box thinkers. Increased awareness of social and cultural issues and expertise in dealing with them adds to professionalism.

Conclusion

The present study, based on a 5-year-long Movie Club international project involving the representatives of American and Ukrainian cultures, has allowed us to come to some reasonable conclusions. Owing to its meaningful, authentic character, cross-cultural discussion of films, rich in cultural elements, is an efficient tool for raising intercultural awareness and honing cultural sensitivity. Vital issues depicted in films encourage students to participate actively and share their experiences and views on the issues under discussion. The extracurricular format of Facebook interaction, unlimited time and place, and the ability to read other group members' posts before shaping an opinion create a comfortable, stress-free atmosphere for students. A relaxed mode of discussion, based on the given choice of questions to answer, facilitates student-centeredness. The conditions mentioned above contributed to a free flow of the film discussions and helped us highlight and describe some value differences in American and Ukrainian cultures according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions model. The research findings contain the value differences related to the power distance index, individualism vs. collectivism, and masculinity vs. femininity. Within the framework of this research, we have focused only on the three variables mentioned above. Our further study might investigate the other cultural dimensions of the Hofstede model. As a result of the participation of American representatives in online discussions, Ukrainian students acquired a firsthand interpretation of the events and the behavior of people in the films, which could cause misunderstanding. The students demonstrated interest and open-mindedness in discussing the peculiarities of other cultures, and in this term, they learned more about their own culture. This format of interaction solidified their language skills.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

(Q1) What was different from the Facebook class to the regular classes?

(Q2) Did you find the Facebook class instructive? In what way?

(Q3) Would you like to have another Facebook class in this or some future course?

(Q4) What should be done the same or different for a Facebook class in the future?

(Q5) Did you find this format difficult to access or to work?