



## Tasks and Challenges Faced by Teachers in Handling an Online Project

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### Bio Data

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### Abstract

The learning process of teachers to integrate information communication technology tools and programs effectively and confidently can be frustrating (Richards, 2005) and social, cultural, and institutional affordances and constraints could shape the agency of online teachers in different ways (Belz & Muller-Hartmann, 2003). This paper presents the tasks and challenges the authors encountered when handling a project of international telecollaboration between Taiwan and Macau, in which students from hospitality colleges were required to first read three online articles featuring hospitality culture, then discuss the questions provided on the discussion board, and finally conduct an online project. The email exchange between the two instructors was examined to reveal the tasks for the instructors of the eight-week electronic negotiation, implementation, and management of the telecollaborative partnership. In particular, it details the challenges emerging from different phases such as the dilemma resulting from the misalignment of the academic calendars and the decreasing of motivation resulting from student workload. Finally, the instructors metacommented on the email messages to investigate the effects and problems of this international telecollaboration. By means of teachers' reflections on their experiences in negotiating and facilitating international telecollaborations, suggestions are presented for future studies to maximize the educational outcomes of online learning.

**Key Words:** online learning, telecollaboration, electronic negotiation

### Introduction

“Geographical/economic isolation” and “academic literacy in English” are two of the major challenges limiting international students' right of access to universal higher education (Morgan & Carey, 2009, p.1). Recent pervasive social, technological and economic changes have

significantly influenced educational contexts, and thus require radical rethinking the delivery of higher education (Rigmor, et al. 2000). Currently, e-learning has been particularly attractive for educational purposes in recent years because of its world wide accessibility, multimedia capabilities, and interactive function (Li & Hart, 1996; Lin, 2006). Nevertheless, the above features bring about special challenges for teachers who are interested in integrating e-learning elements into their courses. Kern, Ware, and Warschauer (2004) pointed out that current research has turned the attention from focusing on the linguistic and affective characteristics of computer-assisted discussion in single classrooms to long-distance collaboration which is challenging to arrange, because it involves diverse learners with different cultural backgrounds, communicative expectations, and rhetorical frameworks.

However, most of the previous research focuses on students' achievements resulting from telecollaboration instead of exploring the many complex tasks and challenges that teachers are confronted with to maximize the educational outcomes (Basharina, Guardado, & Morgan, 2008; O'Down & Eberbach, 2004). The roles teachers play in organizing telecollaboration to promote greater learner autonomy or intercultural competence has been generally neglected (O'Down & Eberbach, 2004). In fact, the learning process of teachers to integrate information communication technology (ICT) tools and programs effectively and confidently can be frustrating and often is not achieved without adequate support (Richards, 2005). This paper explores the tasks and challenges the authors encountered in handling a project of international telecollaboration between Taiwan and Macau. By means of informal interviews with the students and the teachers' reflections on their experiences in negotiating and facilitating international telecollaborations, suggestions are presented for future studies to maximize the educational outcomes of online learning.

### **Literature Review**

One information communication technology (ICT) for teaching and using foreign languages is telecollaboration. Kinginger (2002) defined telecollaboration as the application of global electronic networks to foreign language education. Belz (2003) defined it as Internet communication tools used by internationally dispersed learners to support social interaction, dialogue, debate, and intercultural exchanges and suggested that telecollaboration is an important and relevant component of network-based language teaching. Basharina, Guardado, and Morgan

(2008) argued that international telecollaboration has great potential to promote students' target language learning, intercultural awareness, and computer literacy. For such online learning to be successful, one major challenge educators faced is the creation of a critical community of inquiry within a virtual text-based environment (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).

Hara and Kling (1999) emphasized that successful skills and strategies for face-to-face learning will not suffice for online learning because learners need a basic-medium level of ICT competence. Pillay, Irving and Tones (2007) listed factors contributing to good or poor outcomes for students' achievements in an online environment. They pointed out that social interaction, computer literacy, computer self-efficacy, and positive online learner qualities could result in good outcomes for students while a predetermined pace of learning, poorly functioning learner experiences, dissatisfaction, and negative online learner qualities brought about poor outcomes. They also stated that some of the above qualities are related to student skills and attitudes but some are related to educational design which teachers should take good care of in the process to create an interactive, collaborative, and successful learning experience for their students. A clear understanding of specific learning outcomes and ways to engage students is crucial to minimize two of the most common frustrations of online learning: confusing course organization (how course elements are structured within the course) and unclear navigation (what links or buttons are used to access these elements) (Faculty Focus, 2009).

Online intercultural interaction does not occur automatically. Johnson, Bishop, Holt, Stirling and Zane (2001) reported on an on-line course for student-teachers. They classified the on-line interaction into the categories of social exchanges, administrative posts, academic monologues and academic interaction and found that their students' on-line interaction tended to be dominated by academic monologues. Bels and Muller-Hartmann's (2003) study showed that a telecollaborative foreign language learning partnership was shaped by social, cultural, and institutional affordances and constraints because various aspects of schools and schooling impact upon the negotiation, execution, and management of the telecollaboration. They found four specific ways in which socioinstitutional affordances and constraints co-construct teacher agency in their partnership: (1) the misalignment of academic calendars; (2) culture-specific learner assessment patterns; (3) the history and content of each teacher's academic socialization into the profession of language teaching and particular job responsibilities; and (4) differences in student contact hours and the physical organization of the universities.

Basharina, Guardado and Morgan's (2008) study identified types of challenges experienced by instructors in an international telecollaboration, such as project structure and assessment, research versus pedagogical agenda, and ambiguity about instructor participation. They suggested that future practice of telecollaboration can be improved by making the competing visions of the project more transparent to the participating parties. Bender (2003) suggested that to successfully manage online education, teachers should: (1) acquire experience as an online instructor; (2) have been an online student at least once; and (3) help or guide students in acquiring skills and applying strategies as good online learners. Bender also emphasized that online instructors' experience of online facilitators and online learners will help them to apply strategies suitable to an online learning environment and prevent frustration. Likewise, O'Dowd and Eberbach's (2004) stressed that teachers need to deal with different complicated tasks to make learners aware of intercultural learning and train them to interact effectively on-line. Moreover, teachers have to establish a successful working relationship with their teaching partner in the other classroom. O'Dowd and Eberbach emphasized the tasks and challenges for the teachers to make the exchange as rich an intercultural learning experience as possible including the following aspects:

1. Raising learners' awareness of intercultural learning
2. Training learners to make effective contributions
3. Moving learners from monologues to dialogues
4. Establishing and maintaining an effective relationship with teaching partners

(2004, p. 10)

Richards (2005, p.60) highlighted that teachers must approach the concept of an "ICT-supported learning activity" as "designers" of effective and integrated learning rather than mere "transmitters" of skills or information through an add-on use of ICTs. Currently, the affordance and constraints of ICT impinging on language learning from the teachers' perspective have been underexplored (Belz, 2002). More studies of instructors' reflections on their experiences in negotiating and facilitating international telecollaborations are needed (Basharina, Guardado, & Morgan, 2008). This paper reports on a project of international telecollaboration between Taiwan and Macau and describes the tasks and challenges faced by teachers in handling online project.

## The Study

The two instructors of this project are assistant professors who teach general English. Dr. Wang received her Ph.D. in the Department of English, majoring in computer assisted language learning. She had been conducting various online learning activities such as web-based reading strategy training and online hospitality project construction. The satisfying results of a previous study (Wang, 2009) encouraged her to invite a teacher from Macau to create a learning environment where students can understand and navigate the similarities and differences of hospitality cultures between these two regions. The other author, Ms Ip, holds a Master's degree in English Studies. She has been teaching English for hospitality and tourism for more than a decade and has a research interest in language learning motivation and strategies. Dr. Wang's invitation to carry out this online learning project allowed Ms. Ip to further explore the aspects of learner motivation and strategies as well as to widen her scope of studies in relation to learning English as a second language.

The authors met once in Macau in January (2009) to discuss the project. Afterwards, they emailed each other to negotiate and come up with an 8-week project of online collaborative learning as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 The contents of an 8-week project of online collaborative learning

Time	Contents
Week 1 (2/23-2/27) Orientation	a. Students (Ss) register and learn the process of the study. b. Ss answer pre-questionnaires online. c. Ss briefly introduce themselves and write a short description of their partner's city by replying to their partner (Go to the interaction icon on the left).
Week 2 (3/2-3/6)	Ss read the first article and then do the online pair discussions Article 1: Food & Beverage Culture (For IFT) and Dining in Macau (For NKHC) Discussion question: What are the similarities and differences between Food & Beverage Culture in Macau and Kaohsiung?
Week 3 (3/9-3/13)	Ss read the second article and then do the online pair discussions Article 2: Night Market Snacks and <u>Snacks in Macau</u> . Discussion question: What are your favorite Night Market Snacks and why?
Week 4 (3/16-3/20)	Ss read the third article and then do the online pair discussions Article 3: The Top 10 Taiwan/Macau Destinations among Foreign Tourists and <u>Top Tourists' Destinations in Macau</u> Discussion question: What are the scenic spots you will recommend to your friends from Taiwan?
Week 5 (3/23-3/27)	Each pair writes their pair project.
Week 6 (3/30-4/3)	Each pair publishes their pair project online.
Week 7 (4/6-4/10)	Each pair gives feedback to others' projects.
Week 8 (4/13-4/17)	Ss answer post-questionnaires online.

## Procedures

Fifteen students from a hospitality college in Taiwan and fifteen students from an institute for tourism in Macau participated in this study. The commonalities between these two groups of

students are that they are freshmen and their majors are related to hospitality. All of them volunteered for this online project and thus it is assumed that they were interested in the exchange of hospitality culture and were willing to complete the tasks in their extracurricular time. The differences between the two groups are that the students in Taiwan are classmates in the same department while the students in Macau come from different departments. Moreover, the mother tongue of the students in Taiwan is Mandarin while that of the students in Macau is Cantonese.

Students first read articles online about hospitality culture and then discussed them on the discussion board. For example, they first read two articles “Food & Beverage Culture” and “Dining in Macau”, which deal with food culture in Taiwan and Macau. Then they discussed the following question, “What are the similarity and differences between Food & Beverage Culture in Macau and Kaohsiung?” After they finished all the reading selections, each pair was required to do an online project. One example was provided but students were allowed to choose their own topic.

In Taiwan, students had used the platform for other activities so after making sure that they were familiar with the platform, they did all the activities after classes. In other words, they did not meet at a certain time but individually logged online in their free time. However, the project was novel to all Macau participants, including the instructor, Ms Ip. Therefore, in order to ensure that everyone clearly understood what to do and how to do it, it was decided that the group would meet once a week to complete each week’s task. The participants from Macau were all freshman volunteers from different classes; the group had to meet at a time slot convenient to all. The availability of individuals presented certain difficulties already before the commencement of the tasks.

### ***Email exchanges between instructors***

The email exchange between the two teachers was examined to reveal the process teachers went through to handle the project. It is divided into three phases, before, during, and after the 8-week project (Table 2). From the time of the first contact (January, 2009), there were 80 email exchanges. At the first phase, most of the email exchange focused on the structure of the project, such as settling the schedule to be eight weeks, completing the guidelines to conduct the pair project (Appendix A), and modifying the questionnaire (Appendix B).

At the beginning of the project, there were some problems with the platform registration so email messages were exchanged to find solutions. These were situations expected in online learning and thus could be easily solved. Then during the reading section, the authors checked the progress of both groups of students to make sure they read the online articles and discussed the questions on the discussion board. Most of the students finished the task in time so not many problems needed to be addressed. However, when the project moved to the setting up of the pair project, serious problems occurred. At first, students started to complain that they could not get in touch with their pair to discuss the pair project. Then things became more difficult because the sixth week of the project was midterm for the students in Macau. As a result, they could not spare time for this extracurricular project. A vicious circle occurred because the seventh week of the project was midterm for students in Taiwan. Both groups of students kept complaining that they did not have time to discuss the topic of the pair project. Therefore, during this stage, most emails were concerned with how this dilemma could be solved.

Table 2 Email exchanges of the instructors

Phases/Frequency	Examples
Before the project	<p>Teacher A: The attached file is the new version of the proposal. I added questionnaires needed for the study. Do you have reading texts on food culture about Macau that I can post online for the Taiwanese group to read? Looking forward to hearing from you.</p> <p>Teacher B: The proposal looks fine. I have a few questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You mentioned the ID number problem for registration (Taiwan and Macau have different ID number systems). Is this problem solved?</li> <li>2. We might have some students from China. Can I include them? Or should we stick to a comparison of Taiwanese and Macanese students only?</li> <li>3. You have 3 sets of questionnaires in the proposal. Are students going to answer them all?</li> <li>4. For the Pre- and post- questionnaires on Critical Thinking, do you have an English version?</li> <li>5. Is the pair project in week 5 related to the readings?</li> </ol> <p>Teacher A: As for the questionnaire, the Critical Thinking one is for pre and post study. I don't have English version but I can translate it this week. The other two will be administrated after the study. IF you think that's too much, we can delete the problem-solving inventory. But I think it's necessary to have students evaluate the platform and the interaction through questionnaire. The pair project in week 5 will be related to the readings. My idea is that they can decide their own topic and work on it. That's why I use the problem-solving questionnaire to test if they come across any problem during this process and how they solve the problems. Or you think we can give them topics for the pair project. So far I have got 10 students only. I hope to</p>

	<p>receive more replies in these couple of days. If some students cannot meet at the designated time, it is OK if I arrange another time with them? If it is OK then I can have some more students. I am meeting my students this Wednesday at 5pm for explanation.</p>
<p>During the project</p>	<p>Teacher B: I have passed the filled questionnaires to Viva. There's a total of 16 participants from IFT. We did the two pieces of reading on Wed (F&amp;B culture of Kaohsiung and Dining in Macau). 14 of the students posted a topic on the similarities and differences between the two places in "interaction". When you say as your students to discuss with their pair, do you mean their counterparts in Macau, or in their own pairs? I encouraged my students to write as much as possible so that the Kaohsiung students can respond to. Is it the right way to proceed?</p> <p>Teacher A: Thanks. Viva has contacted me and I'll tell her how to key in the questionnaire. Actually, what I planned is that my students have to discuss at least with their counterparts in Macau. The pair is formed when I asked my students to reply the self introduction posted by your students in the first week. But it is better that they can write as much as possible and respond to other pairs.</p> <p>Teacher B: My students have completed the three reading sessions and have posted messages. Would you like them to write reading reports? According to the schedule, next session will be for group project. How are we to carry out this project? How should the students be grouped? Do the Kaohsiung and Macau students need to go online at the same time? I await your advice on the next step.</p> <p>Teacher A: My students will do the third reading on Monday. After that our plan is to have them do pair project. I will send the pair list on Monday. Please direct the students to use the project conduction area. I think they can have their pair discussion by using the blog in the project area. One more thing is that please remind the students to continue the discussion on the three readings. It seems that after one student in Macau posted their answer and one student from Taiwan replied it and there are no more discussions.</p>
<p>After the project</p>	<p>Teacher A: How is everything? Sorry to get back to you so late. I spent time on how to present our project since it did not work well as we expected. The attached file is the draft so far. Please have a look when you have time. I need your help with the blue part. Please tell me if you have any other suggestions. I will work on the data these days and try to complete the discussion section. The other file is the email exchange for your reference.</p> <p>Teacher B: Happy New Year! Attached please find the paper, with my small input. Please feel free to comment and amend. Do you have records of the students' postings and exchanges? I was wondering if we could do something about this online speech acts patterns.</p>

Table 3 and Table 4 illustrated the metacomments of the two instructors on the email exchanges and the project.

Table 3 Teacher A's reflection

Phases	Tasks	Challenges
Before the project	1. Settling the schedule 2. Modifying the questionnaires	1. The length of the term/semester is different between the two colleges 2. How to recruit subjects
During the project	1. Handling technical problems 2. Checking the progress 3. Motivating students	1. Monitor the interaction between the two schools 2. How to encourage students to continue the project
After the project	Reflecting on the project	1. Learn from the experiences 2. Analyze the data collected

Table 4 Teacher B's reflection

Phases	Tasks	Challenges
Before the project	1. Familiarizing with the learning platform and the structure of project 2. Promoting the project and recruiting students 3. Setting a common schedule 4. Preparing compatible texts for reading tasks	1. Difference in academic calendars between two colleges 2. Different class schedules of students from different classes 3. Difference in eating culture in two places – difficult to look for similar text – night market snacks in Taiwan
During the project	1. Constant communication with students about gatherings 2. Checking progress 3. Motivating students to continue	1. Sometimes students may not respond to emails promptly 2. Looking for solutions for technical problems in the forum on the e-platform 3. How to maintain students' level of interest
After the project	1. Reflecting on the project	1. Learning from the experience

It went smoothly at the first phase of the study. The two instructors had some difficulty when designing the project and recruiting participants, particularly concerning the different academic calendars of the two colleges and different class schedules of students from different classes. Luckily, an equal number of students from the two colleges volunteered for the project. In addition, more effort was required from Ms Ip because both the platform and the project were new to her. In order to demonstrate the infrastructure of the platform, she had to familiarize herself with the learning platform. Moreover, it took time to prepare compatible reading selections for reading tasks resulting from the difference in eating cultures in two places.

At the onset of the second phase, only a few technical problems occurred such as in online registration and the forum on the e-platform. Fortunately, they were solved in a timely manner without interfering with the project. In addition to solving technical problems, the instructors monitored the interaction between the two schools because sometimes students did not respond to emails promptly. Also, it was important to maintain students' level of interest.

The most challenging task occurred at the sixth and seventh weeks, as the misalignment of academic calendars made the instructors more anxious. Students were so devoted to their tests that they ignored the project, especially the pair project. That is, students in Macau had their tests in the sixth week meaning that students in Taiwan lost contact with their counterpart. Then, when students in Macau finished their tests, it was the turn for students in Taiwan to take tests. This misalignment of academic calendars disturbed the project and resulted in the delay of the project and complaints from both sets of students. This is similar to the constraint found in Belz and Muller-Hartmann's (2003) study.

After the project, the authors analyzed the data and pondered on how to present the findings. The two authors reflected on the implement of the project, described the tasks and challenges they faced individually. Afterwards, they exchanged drafts, commented on them, and edited the final draft.

### ***Informal interviews with the students***

Students in Taiwan thought that the project was attractive because they could meet students from Macau and discuss hospitality culture with them. However, they had a hard time trying to contact their partners in the other college. As the workload became heavier and with the approach of the midterm exam, they started to delay the tasks required and postpone the activities because this was an extracurricular activity and there was no pressure from the teacher and peers to engage in the project.

As for students in Macau, although below their expectations, students generally felt that they had made some achievements through the project. They felt the online reading and feedback exercises were fun as they could learn something about Taiwan and something more about Macau. By writing the feedback and viewing and responding to their peers' feedback, they could practice English and befriend students from different classes.

However, the interaction with their counterparts in Taiwan (which was the most attractive

aspect of the project) was minimal and frustrating. Students felt that probably the various study loads of the students of the two different places, combined with the different lifestyles, contributed to the failure of their e-communication. One student mentioned that there seemed to be a gap of a couple of hours between her regular msn time and that of her Taiwan counterpart. Consequently, it was difficult to have real time communication online, and the discussion and completion of the project was seriously delayed. The students also felt that more instruction was needed for the group project. As it was a collaboration between students from two different places, they found it difficult to start the project since they were uncertain of the instructors' expectations. For example, where should their establishment be located? What particular aspects should they consider and include in the writing project?

The students were interested in joining similar projects in the future, but hoped that there would be clearer instructions and fixed time slots set for online communication, so that they could really experience authentic communication with people of different cultures.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has investigated the tasks and challenges the authors encountered when handling an international telecollaboration project between Taiwan and Macau. In this project students from hospitality colleges were required to first read three online articles on hospitality culture, discuss the questions on the discussion board, and finally conduct an online project. The email exchange between the two instructors was examined to reveal the tasks for the instructors of the eight-week electronic negotiation, implementation, and management of the telecollaborative partnership. In particular, it detailed the challenges emerging from different phases such as the dilemma resulting from the misalignment of the academic calendars and the decreasing motivation resulting from student workload. Finally, the instructors metacommented on the email messages to investigate the effects and problems of this international telecollaboration.

As Saiz (2005) stated, student dropout and low student retention could have a negative effect on the instructors' personal and professional satisfaction and self-esteem. In addition, the above phenomena may result in tensions between the instructors. Saiz (2005, p.505) provided the instructor with the following specific actions to prevent online students' frustration:

- Instructors having experienced what it takes to be an online student.
- Instructors helping students to acquire skills and apply strategies specific to successful

online learning.

- Instructors being accessible and reasonably flexible to students, giving clear and timely guidelines and response.

We suggest the following aspects according to our experiences to prevent teachers' frustration in a telecollaboration. As Li and Hart (1996) and Lin (2006) suggested, e-learning is becoming more and more popular with learners as they can combine their learning experience together with the advancement of information technology. They are eager to experience the interactive mode of learning with learners from afar. However, the less than positive results of the Taiwan-Macau collaboration shed light on further planning and education for students to become true international and intercultural learners. The results of this project have also vividly exemplified Belz and Muller-Hartmann's (2003) constraints on the misalignment of academic calendars and the differences in student contact hours.

From the planning perspective, instructors should devise a more comprehensive and transparent schedule for both instructors and participants to follow. By doing so, participants may be able to negotiate a better schedule or arrange their own schedules to accommodate the interactive tasks that involve other participants, consequently, allowing a higher degree of interaction. Considering student education, more encouragement can be given to students to look at the collaboration as a positive learning opportunity. Participants may be overly concerned with their level of linguistic and communicative competence, and thus not carry out more lengthy discussions with their overseas counterparts. Another way to maintain students' motivation is to integrate such collaboration into a language course and allocate a certain percentage of course assessment.

This collaboration promoted learning English online while meeting new friends from another culture. Similar to any new class, an ice-breaking session can be given prior to the designated tasks. This was noticed from the students' postings on the forum. Some postings could draw interest from their local peers and interaction would take place online, even when sitting in the same venue. Their interaction could continue as some feedback was given based on their prior shared knowledge. On the other hand, the exchange with participants from the other school was brief, and lacked continuity. One possible factor could be the traditional Chinese belief that asking a new friend too many questions could be seen as rude and aggressive. Many studies (e.g. Li, 2004; Li, Wang, & Yao, 2008) stressed that cultural differences brought by

students into the learning context influence the patterns of interaction. Therefore, an online ice-breaking activity may help induce more interaction in the discussions.

It turned out that technical problems, which are commonly mentioned in many projects, are the least challenging in this study. To take advantage of the affordance provided by information technology and avoid the constraints, teachers should take into consideration the many aspects of telecollaboration. With more elaborated preparation, more careful monitoring, and timely adjusting of the project, greater achievement arising from telecollaboration would be more promising for language teachers and learners.

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## **Appendix A**

### ***The Guidelines for carrying out the pair project***

1. The theme for the project is to build the virtual online hospitality industry, such as a hotel, restaurant, club, and so forth.
2. All pairs have to set up specific online business plan beforehand. On the U-HELP project area, participants can create their own projects from "Origin" (Figure A.) in which the space allows participants filling in their plan details. Each group has to set up a schedule on the U-HELP so that instructors and the group itself can check if they are able to finish the project by the deadline.



Figure A

- Participants are required to fill in their personal information as the self-introduction from “About us.” (Figure B.)

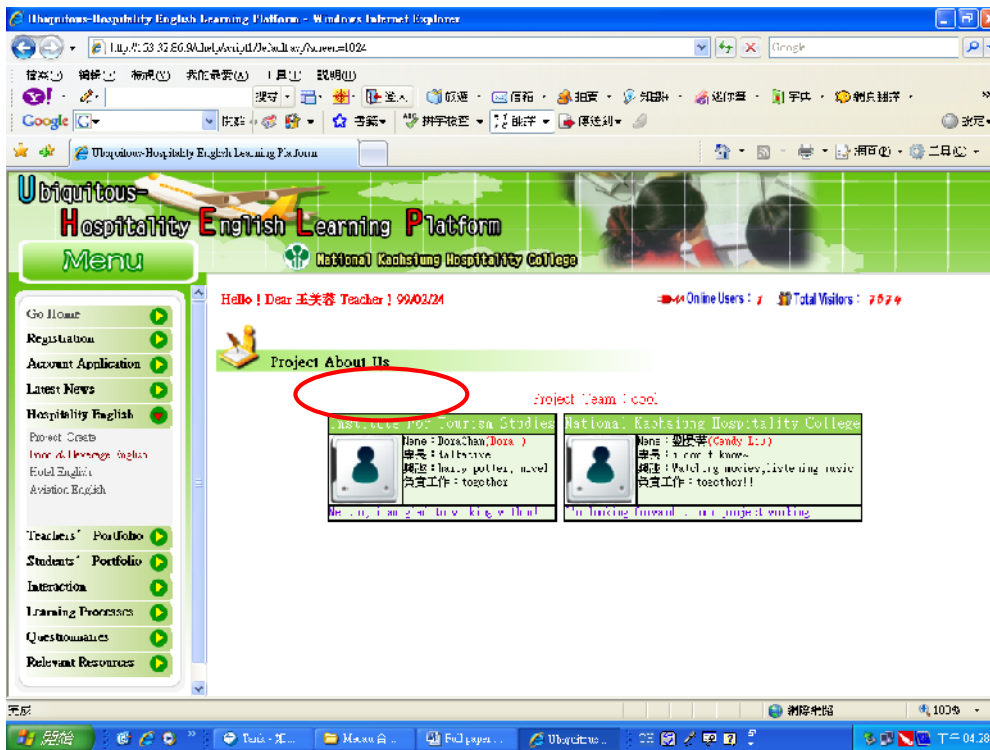


Figure B

4. Each pair is supposed to discuss their plans and exchange their opinions through the blog and the U-HELP discussion board (Figures C & D).

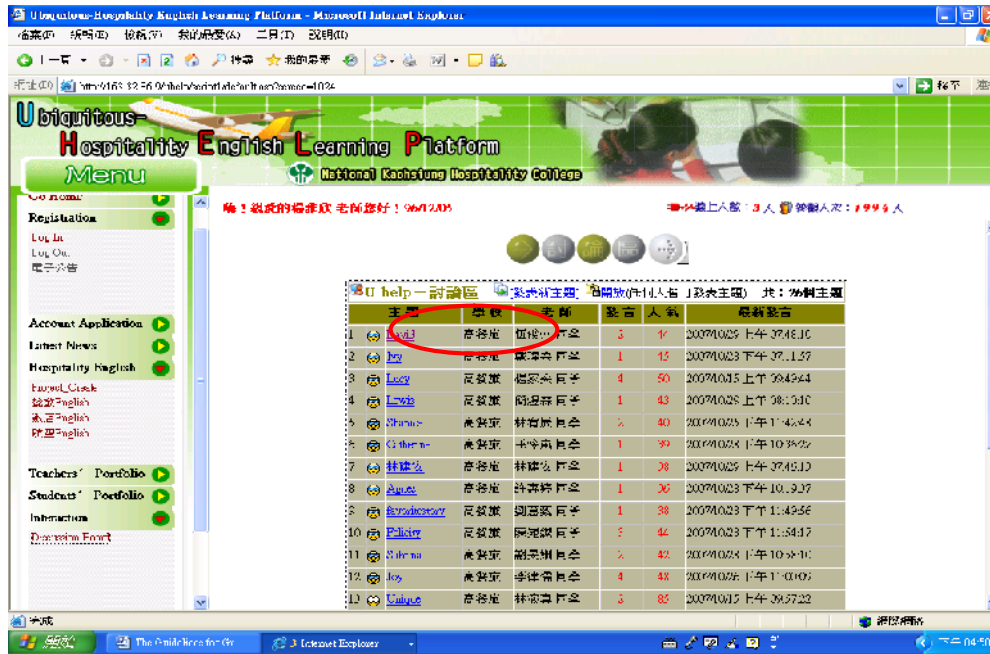


Figure C

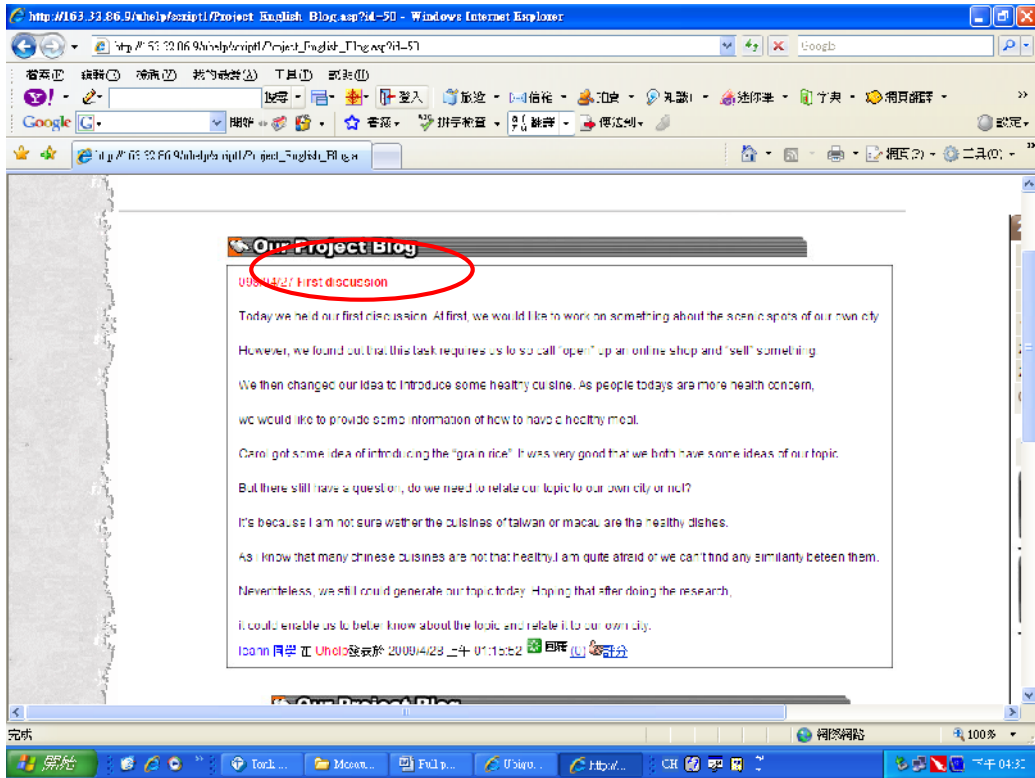


Figure D

5. Also, participants can design their own banners on the blogs to present the specialties of their own stores.
6. The project presentation encompasses all the details of the business from the material facilities to esoteric perception. For instance, to set up a café, the group is required to demonstrate the style of the building or decoration, the best location, the marketing strategies, the feature of their coffee, the departments of the organization, the service, and so on.
7. When the project is completed, each group should post their final work on “Report”.