

# STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES: A VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT WITH FOREIGN COUNTRIES IN ENRICHING THEIR INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

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**ABSTRACT** – *Providing opportunities for students to be engaged with people in foreign countries using the virtual platforms in enriching one's intercultural language competence could pave the way to understand better other cultures. In this light, this study would like to describe and analyze the experiences of students in communicating with other countries through social media platforms as part of their Intercultural Communication class. The purpose of the project was to enrich their intercultural language competence and appreciate world Englishes. In class, they were introduced to the seven continents for an overview such as language use, taboos, and traditions. They were given three months to complete the task with guided activities. Upon completion of this task, all four classes were given a researcher-made questionnaire and focus group discussions were also employed to share and assess their experiences. Students realized that English language use varies from one country to another. Many were familiar with taboos and traditions, but as millennials, not all of them were strictly practicing them anymore. Hence, getting a first-hand experience across the globe opened doors to understand better other cultures and gain mutual respect.*

**Keywords:** Intercultural language competence, world Englishes, cultural understanding, virtual engagement

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural language competence encompasses international contexts which involve native and non-native discourse participants [1]. With the advent of technology, the world becomes borderless which provides an opportunity for people to communicate even virtually through social media.

The English language serves as an international medium for many parts of the globe. Communicating with other people gives anybody a chance to learn and be enriched with their language use, taboos, and traditions. For language use, the English medium is used in different contexts which are very attached to one's identity and culture. It might be expressed in various manners but actually meant the same thing. For instance, "on top of the table" is translated as "tabletop" among Singaporeans. This shows how the English language could be expressed in a different way.

For the taboos and traditions, this helps people to understand better other cultures. In this case, communicating with people from foreign countries virtually via Facebook, WhatsApp, and Skype widens one's perspective about their practices. Taboos and traditions are very important to respect other cultures. This helps in enriching their intercultural competence as well.

In this study, the virtual friend in foreign countries which the students able to communicate through their Intercultural Communication class aided them to understand better the reports of their classmates about their language use, taboos, and traditions. This class project helped them to become open-minded and most importantly respect and understand other cultures.

As the basis of this study, it was anchored on the Theory of Communicative Competence. According to Chomsky, linguistic competence means the "mastery of an abstract system of rules, based on an innate language apparatus. It elucidates the role of dialogue-constitutive universals as part of the formal apparatus required of the speaker's capacity to communicate. He then notes what would be required of a

general semantics based on a theory of communicative competence; and finally points out how this theory might be used for social analysis" [2].

In like manner, the communicative competence is measured through the intercultural communication class experiences of the students focusing on language use, taboos, and traditions. In this context, the social analysis is based on the experiences, conversation threads and video/audio conferences of the students with their virtual friends through Facebook, WhatsApp, and Skype. These virtual applications and social media widen the knowledge and opportunities of the students to be immersed in the virtual world and communicate in foreign countries.

Intercultural literacy that includes language proficiencies, active participation is necessary for effective intercultural engagement [3]. This engagement, it guided students to practice language proficiency through their exposure with their virtual friends in foreign countries such as Singapore, Thailand, the United States, and the like. As they communicated using the English medium, they experienced how the English language was expressed in a different manner but with the same context.

The concept of intercultural communication competence assists instructors to identify successful classrooms. It was found that students reported moderate levels of instructors' intercultural engagement. Results indicate to include cross-cultural interaction in language teaching and learning [4]. Immersing students in this kind of classroom activity wherein students communicate to foreign people virtually has raised their awareness about their neighboring countries.

A common problem in intercultural communication occurs particularly among Asians is when people assumed similarities. Through this approach in teaching the students, it is hoped that one could acknowledge and appreciate cultural differences. Through time, identities also change from one situation to another. This would be helpful in treating others with respect rather than stereotyping a group of people.

Moreover, asking and verifying information about other cultures is a good practice to become intercultural competent. Lastly, making students aware of cultural identity norms would raise awareness and build trust despite the differences [5].

**2. METHODOLOGY**

**2.1 Research Design and Instruments**

This study endeavored to describe and analyze the intercultural language competence of the students in the Intercultural Communication course. It employed descriptive design and mixed methods. It made use of a researcher-made questionnaire and focus group discussions to substantiate the results of the study.

**2.2 Setting, Respondents, and Data Gathering Procedure**

This study was conducted at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, C.M. Recto Lapasan, Cagayan de Oro City. To interpret the results, the descriptive research design was used in the study. It used the procedure of nonrandom sampling, specifically purposive sampling. The units of analysis were all the four classes of Intercultural Communication class with a total of 104 students who provided consent and actively participated in the study.

For the data gathering, at the start of the semester, students were informed about this class project. They communicated to someone in the different continents all over the world. This someone could already be a friend, recommended from friends, requested friend via Facebook or other social media websites. As an introduction to the project, students were divided into groups and were assigned to present each among the seven continents. After the report, they were given a month to establish relationships with their virtual friend and start the discourse and conversation. They communicated through Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Skype. As they communicated with their virtual friend in the Multimedia laboratory or using their mobile phones, they were given instructions and guided activities to help them enrich and have a productive talk. Afterward, they had screenshots of their threads and conversations as well as audio and video conferences which served as the basis of this study.

**3.3 Ethical Considerations**

Both the students and their respective virtual friends were aware and knowledgeable about this class project. Informed consent was also sought prior to the conduct of the study. The researcher-made questionnaire was provided to the students on gauging their experiences and a focus group discussion was also employed as part of processing and synthesis. The purpose of the project was to enhance their intercultural language competence, raise awareness and achieve mutual understanding and respect with other cultures.

These were the processes used in this study to determine the intercultural language competence experiences of the students in the Intercultural Communication course through their active virtual engagement in foreign countries.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This study determined to describe and analyze the intercultural language competence of the students in the Intercultural Communication course. The following were the findings and results.

Table 1 presents the level of experience through the challenges met in their virtual engagement. Many of them found it very challenging in starting the project. They had difficulty in looking for a virtual friend in foreign countries because they did not have friends in other parts of the globe. Several of them provided feedback that it was their first time. Students found it very challenging in terms of internet connectivity. This would suggest improving the internet infrastructure of the city as well. Findings also revealed that many of them found it challenging in communicating with a virtual friend, were afraid and conscious during the video/audio chat, and worried about constructing their sentences. This was supported by the study of Xiao and Petraki [6] wherein Chinese students experienced difficulties and challenges during interaction with students from other countries attributed to a lack of intercultural communication competence and culture shock. These experiences were also similar to Filipino students who provided feedback on the difficulty in constructing sentences and communicating with people from other cultures. These results implied that enriching students' intercultural

**Table 1. Challenges Experienced in the Virtual Engagement**

Indicators	%	Level of Experience
Looking for a virtual friend	39.42	Very Much Challenging
	28.85	Challenging
	16.35	Somewhat Challenging
	15.38	Not Challenging
Having an internet connection	36.54	Very Much Challenging
	29.81	Challenging
	19.23	Somewhat Challenging
	14.42	Not Challenging
Communicating with the virtual friend	24.04	Very Much Challenging
	35.58	Challenging
	31.73	Somewhat Challenging
	08.65	Not Challenging
Being afraid and/or conscious during the video/audio chat	25.96	Very Much Challenging
	29.81	Challenging
	27.88	Somewhat Challenging
	16.35	Not Challenging
Being worried about how to construct my sentences	25.96	Very Much Challenging
	33.65	Challenging
	29.81	Somewhat Challenging
	10.58	Not Challenging

language communication skills are necessary in English language teaching (ELT) since the world is moving its direction toward internationalization and as a medium in business communication.

**Table 2. Learning Experiences in the Virtual Engagement with Foreign Countries**

Indicators	%	Description
Discover the practices, language, etc. of other cultures	50.96	Strongly Agree
	37.50	Agree
	11.54	Somewhat Agree
	00.00	Disagree
Affirm/confirm what is taught in the class based on the chat/conversations	32.69	Strongly Agree
	50.00	Agree
	16.35	Somewhat Agree
	00.96	Disagree

Become inspired to meet other people on the globe	56.73	Strongly Agree
	34.62	Agree
	08.65	Somewhat Agree
	00.00	Disagree
Observe their accent, mannerism, behavior, etc.	33.65	Strongly Agree
	41.35	Agree
	23.08	Somewhat Agree
Find a friend and would like it to continue even after the completion of this course	01.92	Disagree
	50.00	Strongly Agree
	30.77	Agree
	17.31	Somewhat Agree
	01.92	Disagree

\*No one responded Strongly Disagree

Table 2 shows the learning experiences in the virtual engagement with foreign countries of the students. Results showed that the majority of students *strongly agree* that this project helped them to discover the practices, language, etc. of other cultures, became inspired to meet other people in the globe, and would like it to continue even after the completion of this course. Byram et al. [7] mentioned that the new and emerging social contexts contributed to changes where both teachers and students needed to be aware of their own and other's people's cultures. In addition, Akdere et al. [8] agreed on the necessity of immersion or experience. At this time of pandemic with limited mobility, it is important to develop intercultural competence. The potentials of virtual reality and engagement in enriching and advancing the intercultural learning and experience of the students are very promising.

Results of this study showed that many of them *agree* on authenticity with what was taught in class based on the chat/conversations and observed their accent, mannerism, behavior, and the like.

Regarding language use, even though English became the medium in their discourse and conversation, they observed differences in the way it was being told as they talked. They have the same context or meaning but spoke differently. For example, in Singapore, they also say "can" which is equivalent to saying "yes." A sample dialogue is the following: "Can we chat tomorrow?" The response of the virtual friend was "Can!" which also meant, "Yes!" On the other hand, they also discovered that English native speakers were typically straightforward in expressing themselves.

In the other context, the English language use (i.e., world Englishes) could reflect where the person is coming from. As a result, for instance, "Good noon" as a form of greetings, is not typically expressed among other parts of the world. However, it has been commonly used in the Philippines because of their greeting, "Magandang tanghali." This translates to a local or regional variety of English [9].

About taboos and traditions, it has been shown that the students have observed common practices as one ASEAN community. Regarding the taboos, it is a practice not to go against one's God. They were respectful and pious to their religion. In addition, many people in Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and other ASEAN forbid touching their heads because they believe that it is where their soul resides. It is considered the most sacred part of the body. For the traditions, hospitality has been evident in Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia. They treated the guests with respect and prepared the best food for them.

In terms of food, it was common to have spicy ingredients. For example, Indonesians and Malaysians favorite is curry which is also evident in the Philippines (e.g., chicken curry). In Singapore, their national food is "laksa," which is also spicy.

This class project, it helped students open their minds that even though there are similarities, there are also differences. This aids in eliminating ethnocentrism that one culture is better or superior over the other.

These were the things that students have experienced in the Intercultural Communication course. It was hoped that this approach has sparked the beginning of a dialogue that would continue throughout all the lifetime of the students [5].

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been revealed that students found the class project a productive experience in enriching their intercultural language competence through their conversations using the various virtual and social media platforms. It helped to bridge the gap between them and the foreign countries. It raised awareness and mutual respect with other cultures.

On the other hand, there were challenges that they met along the way in this class activity. Some students had difficulty in looking for a virtual friend, were rejected, and lacked confidence in sentence construction.

Hence, it is recommended that in this class project, the school could establish linkages with colleges and universities in foreign countries helping students become more aware and open-minded about other people. It would also help establish internationalization and partnerships among institutions. This would also pave the way to achieve mutual understanding and respect of cultures that will serve as a lifetime commitment to peace and friendship in the global community.

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