

## **An Online Cultural Exchange Program to Develop Students' Inter-Cultural Competence and Language Proficiency**

Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc<sup>1</sup>, Ta Thi Mai Huong<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Department, School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University

<sup>2</sup> English Department, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration

---

### **Abstract:**

**Background:** Language and culture are inseparable (L. Nguyen et al. 2016). Language learning and teaching has been suggested to shift to a way in which more attention should be paid on integrating culture and language competence (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). In addition, in a global world, the focus of language teaching now is to communicate with not only native speakers but also with non-native people using the language (Byram 2009; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). The understanding of cultural differences helps eliminate obstacles and misunderstanding (Yu and Li, 2019); therefore, prevents communication breakdowns. Seeing the need of developing intercultural competence for English language learners (EFL), we suggested the activity of connecting students from different cultural backgrounds together to talk, discuss, share and collaborate on tasks with a view to developing their inter-cultural competence in the process of acquiring the language.

**Materials and Methods:** In this project, we considered the development of cultural sensitivity among students and their motivation in learning writing skills via a guided online discussion between a group of Vietnamese students from School of Foreign Languages (SFL) under Thai Nguyen University with their partners from a Taiwanese university. 28 third year English-majors in a writing class in SFL were paired with 28 students in a class of similar level and courses in Wenzao University in Taiwan, who were participants of a project on English learning and interculturality. During four weeks of the research period, the students were required to share topics related to ethnic groups in one's culture with their e-pal using online channels, raise questions to their e-pal to clarify the cultural misunderstanding and post what they learnt on the discussion room of the project website. A brief questionnaire at the end of the research period, observations of students' discussion on the project websites, and students' weekly online feedbacks and final reviews were the three main sources of data for analysis. In this paper we focused on the effectiveness from the view of Vietnamese students.

**Results:** Responses of the questionnaires and students' reflection showed that the majority of them expressed their interest in having new friends, knowing more about cultures and improving their language proficiency through online cultural exchange activities. Basing on what had been experienced, suggestions and guidelines on how to conduct a similar, more successful project was given. Although the scale of the project was small, the ideas that it proposed were of great significance and could be applied in a much larger scale. This could bring benefits for both learners and teachers in developing intercultural competence and shed light on a new era of interculturalness in English language teaching as well as in other similar contexts.

**Key Word:** Online cultural exchange, Inter-cultural competence, English language teaching, English proficiency development.

---

Date of Submission: 21-05-2021

Date of acceptance: 06-06-2021

---

### **I. Introduction and Rationale**

Language and culture are inseparable (L. Nguyen et al. 2016). Language learning and teaching has been suggested to shift to a way in which more attention should be paid on integrating culture and language competence (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013). In addition, in a global world, the focus of language teaching now is to communicate with not only native speakers but also with non-native people using the language (Byram 2009; Liddicoat and Scarino 2013). However, in reality, not many language teachers find the effective ways to combine culture into their teaching (Byram and Risager 1999; East 2012; Harvey et al. 2010; Ho 2011; Larzén-Östermark 2008; Luk 2012; Sercu 2005). This is because of either their attitudes or their lack of useful teaching guidelines or activities to put ideas into practice. In the Vietnamese context where English is the most popular language taught at schools, L. Nguyen et al. (2016) has pointed out that teachers paid little pedagogical attention to culture or taught it in a restricted way; or even when they did address culture, they focused mainly on developing their students' culture-specific knowledge about English-speaking cultures rather than on cultures the students were more likely to communicate with (e.g. cultures in the Southeast Asian region and others in Asia using English as a lingua franca). Seeing the need of developing intercultural competence for learners

while learning English, we suggested the activity of connecting students from different cultural backgrounds together to talk, discuss, share and collaborate on tasks.

## **II. Material and Methods**

**Study Location:** This study was carried out on the basis of a collaborative project named “International On-Line Project on English Learning and Interculturality” between SFL and Wenzao University in Taiwan, done mostly online though the the project website discussion board and some other online channels such as Facebook, LINE, and emails.

**Study Duration:** Four weeks, from March to April, 2021.

**Sample size:** 56 third-year English major students in Vietnam and Taiwan

**Subjects & selection method:** The subjects of the studies included 28 third year English-majors in a writing class in SFL and 28 students in a class of similar level and courses in Wenzao University in Taiwan, who were participants of the project named “International On-Line Project on English Learning and Interculturality”. They were paired based on the preferred means of communication.

### **Procedure methodology**

Generally, the process was conducted through six steps as follow:

Step 1: Contact information of the coordinators from both sides were collected;

Step 2: Teachers in charge of particular classes were paired up;

Step 3: Guidelines and procedures were discussed and agreed between teachers;

Step 4: List of students with preferred contact channels were exchanged;

Step 5: Students were paired up and talks were conducted;

Step 6: Responses to the questionnaire, students' reflections and observation of students' discussions on the project websites were collected for analysis and report.

Details about the duties of teachers, students and the discussion contents are further explained below.

### **Teachers' duties**

Teachers' duties can be described via 3 phases: before, during and after the students' interactions. Before the process, teachers must send the students list to each other and pair up local students with their online e-pal on a one-on-one basis depending on their preference in contact channels. An orientation session was done face-to-face in one class contact to make students clear about the learning purpose, theme of discussion, intercultural sensitivity, and online etiquette. During the time of students' online exchange, teachers supervised the on-line interaction mainly by reading students' posts through the official website channel and led them to reflect on their own culture through the discussion by welcoming any questions or discussions about our home culture. Teachers could lead them to reflect on their own culture through the discussion as well. In this project, the in-class teacher was also coordinating the exchange. Therefore, teacher and students had time for actual contact in class once every week to discuss and share related issues.

### **Student participants**

Both Vietnamese and Taiwanese students were required to do a number of tasks, including being the informants of the e-pal through the course website for four weeks, sharing topics related to ethnic groups in one's culture with their e-pal and producing a learning outcome assigned by their teachers. The Wenzao students were required to design and produce a poster to introduce the ethnicity in the culture of their e-pal while the students at SFL in Vietnam were asked to write a review of the activities that they had joined. The students of both schools would help make comments and give feedback to each other's products.

### **Discussion contents**

The discussion topic was about ethnicity in different cultures. Clear guiding questions were provided in details to the students (See table 1). Students joined the on-line asynchronous discussion to share the backgrounds of different ethnic groups in one's nation, and their opinions about the integration among these ethnic groups in their own culture. They may use any online channels, such as Facebook, LINE, emails, or the project website discussion board they feel convenient and comfortable to interact with each other. Whatever channels they choose, they were asked to post the main findings on the discussion room of the project website.

**Table no 1: Weekly requirements**

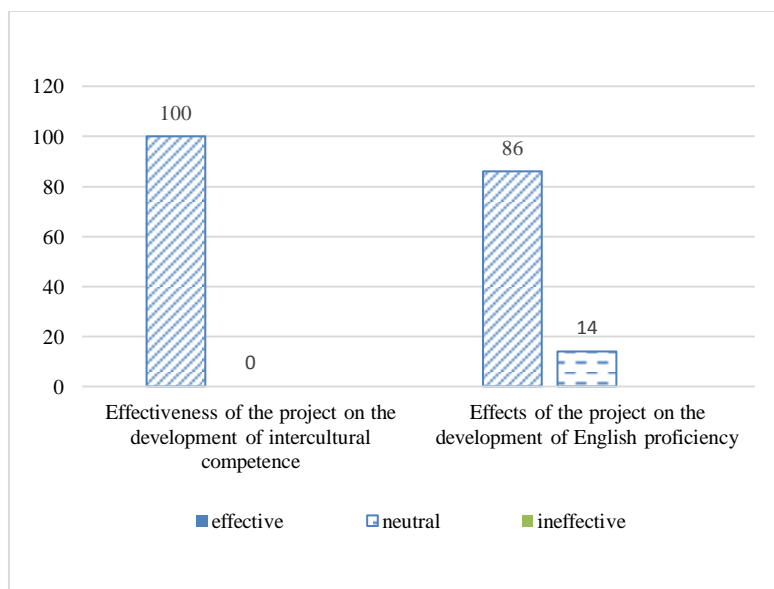
<b>Week</b>	<b>Requirements</b>
1	- Write self introduction and familiarize with e-pal - Introduce e-pal in the project website
2	- Find and share information related to the ethnic groups in your and your e-pal's culture

	- Share what you learnt with your class in direct session - Raise discussion questions with your e-pal
3	- Introduce and discuss the key ethnic groups to your e-pal, answer questions and clarify misunderstandings - Post the key information learnt to share with your class on the project website
4	- Write a review of around 1500 words about the project following the given format, share the relevant part related to culture to your e-pal

### III. Result

#### Findings from the questionnaire

Figure 1 below presents the summary of SFL students' evaluation regarding the effectiveness of the project on developing their intercultural competence and promoting their English proficiency.



**Figure no 1.** SFL students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the project use

Data from the questionnaire responses showed that the majority of students highly appreciated the effectiveness of the project. From the figure, it is recognizable that all students surveyed (100%) approved that the project was a great opportunity for them to improve their cultural knowledge. No students (0%) were skeptical or refuted the usefulness of the online cultural exchange program on the development of their cultural understanding.

Considering the effects of the projects on the improvement of their English proficiency, the majority of students, accounting for 86%, found that frequent discussions as well as the completion of assignments as required in the project helped level up their proficiency. Only 14% of students held neutral opinion and none of them thought that the project had no impact on their English proficiency. Summary of the findings from the questionnaire assured that students held positive attitudes towards the usefulness of the project in helping them improve both cultural and language competence.

#### Reflection from observations

Similar to students' responses to the questionnaire, the main findings from students' reflection also showed that a number of students expressed their interest in knowing more about the new cultures. Regarding knowledge about the cultural ethnic groups, some students shared that they learnt a great many of interesting things.

Through this project, we have discussed the education part and also the religion of the Taiwanese ethics. I also introduce the aborigine in Vietnam. We exchange some different ideas of the ethnic in our own countries. [...] I think we all can get many different cultural exchanges and also we can improve our communicative ability of English. I have learned a lot! (posted by Vie03)

[...] to inform me about the average of the education level in their ethnic group and the actions that government and community take to help the minority groups. They also mentioned the religions of Kinh group and minority groups. Furthermore, Samy shared some websites she found, which are related to the questions I asked her. [...] (posted by Tw02)

Other the students found the discussion useful and that there were numerous matters that they had never known before about their e-pals' cultures. Concerning other cultural issues, the students also shared about lifestyle, hobbies, foods, festivals, clothing or architecture of which they found a number of similarities as well as differences. Nevertheless, in a short message posted online, students could not describe those in details.

In addition to the enrichment of knowledge, students also found that the project provided them a great opportunity to have international friends. Some scripts from students mentioned impressive experience to communicate with each other, especially the appreciation for their partners' friendliness, kindness, patience, and willingness to share. Overall, most of them claimed have nice time together and feel eager to have a foreign friend.

[.....] It's such a great opportunity for me to be a part in this E-pal project and I'm glad to do it all the time. Anny Liu is my partner from Wenzao University, needless to say that she is so amazing a friend that I've ever met and we really get on well with each other. [.....] (posted by Vie01)

[....] I am glad that I have two wonderful e-pals who always share lots of useful and in details information to me. We did have some great times by doing this project. Hopefully, I can have a chance to go to Vietnam again and visit my friends! (posted by Tw01)

While most students reported their productive discussion with their e-pals, some acknowledged that they did not always have a smooth flow of interaction due to busy schedules at school or the different time zones. However, their experience seemed not to be a negative one, as one shared.

[.....] Although we were busy and cannot reply the messages quite often in these days, we still tried our best to exchange the information we had. (posted by Vie02)

#### **Analysis of SLF students' reviews**

From students' reviews, data regarding cultural knowledge gained, students' opinions about the advantages and drawbacks of the projects were analyzed.

#### ***Cultural knowledge***

The detailed knowledge that students gained through the interactions were described vividly in their writings. Most of them showed in-depth understanding of ethnic groups in Taiwan, for example the number of aboriginal groups, the main groups, their lifestyle and traditions.

[....] they all generous to guests who come to their tribe. They like to drink millet wine which is their favourite. They like eating grilled meat on stone [.....] Every group has their own festival to pray for good luck every year. For instance, Yami has Harvest Festival [.....] Atayal has Hunting Festival. The head of the tribe assembles the tribe people to pick a day for the big hunt. [.....] The Bunun have Sowing Festival [.....] They are best known for their sophisticated polyphonic vocal music. The Atayal is best known for the tattoo on their face. (review from Vie 04)

A part from ethnicity, other aspects of culture were also mentioned. These include working life, festivals, foods, daily routines, education, religions, costumes and language.

#### ***The advantages***

The positive aspects of the projects listed in students' reviews were in agreement with what had been stated in their posts. Students mainly focused on three points: a chance to have an international friend, an opportunity to practice English and an acquisition of interesting cultural facts.

[.....] By searching information to answer my e-pal's questions, I have known extra information related to ethnic groups of my country. In addition, my reading and writing skills have improved through exchanging information with my e-pal. (review from Vie 05)

Another advantage stated by students was that they could imagine Taiwanese lives through conversation with their e-pals. Some students believed that the friendship would last long and hoped to visit Taiwan on the nearest occasion.

#### ***The drawbacks***

The drawbacks of the project were stated quite clearly in SFL students' writings. Similar to what was posted in the discussion board of the project website, the most common issue reflected in students' reviews was related to the duration of the project. For them, four weeks (of which one was devoted to self-introduction and familiarization) were not adequate to discuss the topic as fully as they wished. Therefore, students expressed their expectation of an extended project later on.

A few students expressed the inconvenience of interrupted conversations due to different time zones, the difficulties in arranging the time for discussions because of personal schedules and the problem of disconnection with the e-pal during the first week.

[...] sometimes we were not online at the same time on facebook, thus the exchange was interrupted. Nevertheless, my Taiwan friend is truly enthusiastic. He wrote and explained things comprehensively. (review from Vie06)

#### **Future perspectives**

In the review, all SFL students claimed that the project was a good idea and definitely useful. They all hoped to have similar projects to join in the future. One student wrote:

[...] I am honored to participate in this project and work with my e-pal. I am thankful for who created this project because I have a new foreign friend. [...] Similar projects should be held in the future for a greater number of students to join. (review from Vie 07)

#### **Writing motivation**

The majority of students agreed that they did not feel stressful when writing to their e-pals or when writing the reviews because the ideas for writing were from real experience. In his last words on the review paper, one student wrote:

[...] our school should develop such programs to motivate students in learning as the traditional ways were truly boring to them. (review from Vie 11)

### **IV. Discussion**

The project was proved to be a successful model on which students could advance their intercultural ability as well as improve their language proficiency when interacting with those of other cultures through a virtual space on the internet. The major achievement was that students had broadened their worldview and agreed that the project enriched their knowledge in understanding a new culture different from their own. This could be entailed from their excitement and joy arose when they received the interesting responses and assistance from their partners on the project topics. At the same time, students learned to accept and respect differences which led them to compare and consider from various perspectives.

On the other hand, the online interaction is especially useful in connecting students of both sides who learned to make new friends and share their life on diverse topics, including music, sports, food, pop culture, family, work, etc. Frequent discussions, reflections and the completion of the assignments using the target language were also an attribute to promoting the development of their language proficiency. The teachers' continuous efforts in building the network, guiding and encouraging the students in the learning process were also essential to the vibrant interaction and fruitful results through the process.

Meanwhile, there remained the challenges in the following areas, such as cooperation process, schedule conflicts, individual differences among students in the project, personal concerns about on-line interaction, and the criteria in selecting topics. In this regard, it is suggested that the technical and logistic problems be anticipated and various solutions be well prepared in advance for more effective support in the future.

### **V. Conclusion**

Findings from the discussion has shown that online cultural exchange program was beneficial to the development of students' cultural knowledge and English proficiency. Although more potential in conducting cross-national projects awaits to be evaluated, the results of the project has enhanced our understanding in the new pedagogy in bridging English education and cultural learning to prepare students to live a multicultural society.

### **References**

- [1]. Byram, M. 2009. "The Intercultural Speaker and the Pedagogy of Foreign Language Educa-tion." In *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, edited by D.K. Deardorff, 321–332. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [2]. Byram, M., and K. Risager. 1999. *Language Teachers, Politics and Cultures*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [3]. Crozet, C., and A.J. Liddicoat. 1999. The Challenge of Intercultural Language Teaching: Engaging with Culture in the Classroom. In *Striving for the Third Place: Intercultural Competence through Language Education* edited by J. Lo Bianco, A.J. Liddicoat, and C. Crozet, 113–125. Melbourne: Language Australia.
- [4]. East, M. 2012. "Addressing the Intercultural via Task-based Language Teaching: Possibility or Problem?" *Language and Intercultural Communication* 12 (1): 56–73. DOI:10.1080/14708477.2011.626861.
- [5]. Harvey, S., C. Conway, H. Richards, and A. Roskvist. 2010. *Evaluation of Teacher Professional Development Languages (TPDL) in Years 7–10 and the Impact On Language Learning Opportunities and Outcomes for Students*. A Report to the Ministry of Education. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- [6]. Ho, S.T.K. 2011. "An Investigation of Intercultural Teaching and Learning in Tertiary EFL Classrooms in Vietnam" Unpublished PhD thesis. Victoria Univeristy of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand.

- [7]. Larzén-Östermark, E. 2008. "The Intercultural Dimension in EFL- Teaching: A Study of Conceptions Among Finland- Swedish Comprehensive School Teachers." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 52 (5): 527–547. DOI:10.1080/00313830802346405.
- [8]. Liddicoat, A.J., and A. Scarino. 2013. *Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- [9]. Long Nguyen, Sharon Harvey & Lynn Grant (2016) What teachers say about addressing culture in their EFL teaching practices: the Vietnamese context, *Intercultural Education*, 27:2, 165-178. DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2016.1144921
- [10]. Sercu, L. 2005. "Foreign Language Teachers and the Implementation of Intercultural Education: A Comparative Investigation of the Professional Self- Concepts and Teaching Practices of Belgian Teachers of English, French and German." *European Journal of Teacher Education* 28 (1): 87–105. DOI:10.1080/02619760500040389.
- [11]. Yu, Y. & Li, Q. .2019. "Analysis of the Reasons and Solutions to the Failure of Intercultural Communication". *Proceedings of 1st Asia International Symposium on Arts, Literature, Language and Culture (AISALLC 2019)*. Francis Academic Press, UK. DOI: 10.25236/aisallc.2019.062.
- [12].

Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc. "An Online Cultural Exchange Program to Develop Students' Inter-Cultural Competence and Language Proficiency." *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, 11(3), (2021): pp. 09-14.