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REVIEW ARTICLE

INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE PROJECTS WITHIN EFL/ESL CONTEXTS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper argues that intercultural exchange projects can play an essential role in relation to augmenting students' communication skills in English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL). To achieve the intended aim, the paper reports on a three-year research project which was conducted at a private university in Dubai where the researcher works, in collaboration with the researcher's project's partner in Bonn, Germany. Intercultural exchange projects are defined as a communicative, collaborative, and student-driven work, requiring the engagement of students in online communication as well as collaboration with peer students from partner classes in geographically distant places, under the supervision of instructors. The researcher used a ten-item questionnaire to measure the effectiveness of intercultural exchange projects, as perceived by the participating students. The paper concludes with the need to conduct intercultural exchange projects by EFL/ESL instructors and researchers working in different parts of the world, in order for students to promote their communication skills in English.

INTRODUCTION

Characterized by the expansion of knowledge and technological revolution, the current era necessitates the enhancement of a formula capable of keeping pace with recent developments, in order to ultimately direct them towards distinction for all. Successful university education, therefore, involves much more than enabling students to master basic knowledge. What is it then that would contribute significantly to quality university education? Obviously, a variety of factors are involved such as acquisition of communication skillsand mastery of technology literacy and English language. With quality learning outcomes in mind, the current paper reports on a three-year research project the aim of which was to augment students' communication skills in English as a foreign/second language whilst focusing on both intercultural competence and digital communication. The research was conducted at a private university in Dubai where the researcher works,involving one hundred and fifty-eight students who registered for the course Communication Skills; a university requirement course which all students are required to take during their university study. To portray a clear idea about the research study, part two of this paper reflects on scholars' opinions and researchers' studies within the field concerned. Part three proceeds to describe the study in relation to aims, procedures, participants and tools. Next, part four highlights the findings and part five concludes with some

recommendations for English language specialists to consider. Last but not least, the last part presents the references cited throughout the paper.

Literature review

The communication process begins when the sender has an idea. The form of the idea may be influenced by complex factors surrounding the sender. These factors include, amongst others, the sender's background, mood, culture, physical surrounding, and the context of the situation itself (Al Alami, 2013). The way a professor greets people on campus, for example, depends on a number of factors such as culture, type of relationship, and so on. Relating the discussion to the EFL/ESL classroom, it would be necessary to develop students' communication skills so that in the long run they will be able to use English appropriately, fluently, and accurately. This entails that the procedures, activities, and tasks a teaching practitioner performs in the EFL/ESL classroom, are geared towards promoting communication skills on the part of students. This part of the paper, therefore, presents a number of scholars' opinions on communication within EFL/ESL contexts and reports on some previous research projects conducted within this field.To start with, it is essential to bear in mind that communicative language teaching has evolved over the past several decades in response to changing views on the nature of communicative language use and the abilities that underlie it. Stelma (2010) mentions that describing communication as the aim of language teaching since the

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1970s has involved the development of communicative competence definitions. Understanding communicative competence, therefore, is one way of understanding communicative language teaching. It is worthwhile mentioning that societies constantly change, and so do ways of communicating. The principal goal of language teachingmay constantly be subject to change. For EFL/ESL instructors, three issues would help decide the limitations and appropriateness of communicative language teaching. These are: what communication processes learners require, what kind of communicative competence learners need, and what characteristics-if any-communication activities conducted in class share with real life communication situations. What features characterize communicative language teaching? Stating it in general terms, Gilmore (2007) emphasizes that we need to present language which is solidly contextualized, and sensitize learners to the ways in which the discourse presents its context. However, since each culture is unique, each classroom is also unique not only all over the globe but also within the same country. This requires the need to adopt an eclectic approach, in order to meet students' needs. According to Leung (2005), it is necessary for EFL/ESL teaching practitioners to take notice of real-world cultural, social and language developments in contemporary conditions, as well as re-engage with a set of ethnographic sensitivities and sensibilities.

Savignon (2002) argues that communicative language teaching is not exclusively concerned with oral communication. The principles of communicative language teaching also apply to reading and writing activities that engage readers and writers in the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning. Communicative language teaching does not always require group or pair work. Group tasks have been found helpful in many contexts as a way of providing increased opportunity and motivation for students. However, classroom group and pair work should not be considered an essential feature, for they may be inappropriate in some contexts. Finally, communicative language teaching does not exclude a focus on meta-linguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness.Kleinsasser and Sato (1999) believe that communicative language teaching is derived from a multi-disciplinary perspective that includes at least language, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and education research. It focuses on all the components of communicative competence, where language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques, and students ultimately have to use the language receptively and productively.Focusing on various activity types and interaction patterns, Kwon (1999) explored the effectiveness of the opportunities provided for high school ESL students to gain communicative competence inside and beyond the classroom. The aim of the study was to describe and analyze the activity types and the patterns of interaction within the activities. The analysis of interaction patterns within the activities showed that several characteristics were associated with the opportunities that enabled students to acquire communicative competence such as group discussion, cultural awareness, autonomy, and two-way communication. The following situations, on the other hand, seemed to block the students from developing communicative ability: a focus on form rather than content and context, teacher-regulations, limitations placed on the suggested topics of interaction, and

passive participation. This study revealed that the pattern of interaction within the activity influenced a student's development in becoming communicatively competent. Instructorsthereforeneed to consider both interaction and activity types in theory as well as in practice.

As seen byShih (1999), communicative reading and writing tasks involve exchanging information and opinions through the written medium, in situations with which readers and writers are not personally acquainted, and in situations with which they are. In communicative approaches, skills and linguistic knowledge are developed in accordance with the purpose of tasks and the type of texts. Language teaching can be reactive as well as predictive. In Lynch's view (1996), instructors should utilize tasks which aim to encourage the active negotiation of meaning. Such tasks provide students with opportunities to practice the strategies they need for solving problems in real-life situations, and give them a realistic view of what to expect in real-life encounters. To ensure effective negotiation, tasks should encourage two-way communication channels. By including interaction tasks in which students can take the communicative initiative, we can provide them with a richer experience of speaking. The key to successful interaction is flexibility, which results from a combination of adequate command of the language, and confidence from practice in dealing with comprehension problems.According to Hutchinson and Waters (1993), the communicative approach is mainly concerned with three sets: the nature of language, the process of learning, and the context within which learning takes place. Communication is usually based upon interaction, performance, purpose, and context. The language forms used in real life situations vary in accordance with features of role, status, and formality. Roughly speaking, Hutchinson and Waters believe thatthe following principles underlie a communicative approach to foreign/second language teaching:

- People learn best when they are interested in and can identify with the content of what is being taught.
- A major role of education is to enable all learners to achieve their maximum potential. Amongst the best means to attain this is to emphasize learners' successes rather than their failures.
- No two learning situations are the same. The content of any lesson; therefore, is best negotiated between the teacher and the learner.
- A crucial aspect of any kind of teaching a foreign/second language is the social context within which it occurs.
- Integrating thelanguage skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing should be stressed.

Talen (1989) suggests that the development of communicative competencein EFL/ESL instruction requires tasks and activities in the classroom that would approximate the real communicative situation and problems students encounter in foreign language communication. The traditional approach within which communication drills are viewed as operations on the language rather than activities in the language should be abandoned, and drills need to be constructed that view language as a pragmatic medium for achieving a communicative goal.Communicative competence, Gisele (1983) explains, is comprised of the following elements: situational competence which refers to one's ability to decode the specific social, cultural and psycho-cultural context; interaction competence which includes the ability to

understand and practice the interactive rituals appropriate to the culture; linguistic competence which represents mastery of the grammatical and phonological system; and interpretive competence which refers to understanding the communicative intentions of participants involved in real-life communication situations. Great emphasis, according to Gisele, should be placed on the interpretive aspect of communication, and on the enjoyment to be derived from expressing oneself in a foreign language. The development of communicative competencein EFL/ESL instruction requires tasks and activities in the classroom that would approximate the real communicative situations and problems students encounter in real life situations. For EFL/ESL learners to acquire adequate communicative competence, Jakobovits (1982) argues, instructors should use authentic materialswhich will lead to such a desirable outcome. For language production to be authentic, teachers are recommended to offer authentic tasks for students to work on and have practice in, whether inside or outside the classroom.In conclusion, for EFL/ESL learners, acquiring communication skills is achallenge as they have to meet audience expectations, using proper English fluently. The instructor's role, accordingly, is to employ a variety of communicative tasks and activities, so as to achieve good learning outcomes.

under the supervision of instructors. By the end of the academic semester, the participating students were expected to develop their communication skills in English through upgrading their digital communication abilities, promoting intercultural competence, enhancing the four language skills of listening; speaking; reading and writing, as well as enriching their knowledge of vocabulary; grammar and structure in the English language. It is worth mentioning that the students at both universities in Dubai and Bonn were majoring in subjects other than English, and were taking a *Communication Skills* course as a university requirement from the students in both institutions.Through this intercultural exchange project, students learned to utilize the tools of modern communication (both synchronous and asynchronous) for genuine interaction purposes. The proposed topics for discussion were cultures, education systems, festivals, hobbies, and student lives. For almost three years in a row (2014-2017), the project was conducted for nine weeks each semester. The total number of the participating students from the university where the researcher works is one hundred and fifty-eightstudents. To ensure that students' interest was retained whilst communicating with their project's partners online, the author of this paper and her project's partner in Germany pairedthe students up, assigning partners of the same language

Table 1. Students' opinions of the intercultural exchange project effectiveness

Item	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	No Opinion (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
1. I think the intercultural exchange project is beneficial to acquiring the skill of writing in the English language.	54%	46%	0%	0%	0%
2. I think the intercultural exchange project is beneficial to acquiring the skill of reading in the English language.	55%	43%	2%	0%	0%
3. I think the intercultural exchange project is beneficial to acquiring the skill of listening in the English language.	40%	54%	6%	0%	0%
4. I think the intercultural exchange project is beneficial to acquiring the skill of speaking in the English language.	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
5. I think the intercultural exchange project is a meaningful means for enriching knowledge of grammar, structure and vocabulary in the English language.	45%	53%	2%	0%	0%
6. I think the intercultural exchange project is beneficial to acquiring intercultural competence.	68%	31%	1%	0%	0%
7. I feel the intercultural exchange project has made me motivated to learn English.	47%	49%	4%	0%	0%
8. I feel the intercultural exchange project has developed my digitalcommunication skills.	57%	42%	1%	0%	0%
9. I think the intercultural exchange project has augmented my communication skills in the English language.	58%	42%	0%	0%	0%
10. I would recommend this intercultural exchange project to other students learning English as a foreign/second language.	55 %	42%	3%	0%	0%

The current study: aims, participants, procedures, and tools

To enhance EFL/ESL students' communication skills whilst focusing on intercultural competence and digital communication, the author of this paper initiated an intercultural exchange project to her students at a private university in Dubai where she works, in collaboration with a German instructor working at a private university in Bonn, Germany. Logically speaking, digital communication involves technology literacy. On the other hand, intercultural competence refers to the ability to exchange unambiguous, meaningful information across cultural boundaries, whilst minimizing antagonism and preserving mutual respect (see also Byram, 1997; Wiseman, 2002).The intercultural exchange project referred to above requires the engagement of students in online communication as well as collaboration with peer students from partner classes in geographically distant places,

proficiency level so that they would get engaged in genuine conversations with ease and enthusiasm.All the participating students were required to document their experience through using a weekly log where they noted down what they had been doing with their partners, on a weekly basis.

Below is a list of the activities the participating students had to perform every week.

Week 1: Ice breaker-Students from both universities had class discussions about how they perceived their own life style/culture/study program and so on.

Week 2: Students from both universities had a class discussion about the exchanged information of partners' university from previous week. Students received name and contact details of their partner students.

Week 3: Eachstudent made a slide show of a day in their life and shared it with his/her project's partner.

Week 4: Students from both universities had a class discussion about their intercultural projects and created a list of points to consider when collaborating with someone from a different country, such as setting a clear time schedule with deadlines.

Weeks 5-8: Students from both universities worked on their projects virtually focusing on communication across cultures. The medium of the collaborative work was a combination of PowerPoint, blog, pictures, and written essays.

Week 9: In class, students presented their projects offering general debriefing of experiences gained and lessons learned.

To gain a clear idea about the effectiveness of the intercultural exchange project as perceived by the participating students, the author distributed a ten-item questionnaire towards the end of each academic semester. The questionnaire is a five-scale measurement tool where the value 5 reflects a respondent's strong agreement and 1 reflects a respondent's strong disagreement. Table 1 below presents the results in percentages.

Study findings

This part of the paper delineates the study results as reflected by students' responses to the questionnaire presented above. As far as improving language skills is concerned, 54% of the subjects strongly agreed that the intercultural exchange project was beneficial to acquiring the skill of writing in the English language while the rest agreed, 55% of the students strongly agreed that it was beneficial to acquiring the skill of reading in English while 43% agreed, 40% of the students strongly agreed that it was beneficial to acquiring the skill of listening in English while 54% agreed, and 56% of the students strongly agreed that it was beneficial to acquiring the skill of speaking in English while the rest agreed. Commenting on the extent to which the intercultural exchange project was viewed as a meaningful means for enriching knowledge of grammar, structure and vocabulary in the English language, 45% strongly agreed while 53% agreed. When asked about the intercultural exchange project in relation topromoting intercultural competence, 68% strongly agreed while 31% agreed. Relating the discussion to the intercultural exchange project as being a motivating task, 47% strongly agreed while 49% agreed. When it comes to its role in developing digitalcommunication skills, 57% strongly agreed while 42% agreed. The intercultural exchange project, as indicated by the table above, was considered an effective means for augmenting communication skills in English; 58% of the students strongly agreed to this point while the rest agreed. Last but not least, in response to the item enquiring about the extent to which a student would recommend the intercultural exchange project to other students learning English as a foreign/second language, 55% of the students stated that they would strongly recommend the project to other students while 42% agreed that they would.

It should be noted that very few studentsabstained from casting their opinion aboutvery few points for whatever reasons, as the table above reveals.Based on the results indicated by the table above, therefore, it would be logical to claim that the intercultural exchange project described in this paper was of use and interest to the study subjects.

Conclusion

The use of English as the global lingua franca requires the need for an understanding of culture in order for students to communicate successfully across diverse cultures. Excluding the discussion to EFL/ESL university contexts where students have to take a Communication Skills course as a university requirement, it would be of genuine support to assign university students an intercultural exchange project in order for them to meet university requirements and fulfill today's demanding expectations. As explained earlier, intercultural exchange projectscan be defined as an inspiring learning springboard, the aim of which is to equip university students with the ability to employ communication skills including linguistic, intercultural, digital and social ones in real life situations. As previously highlighted, an intercultural exchange project can take place online through Facebook, Skype, Google+, email, YouTube and so on, exposing students to authentic uses of English for various communication purposes. The research into intercultural exchange projects within the field of EFL/ESL instructionis new. There are a number of issues which require thorough research such as the collaboration nature between the respective instructors while designing, applying, and assessing a project amongst other issues (Guth and Helm, 2012). Therefore, the current paper concludes with the author's recommendation that research into this type of projects should be conducted and examined by EFL/ESL instructors and researchers working in different parts of the world.

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