

Teaching Intercultural Communication in an English as a Lingua Franca Context

RELC Journal

1–9

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DOI: 10.1177/00336882221074106

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Abstract

Developing learners' intercultural communicative competence is considered to be one of the responsibilities of English language teaching professionals. This responsibility has become ever more challenging in today's globalized world, in which most intercultural communication occurs in English as a lingua franca (ELF) contexts, where a target culture often does not exist. To address this challenge, the current paper showcases an innovation that utilized practitioner-produced materials to teach intercultural communication in ELF settings as part of a General English course at a Taiwanese university. The project sought to achieve the dual purpose of raising the learners' intercultural and ELF awareness by engaging them in a sequence of activities that involved experienced ELF users from various countries, from video-viewing and online forum discussions to face-to-face interactions. The effectiveness of the innovation was evaluated through questionnaires and participants' written reflections on the activities, which indicated that the project was generally successful in both cultural and language attitude domains.

Keywords

Classroom innovation, English as a lingua franca, teaching culture, General English, English language teaching

Introduction and Reasons for the Innovation

Facilitating learners' development of intercultural communicative competence is considered to be one of the responsibilities of language teaching professionals (Byram and Golubeva, 2020). In English language teaching (ELT), practitioners have traditionally understood this responsibility as teaching the knowledge, skills, and attitude learners need to engage with the community of native English speakers (NESs). In the present globalized world, however, this monolithic view of the target community in ELT has become unrealistic since most intercultural communication conducted in English now occurs

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among non-native English speakers (NNESs) from differing linguacultural backgrounds. English is now construed as pluralist, carrying the cultural conceptualizations of its global speech communities (Sharifian and Sadeghpour, 2020). The diversity of cultures in these communities is likely to place new demands on English language users who are striving to communicate appropriately in intercultural contexts, and ELT practices ought to accommodate this reality. In the absence of a specified target culture, the current project concurred with Baker's (2011) postulation that it is important to develop learners' intercultural awareness. Baker's model conceptualizes intercultural awareness as encompassing three levels of awareness: a basic awareness of one's own and others' cultures; an advanced awareness of the complexity of cultures (e.g. the dynamic and relative nature of any cultural characterization); and an awareness of the liminal status of the role of cultures in intercultural settings (e.g. cultural references as emerging from the communication).

Since English is the *de facto* lingua franca of the world, in ELT, discussions of intercultural communication are inevitably accompanied by discussions of English as a lingua franca (ELF), which has been defined as any use of English between speakers who do not share another language (Seidlhofer, 2011). ELF is often associated with the notion of World Englishes (WE), which refers to the varieties of English developed around the world. Despite the differing theoretical emphases, the two concepts share the same pedagogical implication for ELT; that is, ELT needs to shift away from the exclusive focus on native-speaker norms (Rose and Galloway, 2017). The current project was more concerned about ELF, since it focused on English as the contact language in intercultural communication. However, it should be noted that the project utilized insights from WE, which is in accord with Sifakis's (2021) proposition that in promoting ELF awareness, ELT practice should be open to other relevant perspectives, including WE, as drawing on implications from ELF research alone could be restrictive. According to Sifakis (2019), ELF awareness can be manifested in various aspects, including language and language use, instructional practice, and learning. The current project mainly focused on learning, particularly on bringing learners' awareness to their identity as ELF users in intercultural contexts.

Although the paradigm shift regarding the plurality of communication practices in intercultural contexts has gained significant ground in academia, the NES standard model has continued to dominate ELT practices (Dewey, 2021). One important reason has been the paucity of relevant teaching materials (see Bayyurt, 2021), which has inspired the current project. The project was novel in three respects. Firstly, unlike previous studies (e.g. Rose and Galloway, 2017; Rajprasit, 2021), which tended to rely on available online resources to provide instructional materials regarding the plurality of English, this project employed practitioner-created materials featuring intercultural communication in an ELF setting. Secondly, the project drew on international students from various linguacultural backgrounds as cultural and linguistic resources for the learners. By including these ELF users, whom the learners were likely to see, hear about, or interact with on campus, the project heeded "learners' contexts and their likely use of the language" (Galloway, 2018: 476), thereby creating authentic learning experiences for them. Finally, while most prior studies lasted at most an academic term and often utilized one type of communication activity, this project was carried out for an academic year, which allowed time for the instructional practice to engage the learners in a sequence of three

interconnected communication activities designed to cultivate their intercultural and ELF awareness simultaneously.

The Teaching Context

The innovation took place in a required General English course at a Taiwanese university. The course was a double-semester course and its objectives were to sharpen the students' English language skills and foster their intercultural awareness. The innovation was designed primarily to achieve the latter objective. It was carried out in the author's class, which consisted of 34 non-English majors from various departments, including 26 females and 8 males, who were aged between 18 and 19. The majority of the students had an English proficiency level of approximately B1 or B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The Innovation

The project was implemented over two semesters in two cycles. Each cycle lasted 12 weeks within a semester, and comprised three components: (1) video-viewing; (2) online forum discussion; and (3) face-to-face interaction. All three components involved the participation of international students with different first language backgrounds, and were designed to expose the students on the course to intercultural perspectives on an array of issues step by step through different ELF communication practices. Specifically, the video-viewing component delivered intercultural perspectives to the students in ELF through audio-visual input; then the forums allowed text-based intercultural ELF communication between the students and international students; and ultimately, the third component placed the students in a context where they engaged in face-to-face intercultural ELF communication with international students. Table 1 outlines the aims, varieties of English included, learning activities, and the teacher's role in each component, and the remainder of this section provides details of each of these three components.

Video-viewing

In the first component, students watched a series of videos on intercultural communication, studied the accompanying learning resources (e.g. accompanying readings), and completed written assignments. The videos and learning resources were created by a team of teachers, the author included, at the university. Titled "Voices Around the World," the series contained six videos on the topics of "Hofstede's cultural dimensions," "Stereotypes," "Education," "Politically-correct language," "Non-verbal communication," and "Globalization," respectively. Each video, which was between 15 and 30 min long, involved several international students or teachers at the university being interviewed about their perspectives on issues related to the topic. For example, for the video on the topic of education, one issue discussed by the interviewees was: "How do students in your culture characterize a good teacher?". The interviewees included six NNES international students from Austria, Finland, the Gambia, Guatemala, Indonesia, and Tajikistan, and one Turkish teacher. Two American teachers and one Taiwanese student were also included for further comparison amongst the cultures. The videos were originally intended as supplementary teaching materials for

Table 1. Components of the innovation.

	1. Video-viewing	2. Forum discussion	3. Face-to-face interaction
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop intercultural perspectives ■ Be able to understand ELF speech in videos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop intercultural perspectives ■ Be able to carry out text-based ELF communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop intercultural perspectives ■ Be able to interact with ELF users face-to-face
Varieties of English	American, Austrian, Finnish, Indonesian, Gambian, Guatemalan, Tajikistan, Turkish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Haitian (first cycle) ■ Hungarian (second cycle) 	American, British, Czech, Croatian, Dutch, German, Haitian, Honduran ^a , Kosovar, Spanish
Learning activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students viewing videos ■ Students completing writing tasks ■ International TAs providing feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ International student hosts making first posts ■ Students responding to the posts ■ Forum hosts replying to students' posts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Guest presentations ■ Rotating small-group discussions between students and guests ■ Whole class interaction ■ Reflections
Teacher's role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Material developer ■ Learning facilitator 	Learning facilitator	Learning facilitator

^aThe Honduran student only participated in the second cycle.
 ELF: English as a lingua franca; TAs: teaching assistants.

expanding students' intercultural knowledge. However, the diversity of the interviewees' linguistic backgrounds rendered ELF a conspicuous feature of the videos. This project therefore utilized the videos as a core teaching material to bring students' awareness to ELF.

Every four weeks, students watched a video individually outside of class and completed a 250-word writing task based on the video. For example, after viewing the video on education, the students were asked to describe the best teacher they had ever had, and explain how the teacher matched up with the interviewees' expectations of a good teacher. The video-based tasks were explained to students at the beginning of the project, and they were instructed to work on the tasks at their own pace outside of class, while some class time was devoted to addressing their queries and discussing the cultural issues they raised in their writing. Student assignments were commented on by two teaching assistants (TAs), one from Haiti and the other from the USA, before the author marked them. The TAs' comments served as sources of alternative cultural perspectives for students to engage with. Including the two TAs in this component also added another layer of intercultural interactivity to the task.

Online Forum Discussion

The second component involved creating an online social space for the students. Unlike in the video-based activity, the communication occurring in this space was voluntary and informal. In each of the 12-week cycles, a NNES international student was invited to host

an asynchronous online forum, where the students could feel free to chat about topics of interest for them. The forum hosts for this activity were the Haitian TA in the first cycle and a Hungarian student in the second cycle, whose responsibilities included the following: initiating a discussion every three to four weeks by making a post about their own intercultural experiences; eliciting student responses to their posts by raising questions; and replying to the student responses. Example topics appearing in the forums were “A foreigner singing in Taiwanese,” “My top 5 surprises when coming to Taiwan,” and “University life in Taiwan vs. in Hungary.” The discussions accrued a total of 238 messages. Considering the participation in this activity was not mandatory, such an active (as opposed to passively reading posts without making comments) participation rate demonstrated a high level of student interest in the activity and its associated cultural focus.

Face-to-face Interaction

In each of the two cycles, the innovation culminated in the final component, in which students interacted face-to-face with international student guests from a number of countries. The event was held during class at the end of each cycle. It included both NNES and NES guests, one each from the Czech Republic, Croatia, Germany, Haiti, Hungary, Honduras, Kosovo, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK, and the USA. Except for the Honduran student, who only joined the event in the second cycle, all the guests took part in both events. Each event lasted for 3 hours and contained the following three stages.

- 1) *Guest presentations (approximately 40 min)*: Each guest made a short presentation to the class on a topic provided by the author. The topics were, for the first event, “Stereotypes of people from my culture,” and for the second event, “What people should (not) say or do when visiting my country.” Both topics were related to the “Voices Around the World” videos. The presentations were intended to offer students additional knowledge about what they had learned in the video-viewing activity as well as spur discussions in the next stage of the event.
- 2) *Rotating group discussions (approximately 110 min)*: Students were then divided into several groups to discuss topics of their interest with the guests. One or two guests were assigned to each group, and they rotated to another group every 15–20 min. While the students were encouraged to raise questions about the guest presentations or discuss with the guests what they had learned throughout the project, they were given complete freedom to steer the discussions in any direction they found appropriate. According to the guests, the discussions covered assorted topics, from entertainment choices to life under COVID-19, which were all immediately relevant to the students’ lives.
- 3) *Closing Q and A session (approximately 20 min)*: The event closed with a whole class activity where the students and guests asked and answered further questions to each other, and where both groups elaborated on issues emerging from the rotating discussions.

The design of the face-to-face event was largely the same in both cycles except that the first one took place on campus while the second one was held online through Google Meet due to COVID-19. After each event, a debriefing session was conducted in the following class session, where the students were encouraged to talk about their experiences of the event.

Effects of Innovation and Reflection

To understand the effects of the innovation and whether it achieved its dual purpose of raising the students’ intercultural and ELF awareness, a questionnaire was administered to the students after each cycle of the project was completed. The first questionnaire asked the students to briefly describe their previous intercultural experiences and offer suggestions for improving the activities implemented in the first cycle. The second questionnaire asked them to rate the helpfulness of each of the three components as outlined above and provide reasons for their ratings. The data was supplemented by the author’s observations and the event guests’ written reflections on the activities they participated in. In the reflections, the international student guests were asked to provide observations of their interactions with the students.

The results indicated that the innovation was largely successful, while also creating a satisfying learning experience for the students. Underscoring this in qualitative terms, when asked how helpful each component was to their learning, 97% of the students rated the face-to-face events as either “very helpful” or “helpful,” and 81% and 72% rated the forum discussions and the video-viewing activity, respectively, in the same way. No student rated any component as “unhelpful” or “very unhelpful” (see Table 2).

Although the students considered the face-to-face events to be more beneficial than the other two components, it should be emphasized that the three components were interconnected, and the students’ learning in the video-viewing and the forum activities in fact prepared them for the face-to-face interactions. Nevertheless, students’ preference for the face-to-face component confirmed that intercultural activities requiring real-time interaction were most appealing to them. This was likely to be due to a lack of such opportunities in their prior learning experiences. As shown in the students’ descriptions of their previous intercultural experiences, nearly two-thirds of the students did not have any experience of speaking to a person from another culture before taking part in this project.

Table 2. Student ratings of the benefit of each component.

Component	Student rating				
	Very helpful	Helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Unhelpful	Very unhelpful
1. Video-viewing	9	14	9	–	–
2. Forum discussion	8	18	6	–	–
3. Face-to-face interaction	22	9	1	–	–

Note: Number of students who completed the questionnaire = 32.

With respect to students' gains regarding intercultural awareness, since the discussions throughout the project were centered around similarities and differences between cultures, it was expected that the students' intercultural knowledge would increase. The gains were clearly demonstrated in their assignments, in which most students were able to describe and critique what they had learned as well as reflect on their own culture. Also, almost all students mentioned learning about other cultures through persons from those cultures, or knowing their views and values, as a great benefit of the activities. The gains in intercultural communication skills, however, were more difficult to gauge, although some evidence did emerge. Several students commented that they were more capable of initiating conversations in the second face-to-face event than in the first one, which was attested to by the guests' reflections, too. According to the guests, the students participated more actively in the second event, were "considerably more enthusiastic" (British guest), were "making jokes" (Croatian guest), and overall, "showed more confidence in English as well as in overall interaction skills" (Spanish guest). Echoing these guests, one student mentioned a skill she learned by observing how the guests interacted with one another in the face-to-face events:

I feel now I'm able to give international students the kind of reaction they like, like "Really?", "Oh, Wow", and "That's Great". They seem to like these exclamations, which may sound over-the-top to us. But now I use these expressions to let them know I am engaged in the conversation. (Student 17)

Regarding ELF, the project also produced a favorable effect. Many students mentioned that the activities made them realize it was more important to focus on communicating their meanings to others than obsessing about speaking "correct English." By "correct," they were very likely to mean native-speaker norms since these are the norms taught in English language education in Taiwan. Several students also directly referred to native-speakerness in their comments. For example:

I used to picture communicating in English as communicating with American or British people. After these activities, now when I think of English conversations, the picture in my head also includes non-native English speakers. (Student 07)

Although all the interviewees in the videos speak with their own accents, I found their accents do not affect my understanding of their meanings. Instead, I found this gives each of them a distinctive character, which made me feel even if I also speak with an accent, it is fine. After all ... my purpose is to communicate. (Student 14)

In summary, the project was favorably received by the students, and can be considered largely effective in enhancing the students' intercultural and ELF awareness. From the perspective of Baker's (2011) conceptualization of intercultural awareness, through the project, the students achieved the first two levels of awareness: an understanding of specific cultures and an understanding of the complexity of cultures, although not the third level of intercultural awareness concerning the emergent nature of cultural forms and references, which is the most challenging of the three levels. In addition, the students demonstrated an awareness of their identity as ELF users in the project, which was

illustrated in their realization of the lingua franca function of English and their recognition of the English used by their NNES interlocutors as legitimate.

Future Pedagogical Directions

This innovation was implemented during the time when the university's international student enrollment was significantly reduced because of COVID-19, which limited the selection of the face-to-face event guests regarding the diversity of the guests' cultural backgrounds. As shown above, most of the guests were from Europe. If possible, future implementations could recruit ELF users from a wider range of cultures to maximize learners' exposure to more diverse intercultural perspectives and uses of English. It is also recommended that ELT practitioners, either individually or in groups, develop their own ELF-aware teaching materials, such as the videos employed in this study. As demonstrated in this paper, videos in particular can springboard to other activities. More importantly, they can be reused or adapted for other teaching contexts. Finally, further studies could improve on the pedagogical design of this study to instigate the third level of intercultural awareness in learners according to Baker's (2011) model.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (grant number PGE1090415).

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