

LEARNING ENGLISH ACROSS CULTURES A REFLECTION ON CHALLENGES FACED BY ONLINE LEARNERS AND THEIR MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Badrul Hisham Ahmad¹, Norkhairi Ahmad²

¹Universiti Teknologi Mara Perlis Branch, Perlis, Malaysia.

²Universiti Kuala Lumpur Malaysia France Institute, Selangor, Malaysia.

Corresponding Author: norkhairi@unikl.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This study sets out to investigate learners' cross-cultural experience of learning English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) course from an international instructor via online setting. The objectives of this study were to investigate a) the learners' feedback on the overall online learning experience, b) the challenges that the learners have experience during their online lessons and c) learners' strategies in overcoming the challenges experienced during their online lessons. Qualitative data is elicited via purposive sampling from five diploma students enrolled in the ESAP course at a public university in Malaysia. Focus group and follow up individual interviews were utilised to gather feedback on their general cross-cultural learning experiences online learning experience as well as the challenges they encountered during their lessons and their strategies in overcoming those challenges faced during their lessons. The study found that learners perceived their online language learning experience in cross-cultural setting as a positive one. They shared several challenges experienced during the lessons and some strategies that they utilized to manage the challenges.

Keywords: Cross Cultural Setting, Online Language Learning, Language Learning Challenges, Language Learning Strategies, Cross Cultural Competence

INTRODUCTION

Currently, various platforms like Google Meet, Voov Meeting and Zoom Meeting are being utilised by many educators and learners to ensure learning takes place effectively particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic era learning has to inevitably go online. Through the engagement of technology innovative teaching options are available for English lessons and offers new learning experience for the learners (Zulfa & Yuniasih, 2018). Nevertheless, one crucial factor in ensuring successful education is the understanding of the learners when designing an online learning approach to teaching and learning (Mohamad, 2017). This is to ensure the system to be developed caters to learners' abilities as well as their interests. Ahmad, Sayadi, Danuri and Ismail (2021) highlighted that in the 21st century the managing of English courses offered at universities requires a multi-dimensional approach due to the dynamic nature of the English language, diverse learners' profile, the contextualisation and the challenges that come with them. One of the aspects being well propagated is the international mobility of learners and teaching staff. In fact, International mobility is vastly becoming a well-accepted avenue for exposure to international context and enhancement of students learning experience and development of character (Ahmad et al, 2017). The online learning experience could turn out to be even more challenging when the online instructor is a foreign national living a foreign country. This cross-cultural setting might pose some challenge to the students who are still struggling in adapting to online learning itself at the university level. Thus, gathering learners' feedback is crucial in order to help identify the

quality of their teaching and learning by investigating the strengths and weaknesses, and finding areas that may need further improvements (Abduh, 2021).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Theoretically, when learning happens in a distance, we have to enable teachers and learners to communicate with each other or to empower students to carry out learning using the right technology and platforms. This means that learners can access education and learning opportunities at any time and place. Such condition, according to Idrus and Lateh (2000), optimizes the applications of various technological innovations available for the educators. Another aspect to consider is when the instructor was from a different cultural background. Thus, when teaching and learning across cultures takes place, learners and instructor with varying cultural backgrounds might experience some unwarranted complications during their online lessons. As mentioned by Weda and Atmowardoyo (2018), people from different ethnic groups need to possess some cross-cultural competence (CCC) to maintain good communication and mutual understanding when they are involved in a cross-cultural communication which is applicable to cross cultural learning as well. It is therefore crucial for online learners and providers to ensure online learners are not short-changed when the online teaching of English proficiency courses takes place particularly in a cross-cultural setting. This study attempts at investigating the challenges the students experienced and their strategies in overcoming such obstacles.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objectives of this research are to investigate learners' feedback on their overall online learning experience for a language course in a cross-cultural setting. This is to ensure that any challenges that the learners have experience during the online lessons could be addressed. Moreover, there is a need to explore whether the learners' have undertaken any strategies in overcoming the challenges experienced during their online lessons. All these are necessary in order to gain a better understanding of the learners' online language learning experience in a cross-cultural setting. Due to all these this study aims to answer three main research questions outlined below.

1. How do English Language learners value their overall online language learning experience in a cross-cultural setting?
2. What were the challenges that the learners experienced during the lessons?
3. What were the strategies the learners employed to overcome the challenges they faced?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Many educational institutions have established international mobility collaborations between universities allowing staff and students to carry out their internships globally. Byram (2018) states that one of the implications of internationalisation of education is the movement of students and educators worldwide at a cost which institutions and relevant parties are willing to spend on. Nowadays, such practice has become a norm for many established universities. Ahmad (2015) believes that universities stand to benefit from international mobility students get to observe, bring back good practices, academic resilience and dynamic new campus culture of the host institutions at the respective countries.

However, due to Covid-19 pandemic that brought about travel restrictions and movement control, the only available option would be to go online. Online learning has been widely accepted since it offers new learning experience for the learners, improving their active participations, improving their exam grades and promoting their engagement and interaction during the lessons (Zulfa & Yuniasih, 2017). However, are the learners coping well with their online English language learning? This leads to the question of how would the online learning be affected when the instructor is a foreigner? Challenges need to be addressed and higher education institutions need to recognise the critical importance of ensuring classrooms are conducive for both physical and online learning so that participants can experience and appreciate their learning experience. It is also vital to ensure these learners are capable of meeting the demand of the communication in an online learning setting. Common online lesson can sometimes be challenging and a cross-cultural setting could pose an even more challenging environment for the learners. Kefalaki et. al. (2021), furthermore, stresses that international communication involves intercultural communication. To achieve that, Byram and Golubeva's (2020) have created a list of cross-cultural skills includes autonomous learning skills, analytical and critical thinking skills, skills of listening and observing, empathy, flexibility and adaptability, linguistic communicative and plurilingual skills, and conflict-resolution skills. This would help ensure communication takes place in such environment.

One's ability to express ideas and thoughts to other people who come from different cultural backgrounds is referred to as cross-cultural competence. This is crucial in the learners' life to ensure understanding when communicating with people from different cultures (Weda & Atmowardoyo, 2018). This is concluded when they studied cross-cultural competence (CCC) in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom at higher education in Indonesia. Therefore, mastering a variety of skills and abilities is the only means for the learners to succeed in their learning in a cross-cultural setting. A cross-cultural setting allows learners to experience and learn valuable things as in any new language learning setting, the utilisation of items from different cultures in the world highlight the diversity of knowledge. The sharing of information of different cultures and experiences and the lessons learned from that experience can encourage cross-cultural knowledge (Ahmad, et al., 2017).

Many have studied cross-cultural experience in classroom practice but the studies like Pishgadam et al., (2021), Weda & Atmowardoyo, (2018) focus mainly on interaction between the learners of different cultural backgrounds. Yu and Peters (2019) is one of the studies investigating cross-cultural interaction focussing on the staff and students. Meanwhile, Gazioğlu and Güner (2021) focus on instructors' intercultural competence. This study focuses on learners' language learning experience with an intern from a different country.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will gather qualitative data from the participants. The learners were the entry level English proficiency course learners. The English proficiency course investigated is the compulsory proficiency course for first year diploma students of the institution. All classroom lessons are conducted online due to Covid-19 pandemic. They were taught by a female language instructor from China who majors in Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) as part of an international mobility programme via exchange of staff for

online teaching between the two universities in China and Malaysia. The focus of the lessons would be Reading and Grammar.

Participants

To explore students' perception on cross-cultural practices in the EFL classroom, the authors conducted research on this topic on undergraduate of a diploma program at a public university in Northern Malaysia. Five undergraduates taking the English proficiency course were selected via purposive samplings as the participants of this research. They comprise two females and three males and all were from the Agro-technology Faculty enrolled for 2021/2022 academic year. All were given pseudo codes S1F, S2F, S3M, S4M and S5M for research identification so as not to reveal their true identity as students.

Instrument

Both focus group online interviews and face to face interviews were utilised for data collection purposes. The interviews were utilised to gather feedback on their general online learning experience as well as the challenges they encountered during their lessons and their strategies in overcoming those challenges faced. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and shown back to the learners for data accuracy via member check procedures. The analysis of the interview transcripts involved coding which were created in identifying key words and points that leads to the discovery of main themes that form the findings of the research. A few senior colleagues were roped in to provide second opinion as ratter and verifier for the results of the coding and the emerging themes identified.

FINDINGS

Generally, participants acknowledged that the classroom environment was favourable for them. When asked about their online language learning experience in a cross-cultural setting, both participants, in their responses, recognised the benefits this new learning experience presented to them. All learners had a similar first reaction when knowing that the instructor would be from China. Some responded, "*I was excited. It was my first time getting an international instructor especially from China*". This indicates a very positive attitude towards the future cross-cultural learning experience. Later, when asked about their feeling when attending their first class, Learner S1F clearly mentioned that she was "excited and happy, I guess". Learner S2F's response was "*I was enthusiastic to join the class*". This further supports their receptive attitude towards their learning experience.

Another positive feedback from Learner S1F was the opportunity of learning some information regarding Chinese cultures. Learner S1F noted that "*When the instructor talked about the Chinese celebration, I understood it well*". Similarly, Learner S2F appreciates the fact that "*she always shared bout her country and her life in university in China*". The sharing of such information is highly welcomed by the learners because they have learned some insights to different cultural experiences.

Next, all learners have expressed favourable responses to their learning. When asked about their Reading and Grammar lessons, the Learner S2F highlighted that she could understand the lesson well because "*for example, the example she gave can be understood easily because she always gave simple examples.*" Meanwhile, Learner S1F also commented that "*I can understand her explanation during Reading and Grammar sessions and I can understand the examples she used too.*" Overall, all learners acknowledged a favourable

feedback towards their online language learning. Their instructor was able to handle the class well. Learner S2F stressed that *“her English is very fluent.”* Learner S1F shared similar feedback on the matter, *“Overall, I can understand her speech”*.

Challenges

A few unpleasant classroom experiences that the students do not normally experienced in their previous language learning environments were also highlighted by them. One of the first challenges mentioned was the admission by Learner S5M that, *“I couldn’t understand what she was talking about because of the pronunciation of certain words”*. Nevertheless, the learner emphasised that such occurrences were far and between because the learner has noted that in most occasions, the learner could understand his foreign instructor’s speech well. Further assurance was given when he noted that; *“it was not a really big problem for me because most of the time I could understand her well”*. Learner S4M had a similar feedback regarding the issue. He commented that, *“Sometimes, after listening to some words that she said, I need to think first or I have to ask her to repeat her speech. But overall, I can understand her speech”*. Hence, occasional errors in pronunciation made by the instruction do not actually deter the learners’ learning and comprehension.

Another challenging moment indicated by Learner S3M was the occasional interruption to the delivery of teaching content due poor internet connectivity. This commonly occurring setback during online learning posed an unavoidable challenge for the learners. Learner S1F vividly described that there are instances when information presented was not clear or distorted because; *“The internet connection was bad, the connection was lagging. Sometimes the voice got disconnected, the video or slides cannot be seen clearly”*. Learner S2F echoed similar feedback when stating that on some occasions, she had to leave the online meeting due to poor connection thus resulting in some missing details or explanations given by the instructor. The disruptions could be identified by many online learners and be described as a frustrating experience. The concern is more on whether such disruptions affect learner’s understanding of the lesson content or not. All learners later acknowledged that such disruptions did not really affect their understanding because they always asked their instructor to clarify the matter and the nature of the content being very general or being a familiar information for them.

The final challenge identified by the learner is classroom participation. Although Learner S1F noted that she participated actively in classroom activities and interaction, she felt that, *“My classmates were not really active in class. I don’t want to be the only one to answer her questions”*. The learner stressed that ensuring class participation is a tiring effort because of the poor response from the classmates in volunteering during classroom activities. Nevertheless, Learner S1F exclaimed that; *“it’s not the instructor’s problem, it was my class problem, I guess”*. The learner realised the root of the issue and emphasized with the instructor for not getting the responses she has expected. In summary, irregular pronunciation issue, disruption to the content delivery due to technical glitches, lack of participation from her classmates are the challenges faced in their cross- cultural learning.

Strategies

All student participants described a variety of challenges that they had experienced in their cross-cultural online lessons. Interestingly, the necessary strategies to overcome the obstacles were shared by the learners. When faced with the issues of mispronunciation, Learner S1F indicated that asking the instructor to repeat and asking for confirmation were the best ways to handle the matter. Learner S2F explained that sometimes; *“after listening to some of my instructor’s speech I need to think first or asked her to repeat the speech”*. So, asking for assistance from their instructor to repeat and clarify the matter is their way of ensuring their understanding.

When asked about their strategy to manage issues regarding the information gap caused by poor internet connectivity, Learner S3M indicated that; *“asking the instructor for confirmation about the slide contents”* Next, the learners ensured their involvements in classroom communication through volunteering to answer questions and instructor’s prompts. Learner S4M stressed that, *“For every Grammar practice I can volunteer to answer. If I were wrong, she will explain and correct my mistakes”* Learner S5M, meanwhile, suggested that active participation in the activities and interactions kept him focussed on the learning. Thus, being proactive in their learning is one of the strategies employed by them. Such participation would help to encourage others to improve classroom participation and dynamics. Student responses largely focused on the positive outcomes that this transition provided for them. In addition, the students have also addressed some of the specific challenges and difficulties that they faced, alongside a variety of positive outcomes.

DISCUSSION

This study on English learners’ point of view and experiences of online language learning in a cross-cultural setting is deemed important for several reasons. First, this study has shed some insights of the unique cross-cultural classroom setting where any possible shortcomings or issues can be identified and resolved. Secondly, the management can refine the requirements, terms and conditions of future cross-cultural engagements to avoid unnecessary issues in the teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, it was also discovered that the learners were presented with a few minor setbacks or challenges too. Issues like irregular pronunciation errors and interrupted delivery of teaching contents due to poor internet connectivity needs to be addressed so that every stakeholder are aware of these minor yet distracting setbacks and subsequently make necessary adjustments and preparations. The disruptions could be identified by many online learners and be described as a frustrating experience. Online platforms were often experiencing malfunctions. Due to the limited time of online lessons, this could be exhausting for some instructors and stressing for learners (Abduh, 2021). The greater concern is placed on whether such disruptions affect learner’s understanding of the lesson content or not. All learners however acknowledged that such disruptions did not really affect their understanding due to the nature of the content being very general or a rather common issue for them.

Another setback identified when investigating on the challenges they encountered was ensuring a positive classroom participation or dynamics. Undeniably, this is also one of the greatest challenges in a cross-cultural setting as discovered by Yu and Peters (2019) when identifying barriers that students face in cross-cultural interaction. Classroom communication and progression could be affected when there are issues with limited interaction and group dynamics.

To overcome these challenges, learners have employed several strategies. First, they took the initiative to ask their instructor for clarification and confirmation to ensure their understanding of the instructor's speech and teaching contents. As for the challenge in getting their classmates to be active in classroom participation, the learners have demonstrated their initiative to volunteer and hoped that their classmates could be encouraged to do the same. Thus, the learners have demonstrated that they possess some of the necessary cross-cultural abilities like analytical and critical thinking skills, skills of listening and observing, empathy, flexibility and adaptability, conflict-resolution skills (Byram & Golubeva's, 2020).

In planning teaching and learning across cultures there are always possibilities of challenges. Learners and instructor have to establish strong communication to ensure effective learning. Learners should also work together to ensure classroom communication is successful. To create harmony and tolerance in the classroom, learners or participants (including instructor) should realise of the importance of maintaining cross-cultural communication (Weda & Atmowardoyo, 2018; Yu & Peters, 2019).

It was clear that learners employ several strategies to overcome the challenges they have faced. They trust their language instructors and would ask for their instructor's assistance in finding the resolutions to any information gap and misunderstandings as well as voluntarily contribute in online language learning. This finding supports earlier study which concludes that some of the strategies that can be employed to overcome the challenges include facilitating a connection between the members, building trust with the members and making help seeking a norm (Yu & Peters, 2019). Taking responsibility to find the right strategies is an indicator that the learners can cope with the demands of their learning and can manage their own learning since online learners are responsible for their own learning as suggested by Kenney and Newcombe (2011).

This study has attempted to understand undergraduates' perception of their own online language learning experience in a cross-cultural setting. Although a lot of studies might have been carried out on online learning, there have not been many major studies that have sought the voices of the learners and their perspectives on their cross-cultural experience when enrolling in an English proficiency course. For this reason, this study has explored and offered a preliminary understanding of learners' perceptions of their experiences in a cross-cultural language classroom setting. The findings of this study will allow the educators and the institutions to learn about the students' experiences and make future improvements and adjustments since more higher learning institutions now have taken enormous efforts to materialise the mobility programme (although being conducted online due to Covid-19 pandemic).

CONCLUSION

When investigating English Language learners' feedback on their online language learning experience in a cross-cultural setting, overall, the study found that the learners have a positive feedback towards their experience in their English Language learning. First, the learners were excited and looking forward to their cross-cultural experience with a foreign instructor. And they have indicated their enjoyment when they attended their online lessons with their foreign instructor. Lastly, the learners have indicated that they were able to learn about some cultural information embedded in the learning by the instructor. This cross-cultural experiences and what they learners have learned from that experience during their lessons are valuable and instructors need to realise the importance of such classroom practice

for learners' development and future gains. Online language learning in a cross-cultural setting is truly exciting for the numerous possibilities. All the learners need have a positive outlook towards learning, take responsibility with the learning and manage the challenges properly.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, N. (2015) Intensification of ASEAN economic community Integration via university students' mobility in *The Globalist* Vol. 4 2015. ISSN 2232-027X
- Ahmad, N., Ina Suryani, A.R., & Hairan, H. Azmy (2017). An analysis of perceptions on international mobility experience: Narratives of technical university students on challenges mitigated and impacts gained. *Integrated Practices in Language Learning: Unity Through Diversity* Vol. 1. 69-89, UniMAP Publication
- Ahmad, N., Sayadi, Z.A.2, Danuri, N., & Ismail,(2021). A multi-dimensional approach to managing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and assessment practices in technical and engineering education context. *ICONTVET Proceedings 2020*. UniMAP
- Abduh, M. Y. M. (2021). Full-time online assessment during COVID-19 lockdown: EFL teachers' perceptions. *Asian EFL Journal*, 28(1.1), 26-46.
- Byram, M. (2018). Internationalisation in higher education—an internationalist perspective. *On the horizon.*, 26(2), 148-156.
- Byram, M., & Golubeva, I. (2020). Conceptualising intercultural (communicative) competence and intercultural citizenship. In *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication* (pp. 70-85). Routledge.
- Djiwandono, P. I. (2018). The Effect of Blended Learning on Reading Abilities, Vocabulary Mastery, and Collaboration among University Students. *The New English Teacher*, 12(1), 23.
- Gazioglu, M., & Güner, B. (2021). Foreign Language Teachers' Intercultural Competence as a New Aspect of Professional Development. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 4(2), 27-41.
- Gyamfi, G., & Sukseemuang, P. (2018). EFL Learners' Satisfaction with the Online Learning Program, Tell Me More. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 183-202.
- Idrus, R. M., & Lateh, H. H. (2000). Online distance education at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia: preliminary perceptions. *Educational Media International*, 37(3), 197-201.
- Kefalaki, M., Nevradakis, M., & Li, Q. (2021). Cross-Cultural Effects of COVID-19 on Higher Education Learning and Teaching Practice: A Case Study from Greece. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 18(5), 5.
- Kenney, J. and Newcombe, E. (2011). "Adopting a blended learning approach: Challenges encountered and lessons learned in an action research study." *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 15, no. 1: 45-57.
- Mohamad A. E. (2017). Redesigning Higher Education.:UiTM Academic Conference (Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam. Keynote.
- Pishghadam, R., Derakhshan, A., Zhaleh, K., & Al-Obaydi, L. H. (2021). Students' willingness to attend EFL classes with respect to teachers' credibility, stroke, and

- success: a cross-cultural study of Iranian and Iraqi students' perceptions. *Current Psychology*, 1-15.
- Tafazoli, D., Gómez Parra, M., & Huertas Abril, C. A. (2018). A cross-cultural study on the attitudes of English language students towards Computer-Assisted Language Learning. *Teaching English with Technology*, 18(2), 34-68.
- Weda, S., & Atmowardoyo, H. (2018). Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC) and Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) in multicultural education in the EFL classroom. *The Journal of English as an International Language*, 13(2.2), 9-31.
- Yu, X., & Peters, B. (2019). Let all voices be heard: Exploring international students' communication challenges in the internationalized classroom. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, 8(1), 107-116.
- Zheng, Y., & Cheng, L. (2018). How does anxiety influence language performance? From the perspectives of foreign language classroom anxiety and cognitive test anxiety. *Language Testing in Asia*, 8(1), 1-19.