

The Role of Technology in Enhancing Intercultural and Pragmatic Competencies in EFL Class

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Abstract: There is a close relationship between language and culture, and a review of the literature indicates less attention is given to the enrichment of cross-cultural and pragmatic awareness in the classrooms. The role of culture in language learning is often overlooked in language classes. The notion of cultural competencies is often derived from English-speaking countries, and though students can learn from such a perspective, it does not provide a good model for developing their cultural and pragmatic competencies. Using students' own cultural experiences would be a good way to enhance their cultural and pragmatic competencies. This investigation involves a qualitative approach, and the participants involved 10 EFL lecturers and 20 EFL students from China. Data was collected by using in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and field notes. The role of technology in enhancing these skills is highlighted in this study. The results indicated that the bidirectional approach of integrated language and cultural elements enhanced their pragmatic competence. The use of technology further promoted learner autonomy and independent learning. The study highlights the limitations of the unidirectional approach in language teaching and advocates a bidirectional approach to enhance pragmatic and cultural competencies, which can be ideal for EFL settings.

Keywords: Cultural competence, Pragmatic competence, Bi-directional approach, Digital tools, EFL Context.

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, the ability to effectively communicate across cultures and understand the pragmatic use of language is increasingly important. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes aim not only to develop language proficiency but also to equip learners with intercultural and pragmatic competencies necessary for effective communication in diverse contexts (Asrial et al., 2019). Linguistic proficiency has generally been the primary curricular goal in language teaching. However, in this age of globalization, when individuals are connected from all over the world, merely providing students with linguistic competency

may not be enough. Additionally, communication appropriateness and efficacy are crucial factors in language learning. As a result, many academics are now interested in how to foster intercultural communicative skills in language classes (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018). With the advancement of technology, there has been a growing interest in exploring how technology can enhance these competencies within the EFL classroom. The sector of learning and acquiring communication competency in the English language has undergone a revolution due to the rapid advancement of technology. The previous fifty years of technological advancement, together with more current mobile devices and Web 3.0 technologies, have created many chances for its application in enhancing English communication skills (Xiuwen & Razali, 2021). Technology has numerous and largely beneficial applications in language learning and teaching, and these applications' advantages are consistent across all communities, regardless of their size or location. New and creative applications of technology are being adopted to support language revitalization initiatives (Galla, 2016). Technology provides EFL learners with unprecedented access to authentic resources, real-world communication opportunities, and interactive learning experiences. It bridges geographical boundaries, connects learners with diverse cultures, and offers immersive experiences that were once limited to travel or in-person exchanges. For educators, students, and society at large, the study of how technology might improve intercultural and pragmatic competence in EFL lessons is of utmost importance. For educators looking for professional development possibilities, research on how technology might improve intercultural and pragmatic abilities is quite helpful. It provides instructors with information on the pedagogical strategies, digital resources, and technology integration that can best promote the growth of these competencies in EFL students. Additionally, it enables teachers to update their instructional strategies in line with technological changes. Research on how technology might improve intercultural competence in EFL lessons enables teachers to better understand how to give students chances for real conversation, exposure to different cultures, and the development of cross-cultural understanding and empathy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Communication in Language Learning

Effective intercultural communication occurs when language learners can communicate with people from other cultures in a new language (Byram, 2020). Intercultural competencies involve understanding and appreciating different cultural perspectives, adapting to cultural norms, and effectively communicating across cultural boundaries. The ability to traverse another culture requires speakers to be conscious of their own and other people's cultures as well as their own. It has become clear that the various elements that go into creating a learner's identity, such as culture, influence how well they can learn a language. According to Kramsch (1995), the word "culture" refers to the common worldviews of the communities where the students were reared, as well as the family, social, and academic environments that reflected those worldviews. The traditional culture of their educational environment, which is a component of the local culture in which they were socialized, has been seen in literature to be acted out by instructors and pupils. Culture and language are intertwined. One has to be interculturally and communicatively competent to engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds acceptably and successfully (Tran & Duong, 2018). Although linguistic precision is required for language users to communicate effectively, language is intricately linked to culture when it is employed in communication situations. Learning how English is used in English-speaking nations has always been a part of English language instruction. To educate students about cross-cultural communication and to foster linguistic awareness,

English education should consider the status of English in all of its functional ranges and varieties around the globe (Chen & Yang, 2014).

Past Studies on Technology and Intercultural Competency

Many academics in the field of English L2 research have looked at strategies to support learners' intercultural competency. In the research by Juan-Garau and Jacob (2015), for instance, task-based lessons centred on cultural challenges in Africa involved cross-border collaboration and debate amongst teenage EFL students in Spain and Poland. Their findings demonstrated that this instructional strategy helped students acquire the five transcultural competencies—world learning, global awareness, L2 fluency, emotional development, and emphatic activism—that were highlighted in their study. Banjongjit and Boonmoh (2018) conducted a qualitative study on the attitudes of EFL teachers towards encouraging intercultural communication skills in EFL lessons, as well as the methods they employ to do so, among seven English teachers in Thailand. The research found that the majority of the instructors defined intercultural communication skills as having the capacity to interact responsibly and successfully with people from many cultural backgrounds, as well as having an awareness of cultural diversity. The parts of intercultural communication skills that instructors have traditionally focused on include the desired external goal, skills, knowledge, and required attitude toward cultural differences. However, instructors' perspectives on culture differ, and as a result, their understanding of intercultural communication skills varies somewhat. Anecdotes from personal experience, having students read and discuss, and student role-playing are the most common tactics that instructors employ to encourage intercultural communication skills. Chen and Yang (2014) conducted a one-year action research study using web-based resources in a 7th-grade EFL class to conduct three collaborative intercultural projects to establish an authentic EFL classroom. The goals of the initiatives were to raise students' linguistic proficiency and intercultural communication competence (ICC). Specifically, questionnaires, interviews, and document analyses were utilised to explore the learners' reactions and learning processes. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were also employed to triangulate the results. According to the study's findings, the participants' views towards technology-enhanced intercultural language learning (TEILI), which allowed students to engage in real language learning that promoted linguistic competence and ICC, were found to be overwhelmingly favorable. Jata (2015) looked at the attitudes of 10 professors at an Albanian institution toward educating students about culture and intercultural competency in English language classes. According to the questionnaire results, intercultural competency abilities were ranked as the least important teaching aim by 70% of the instructors, whereas linguistic competence was ranked as the priority. Despite understanding the value of intercultural competency, they had trouble incorporating it into their lessons due to time restraints, the curriculum's emphasis on linguistic skills, the students' poor level of language proficiency, and the lack of appropriate materials. Additionally, most of them were inclined to teach observable components of culture—such as geography, history, and daily life—instead of other cultural facets when they had the opportunity to do so. Sevy-Biloon and Chroman (2019) conducted mixed-method research through the use of questionnaires, unstructured interviews, and five weeks of observations on 17 Ecuadorian university-level EFL students. Due to a lack of regular interactions with other cultures, the students are less able to speak effectively and progress in their language acquisition. A video chat platform and a programme for the exchange of languages were developed. Giving students the chance to practise their English was the research's main goal—to improve their internal motivation and spoken communication. The findings revealed that students appeared to be more organically driven to develop, speaking fluency rose, and speaking confidence grew as a result of the program.

Pragmatic Competence in Language Learning

Due to its recognition as one of the primary components of language ability, the teaching of pragmatic competence has attracted a lot of attention (Bachman, 1990). The capacity to employ the structural repertoire of the target language (grammar, lexis, prosody, etc.) in a situationally and contextually appropriate manner to grasp the L2 in context and to achieve one's communicative goals is known as pragmatic competence in a second or foreign language (Glaser, 2018). Such competence requires both socio-pragmatic skills, or the understanding of when to use which linguistic forms appropriately in social situations, and pragmalinguistic skills, or mastery of the linguistic forms that the L2 offers to realise specific intentions. Rather than being a separate skill from the learners' current grammatical knowledge, pragmatic competence is an integral component of communicative competence (Kamiya, 2006). This indicates that pragmatic language learning focuses on the meaning of learners' language usage in acts of communication rather than on grammatical knowledge. In addition, it emphasises helping students build meaning rather than precise grammatical form. More obviously, pragmatics is the study of language from the perspective of users, particularly the decisions they make, the limitations they face when using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017). This implies that it approaches language from the perspective of the user, allowing EFL students to communicate effectively and efficiently. Raising EFL learners' pragmatic awareness in the field of interlanguage pragmatics is crucial, according to Vásquez and Sharpless (2009). According to Schmidt (1993), learners might acquire pragmatic features by making them conscious of the forms. Additionally, research has demonstrated that unless learners get pragmatic teaching, they cannot spontaneously learn some pragmatic characteristics (Gholamia & Aghaib, 2012). According to Doughty (2001), pragmatics involves constant attention, exercise, and long-term memory.

Advocates of explicit pragmatic training contend that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) should focus on the target speech act types to improve their pragmatic proficiency. Additionally, the lack of adequate opportunities to practise teaching pragmatics in a foreign language classroom prevents students from demonstrating their practical skills there. Since they have little opportunity to interact with native speakers of the target culture, they become less communicative and sensitive, placing a greater emphasis on language rules (Afshar & Asakereh, 2016).

Past studies on Technology and Pragmatic Competency

Eslami et al. (2015) examine two forms of form-focused instruction on the acquisition of requests by Iranian EFL learners to ascertain the efficacy of pragmatic training via asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC). This research provides proof that, in a virtual communication setting, L2 pragmatics can respond favorably to consciousness-raising interaction and teaching scaffolded by proficient target language users. More precisely, when L2 learners advance their pragmatic skills, computer technology and CMC provide instructional and communicative affordances that can meet their demands. The findings showed that feedback and training can increase students' awareness of form-function mappings and relevant contextual factors that would not otherwise be sufficiently prominent when delivered through personalized online contact with L2 informants.

Azad et al. (2018) conducted research that sought to investigate the impact of social media use on the pragmatic competence of EFL learners as demonstrated by speaking fluency and accuracy. Based on their results on the Oxford Placement Test, 60 EFL students were chosen for this project, and 30 students from each of the two groups—one experimental and

one control—were randomly allocated. While the control group received the standard pragmatics lesson through speaking, the experimental group utilised the Telegram application to obtain the specific pragmatics instruction through speaking. The study's findings showed that most learners preferred to use technology, particularly computers, to advance their L2 abilities. Alemi et al. (2023) conducted a quasi-experimental study and examined how 20 male and female B.A. TEFL students' growth in request generation was impacted by technology-mediated task-based instructions in an online collaborative and individual EFL learning environment. Since the coronavirus epidemic began, distance learning has been essential in education; thus, it appears crucial to investigate useful methods to improve EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge in online settings. The findings revealed that, due to group discussion, concept clarification, and opinion evaluation, they concluded that the collaborative atmosphere is useful in the pragmatic growth of students even within a short period.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore EFL instructors' perceptions of the role of technology in enhancing intercultural and pragmatic competencies in EFL classes. The study adopted a qualitative research design. The data was collected from a private university (SEGi University) in Kuala Lumpur. The qualitative method allows the researcher to explore complexities beyond the scope of more controlled approaches. Qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (Sherman & Webb, 1988). The total number of participants was 10 EFL instructors and 20 EFL learners from China and SEGi University Malaysia. This research employed a purposeful sampling method for the selection of participants in an attempt to obtain information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). The qualitative method allows the researcher to explore complexities beyond the scope of more controlled approaches. Qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (Sherman & Webb, 1988). Data was collected by using in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and field notes.

Follow-up questions were employed for clarity or expansion. This open-ended interviewing style has been promoted by Charmaz (2006) to generate robust qualitative data, and as such, the researcher followed the tenets of her approach for the in-depth interviews. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview questions and interview protocol were designed by the researchers and validated by member checks. The criteria for expert selection and inclusion were teaching EFL learners for more than 10 years and experience in handling learners from different EFL backgrounds. For the analysis of the qualitative data, thematic analysis was utilised (Levitt et al., 2018). The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face. During the data collection process, member checking with the interviewees was carried out to enhance the accuracy of the responses. Member checking was followed by a comparison with the results of similar studies to address the reliability of the study.

The following qualitative research questions (RQs) were proposed in this study:

RQ1: How does a bidirectional approach enhance cultural competence among EFL learners?

RQ2: How do EFL instructors use technology to develop pragmatic competencies among EFL learners?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

RQ1: How does a bidirectional approach enhance cultural competence among EFL Learners?

Promoting Cultural Exchanges among Students

As culture and language are interrelated and the definition of intercultural competency is being shaped and reshaped, it is imperative to adopt a bidirectional approach to language learning to enhance cultural competence among EFL learners. The participants were monolingual, and it was a homogeneous classroom; hence, the lecturers adopted activities that would enhance their cultural competence in the classroom. The bidirectional approach was more appropriate for this EFL setting. For this class, the instructors used materials that were culturally related to the students. For the first few weeks, students were shown videos of places in China and some local food, and they were put in groups to discuss and talk about them. The videos of the places and the different cuisines were from different provinces, and this served as a good starting point for students to exchange notes on the different cultural practices. This topic suggestion helped students get rid of their inhibitions and interact freely with others.

As one student remarked:

S10: “The videos reminded me of fond memories of my place, and I was able to share the cultural norms and practices easily.

The instructors also provided them with enough guidance and step-by-step instructions on the group discussion activity and a list of vocabulary related to the topic was handed to each group. According to one instructor:

T4: “My initial perception of using videos was positive as I do know that students love to watch content that is relevant to them. The students had fun learning and it motivated me to give them more such activities.”

In the following classes, students were given pictures that promote healthy living based on the Chinese context and were asked to come up with a conversation or a dialogue session. This activity, though, received initial hesitation from the students, but with enough guidance, they could have a short conversation on the topic. The initial hesitation was due to the lack of vocabulary and the students' lack of interaction and communication skills. The instructors used pictures and encouraged students to ask questions that prompted the group discussions.

According to a student:

S5: “We were not sure of the vocabulary to use but the pictures helped us to ask questions and managed to do the dialogue sessions.” According to the instructor:

T3 “The students could identify with the topics presented and hence they could relate to them. Furthermore, they were less anxious to talk as they are familiar with the content given.”

Promoting Learner Autonomy and Independent Learning

The instructors believed that using culturally relevant topics and materials in the class encouraged learner autonomy and independent learning. Though the learners were initially reluctant to exchange their views, with the guidance of the instructor, they were able to take charge of their learning. The instructors gave them step-by-step guidance on how the discussion should take place, and the students were able to engage in independent learning. The use of technology to allow them to look up words also enabled them to be independent learners and

search for unfamiliar terms. To collaborate with peers students, they were asked to come up with posters on healthy living and explain this to students from other international countries. The exchange of questions with the other students promoted learner autonomy and independent learning. According to the instructor:

T2 “The students learned to be autonomous as they were given the choice to design the poster and I just showed them a sample. They learned independently after watching some videos and the interaction with the other groups was quite interactive.” As one student observes:

S12 “At first it was difficult to understand the pronunciation of the other international students. But we managed to answer their questions and it helped to overcome my anxiety.”

RQ2. How do EFL instructors use technology to develop pragmatic competencies among EFL learners?

Using Technology as a Medium for Communication

In this approach, the learners were asked to view videos of popular places depicting the culture of a particular place and pick out vocabulary that described the culture and tradition of that place. Later, students were grouped and came up with a dialogue and enacted a role play on a scenario they picked. Some of them played like tourist guides to explain the cultural relevance of the place. The students were allowed to translate the word from Mandarin to English using the apps available. The students were also encouraged to have a cultural corner in which they displayed their culture through poster presentations.

One student describes this learning as :

S7” We were allowed to watch the videos multiple times and also allowed to use cards to jot down the vocabulary. Watching places familiar to us helped us to use the vocabulary confidently”.

According to one instructor, the students were less shy after a few rounds of interactions and picked up basic sentence structures related to the video presentation. The learners were engaged in authentic conversation in social situations and the conversations were spontaneous in response to the questions raised by the groups.

S9” The cultural corner was something the students enjoyed as they interacted with the group of other L2 learners and this enabled them to practice their vocabulary”.

The instructors revealed that they used two strategies, such as the use of technology as well as input in the language class, with input referring to the list of vocabulary provided related to the topic used in the class. The instructor opined that setting up such cultural activities enhanced their interactions with the other group, and the students were motivated to take part in such activities. In this approach, the instructor adopted a guided approach, and students were given some cues on how to interact with others. The list of vocabulary served as a starting point for the conversation to take place. The other materials were popular music songs in their home country, and students were asked to discuss the popularity and appeal of such music. Students were given some linguistic and cultural tasks. The students were given topics, and each student was assigned five minutes to talk about the popularity of the particular music each group chose.

According to one instructor,

T 10 “The students were able to form simple sentences and the lyric was played after which they spoke on the appeal of the music”. While some chose to explain the meaning of the lyrics other students spoke about the singer”.

To promote culturally enriched language learning, the terms plurilingualism and pluriculturalism were introduced and expanded as the repertoires needed while developing linguistic and cultural communication (Council of Europe, 2018). This implies that language learning also must be extended beyond the classroom and the learners were taught body language, and social cues as playing an important role in communication.

Pragmatic competence concerns second language learners’ knowledge and ability to use their L2s appropriately in given contexts (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). Such social strategies encourage learning through interaction with others, although this study did not focus on all the different aspects of pragmatic and cultural competence. The instructors taught both cultural and pragmatic use of language, and they are aware of the need for authentic social interactions to make language learning fun and interactive. As such, the study adopts a comprehensive definition of pragmatic competence stated by Taguchi: “L2 pragmatic competence refers to learners’ knowledge of linguistic forms and cultural norms, as well as their ability to use the knowledge when performing socially bound functions” (Taguchi, 2014, p. 161).

The study also highlights the fact that, though instructors know the value of such social interactions for language learning to take place, such activities do not take place frequently, and hence the results could not be conclusive. However, the use of technology encouraged them to get students involved in the tasks, and students enjoyed talking about facts that were familiar and related to their own culture. However, the generalizability of the data is untenable, as instructors did not investigate the explicit and implicit features of pragmatic competence. The course was a general English course for EFL learners with a basic competency level. Hence, the study has limitations in its approach, and further studies are required to explore specific aspects of cultural and pragmatic competencies and the approach used by the instructors. Therefore, it is evident that the emphasis is on the importance for teachers to consider the goal of intercultural education, which is to provide language learners with the language and intercultural skills they need to function effectively as citizens, gain knowledge, and develop open attitudes toward others coming from different communities (Council of Europe, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study used a qualitative approach and thematic analysis to investigate the role of technology in enhancing the pragmatic and cultural competencies of EFL learners using a bidirectional approach. It was concluded that using technology to enhance cultural and pragmatic competency proved to be efficient in acquiring some basic social skills as well as enhancing proficiency in English. Using culturally relevant materials enhanced learning autonomy and independent learning. While the interactions with learners from other groups enhanced their pragmatic competencies. The activities outside their classroom instructions further enhanced their learning experience as students could learn from the interactions and such collaborations encouraged them to use the language in social contexts. The study has limitations as it was conducted with limited participants and for only one semester that involved 14 weeks the results were positive.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

[RQ 1. How does a bidirectional approach enhance cultural competence among EFL Learners?]

What communicative tasks did instructors usually conduct in the classroom teaching to improve your students' communicative ability and pragmatic competence?

What challenges or benefits do students face in cross-cultural communication in classroom situations?

What kind of language learning strategies (learning activities) were used to help overcome cross-cultural communication challenges or difficulties in classroom multicultural situations?

To what extent do the materials used in EFL class provide information on cross-cultural pragmatics and promote learner autonomy and independent learning?

[RQ 2. How do EFL instructors use technology to develop pragmatic competencies among EFL learners?]

What communicative tasks do you usually conduct in the classroom using technology to teach students' communicative ability and pragmatic competence?

What are the strategies used to enhance their vocabulary as well as a culturally enhanced learning experience?

What social strategies were used to promote interaction?