A Study of the Pedagogical Benefits of Online Intercultural Exchange Between China and Colombia: Investigating Chinese and Colombian EFL Learners' Perception

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Abstract: *Online intercultural exchange is developing rapidly in foreign language education, especially English language education. In this study, we used Online Intercultural Exchange with VooV Meeting, focusing on analyzing students' reflective journals, to draw pedagogical benefits of Online Intercultural Exchange in China and Colombia. Participants in this experiment were students from two separate countries. One group of students was English majors from a Chinese university and the other group was English majors from a Colombian university. The results, analyzed through qualitative analysis of students' data from two countries, showed that online intercultural exchange produced three consistent major benefits: promoting cultural learning, increasing motivation to learn English, and improving English skills. Analysis of the students' submitted reflective journals showed that, on average, cultural learning had the highest self-evaluation, followed by motivation to learn English and English skills. Students with intermediate levels of English proficiency had a significantly high sense of positive perception and gain.*

Keywords: Online intercultural exchange, EFL learners, Intercultural communication competence, Qualitative analysis.

1. Introduction

Online intercultural exchange (hereafter abbreviated as OIE), defined by Beltz, refers to the use of online communication tools and media for foreign language learning and cultural exchange under the leadership of language experts (such as English teachers) (see Luo, 2022). Over the past 20 years, the influence of OIE has been increasing, and it has gradually developed into an emerging sub-field in computer-aided linguistics (Luo, 2022). In foreign language teaching, OIE is becoming more and more common, and more and more language experts and language teachers will adopt OIE mode when teaching foreign languages (Hagley, 2020; Arndt et al, 2022; Yeh & Heng, 2022).

However, in past experiments and studies, the tools used (e.g., e-mail, forums, etc.) were relatively cumbersome, and participants from both countries could not interact in real time. A small number of experiments set the form of OIE as offline English corners, etc. Although this practice allows participants to have a better experience of the communication environment, it increases the difficulty of the experiment, because most of the experimental participants will find it difficult to get together because of the long distance, thus increasing the possibility and frequency of experimental failure. Therefore, this experiment has learned from the shortcomings of previous experiments and innovated from the point of communication tools, which is also the reason why we positioned OIE this time, using VooV meetings for eight weeks, once a week, with an average length of one and a half hours of OIE meetings. Through these meetings, the participants in the experiment had a more favorable experience. Several participants also made positive comments on OIE.

In terms of the pedagogical advantages of OIE, several scholars have argued that the purpose of language education is to develop communicative and intercultural competence in language users and that these competencies cannot be practiced to a greater extent in traditional classrooms in countries where English is a second language. In other words, the development of intercultural communicative competence requires that EFL learners be provided with a language environment in which they can naturally communicate in English. Meanwhile, in the traditional classroom, EFL learners can only get cultural input in the form of videos and pictures played by the language experts, which it is difficult for EFL learners to feel and learn the culture of other countries. For EFL learners to develop intercultural competence they have to be open and tolerant to people from all over the world and from different cultural backgrounds (Toscu & Erten, 2020). Therefore, for this OIE, we chose to communicate with people from a country with a very different cultural background from China: students from Colombia.

At present, more language experts and education experts have realized the importance of intercultural communication ability in language learning. According to Zhu (2022), for language learners, learning a language is about providing them with the opportunity to communicate with the people who use the language and learn about their culture and traditions. Therefore, OIE can provide opportunities for OIE in this respect, to improve intercultural communication competence.

As education develops increasingly rapidly, there have been many language education experts who have recognized the importance of OIE for language learning and intercultural learning. OIE is not only a way to expand the culture of the participants, but also to motivate language learners to learn language. Creating a language environment for language learners improves students' pragmatic skills and allows them to learn more than just the textbook. At the same time, through cultural input, language learners can understand the logic of the language and thus learn and understand more authentic

expressions and language knowledge (Byram, 2020).

At present, most language teachers in China implement two teaching methods: the first is a culture-based teaching method, and the second is a teaching method that combines language and culture. The goal of these teaching methods is to develop EFL learners' language skills to be as fluent as native English speakers, or to be familiar with the cultural background and knowledge involved in language use. Some scholars have criticized these two teaching methods. Zhu (2022) thinks that this teaching method often ignores the EFL learners' cultural background or unconsciously puts their own culture in a lower position and puts the culture of other countries in a higher position. In contrast, she believes that the "intercultural" approach to language and culture teaching makes up for this deficiency. The goal of the intercultural language and culture teaching method is to guide EFL learners to become "intercultural speakers" so that they can freely travel and communicate in different cultural backgrounds, neither neglecting their own cultures nor elevating other cultures, and face foreign cultures with a more tolerant and confident attitude.

In selecting the communication objects of OIE, we compare the related OIE experiments at home and abroad and find that most of these studies are related to the OIE on the line of British and American countries, and there is little OIE among EFL learners. There are even fewer related studies from which the advantages of OIE for language education are explored. At the same time, these experiments ignore that English is a lingua franca to OIE. We will use English as a common language to communicate in the future. Therefore, for this experiment, we chose Colombian students, who are also EFL learners, as the equal partners in OIE. Thus, we can explore more specifically and comprehensively the pedagogical benefits of OIE

2. Literature Review

2.1 Domestic Research Status

In recent years, the rapid development of virtual teaching and learning such as OIE has attracted the attention of some scholars in China, who have put forward different views on virtual teaching and learning, which are both positive and negative. Luan (2023) has suggested that virtual reality environments can provide EFL learners with contextualized and immersive learning experiences as well as real-time interactions and feedback, and scholars have put forward positive evaluations of such virtual teaching tools. Through a systematic review of related literature, they conducted an experimental study based on the theory of contextualized learning, using the self-developed virtual simulation experimental platform as a tool, and dividing experimental participants into experimental and control groups. It has also been analyzed that the elements of teaching context are based on contextual learning theory, supporting that the use of virtual teaching tools has a positive auxiliary effect on creating context, experiencing context, interpreting context, and reflective evaluation.

All of the above literature offers positive comments on whether virtual teaching tools are beneficial for EFL learners

communicating with native speakers.

2.2 Foreign Research Status

Overseas, many scholars have also published evaluations on the aspects of intercultural activities for English language teaching and learning, which are analyzed from multiple dimensions.

Schreiber (2019) offered his perspective in the journal in terms of the selection of communication recipients. He communicated with undergraduate students in New York City through a digital platform. Data was analyzed based on interviews and students' online writing. He argued that OIE can provide students with opportunities to interact directly with English speakers who may be challenged by beliefs about "correct" English, and their identity, competence, and privilege as native speakers. At the same time, he stated that in the context of a globalized economy and changing times, the purpose of learning English is no longer essentially to communicate with idealized native speakers of English but rather to communicate with speakers of English from different cultures, primarily with others who use English as a second or foreign language. Part of the reason for this is the lack of teaching materials for the diversity of English, facing the reality that the teaching of English globally is lagging far behind the changes Based on this, Chinese and Colombian students were chosen for the experimental subjects in this article. Chinese students use English as their second language. Colombian students are also EFL learners. They can learn from each other, being exposed to varied types of English.

In addition, many scholars have expressed positive views on the pedagogical benefits of OIE. The most widely discussed educational advantages are second language development; they found that OIE promotes meaningful communication among EFL learners, develops pragmatic competence, improves grammatical competence, and promotes speaking competence. Another widely discussed advantage favors the development of intercultural communication skills. In addition to this, scholars have argued that OIE promotes EFL learners' motivation to learn the language, enhances their self-directed learning, develops digital literacy, and facilitates the construction of learning communities (Luo, 2022). Other scholars argued that students enjoy intercultural learning in the OIE. They can enter into in-depth interactions which have a profound effect on students who never interacted with people from different countries and have different cultures, thus attaining broader and deeper intercultural knowledge as a minimum (Hagely, 2020).

In the context of English language teaching, Yeh and Heng (2022) scrutinized the pedagogical benefits of OIE, which have been examined primarily based on students' ratings of pre-determined Likert scale items or the researcher's assessment of OIE in the form of a summary. Such scoring and assessment methods have limitations and do not place the student's feelings about the activity in the scoring and assessment criteria. Therefore, this article uses qualitative data (e.g., students' perceptions) to increase the objectivity of the data analyzed.

Despite a range of pedagogical advantages of OIE (Schreiber,

2019), challenges still arise during OIE, such as reinforced stereotypes of the target culture, pedagogical goals to achieve, mismatched proficiency levels, and unequal participation.

In addition, according to the experimental data in this article, OIE has various types of challenges in the context of English language teaching and learning, for example, students with different levels of English proficiency feel differently about OIE. Students with higher levels of English proficiency favor positive evaluations of OIE, and they believed that OIE had greatly improved their English speaking skills, motivation to learn English, and intercultural learning, especially in terms of English speaking skills and motivation to learn English, and that OIE could provide them with a purely English communication environment, and that during the process of communicating they had a better understanding of the process of communication, they also have a better understanding of Colombian culture. As for the students with lower English proficiency, they have more negative evaluations. In OIE, due to their limited English proficiency, they cannot fully understand the speeches of the Colombian students, and thus they cannot speak as confidently and generously as the students with higher English proficiency, and they cannot devote themselves 100% to the activities. Therefore, based on the different feelings and evaluations of these two groups of students about online OIE, English teachers need to fully and comprehensively consider the feelings of students with different bases, and fully explore the potential of this activity.

Another point that teachers need to be aware of is that most programs designed for EFL learners often rely heavily on communication with native speakers, and fail to take full advantage of OIE. Native speakers might make EFL learners feel anxious. The goal of being like a native speaker seems to be unattainable for EFL learners. Therefore, the experimental project in this article takes this into full consideration by allowing both EFL learners (Chinese and Colombian students) to use an all-English environment to collect and create a PowerPoint presentation of the cultures of their respective countries so that the students' exchange content focuses on cultural exchange. This study utilizes qualitative analysis with a special focus on the assessment of two EFL learners with different levels of English proficiency, more specifically, this study focuses on examining the following two questions:

How do EFL learners evaluate the communicative benefits of OIE?

Are they evaluated differently at beginner and intermediate levels?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Subjects

This OIE between China and Colombia included both English majors at the Jiangxi University of Technology and Colombian students at Universidad Pedagógicay Tecnológica de Colombia. They were categorized according to their English proficiency into beginner level and intermediate level based on their self-reports and expert (teacher)-reports. The beginner-level students had less fluent speaking skills and were less able to communicate in English; the

intermediate-level students had better speaking skills and were able to communicate confidently in English and have conversations with foreigners in English. There was a total of 16 English majors from Colombian universities whose native language was Spanish and English was their second foreign language, and 32 Chinese students who were English majors (most of them had learned English for over 10 years). The experiment was led by English specialists (university English teachers) from two different countries (China and Colombia), who guided and assisted the students in the exchange, regulating the atmosphere of the exchange.

3.2 China-Colombia Online Intercultural Exchange

There was a component to this OIE: culturally relevant discussions using VooV Meetings. The main activity of this experiment was a weekly, 80 minutes-90minutes online exchange session using VooV Meeting. The main theme of the meetings was traditional Chinese and Colombian culture, including holidays, traditional food, differences in lifestyles and habits, and so on.

The weekly discussion required participants to communicate in English throughout the whole process. Students were supposed to create PPT or final Video work for a cultural presentation, and after the cultural presentations were over, others could ask questions about the parts that they were more interested in, during the questioning process, students from both countries needed to use English. To bridge the language gap between the two groups of students, the teacher provided the topic of the week's discussion in advance, so that the students could prepare an outline of the presentation and consulted the relevant vocabulary in advance. When communicating online, students were allowed to search for words using a vocabulary program.

During the process, students from both countries must discuss the topic in English, some students could not understand the content of the presentation, but students of the presentation could explain it to help others understand details. It was worth noting that some students were curious even could not understand strange festivals and customs from different cultures, so teacher or English group leaders should lead students to tell the festivals and customs origin and ways of celebration during the presentation.

After each week's online exchange, students wrote a reflective journal describing how they felt during the online exchange meeting and what they gained from the exchange. In the final online meeting, students from both countries were divided into groups to record a brief video to summarize what they have learnt, in which they introduced traditional culture and shared their learning with the help of pictures and audio. The language used in the video was also English.

Both students from China and Colombia shared their feelings and gain about the OIE through reflective journals. About the feelings and gain of the OIE, some Chinese students said: that before this term of OIE, they didn't know the culture and living ways of the country, they just heard the name; but now, they have assimilated a lot of Colombian culture. Colombian students thought this term of OIE let them learn more about Chinese traditional culture, they also felt the enthusiasm of

Chinese, and they appreciated that they had a chance to join this term of OIE. Besides the VooV meeting, we also sometimes used WeChat or chat box in VooV meeting to ensure the correct content when we did not fully understand the meaning of Colombian students.

This experiment adopted an OIE model, using the VooV meeting, and reflective journals to summarize their learning and perceptions, while various measures were taken to alleviate the language gap between students. (e.g., allow students to prepare in advance the words they would use in communication, and allow students to use tools to search for words during communication).

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Our major data sources for this experiment: reflective journals. All of participants were intermediate English speakers, varied from sophomore to senior.

To examine the pedagogical advantages perceived by students in OIE, the researcher conducted qualitative content analysis through students' reflective journals. Without pre-supposing the results of the experiment, the researchers analyzed the sources from the students' reflective journals to track students' feelings and gains about the experiment. These sources were categorized according to the different English levels of the students, thus comparing the evaluations of students with different English levels on the same OIE activity. These evaluations were categorized based on positive versus negative evaluations. Qualitative analysis is a continuous recursive process.

4. Results and Discussion

By subjecting the two main sources to the constant comparative method, three main instructional strengths surfaced: cultural learning, English language skills, and motivation to learn.

4.1 Cultural Learning

Two groups of Chinese students used different methods to discuss cultural achievements in their country, and themes of cultural learning continued to emerge from the three main sources. The reflective journals from Chinese and Colombian students demonstrated cultural learning as a pedagogical strength.

Throughout the semester, a total of this term of OIE was held using the VooV meeting, with a total of eight topics, all of which centered on transmission culture, covering: traditional festivals, clothing, food, living habits, etc. Students from both China and Colombia shared their cultural knowledge, cultural differences, and their own experiences and opinions. Both groups of students agreed that they learned a lot about Colombian traditional culture during their participation in the conference, which had a great impact and made them more interested in understanding and learning about Colombian traditional culture.

To show the traditional culture more realistically, students searched for relevant photos and videos on the Internet to go

with the English, and some students showed photos from their own lives. For example, when the Chinese students were demonstrating traditional Chinese costumes, they took out their Hanfu (a kind of traditional Chinese costume) and showed them to the Colombian students. To make the Colombian students understand more about the patterns on the costumes, the Chinese students collected detailed pictures of the costumes on the Internet; when discussing Chinese tea culture, to make the Colombian students realize that tea can be found everywhere in the lives of Chinese people, the Chinese students showed the modern milk tea (a kind of tea made by combining milk with other tea products) to the Colombian students. These methods of demonstrating the culture through objects, photographs, and drinks made the Colombian students more impressed and knowledgeable about the content.

"I am grateful for this OIE, which has impressed me about traditional Chinese dress. Before the intercultural exchange, I had no idea about Chinese traditional dress, and I would have thought that it was like the common shirts that people around the world are wearing nowadays. But it's not true, Chinese traditional costumes are very gorgeous and colorful, and if I have the chance, I'd love to feel them on my body." (As mentioned by a student C8 from Colombia in his reflective journal after a discussion on traditional dress).

"Before this term of OIE, I was not familiar with China. My friends also didn't care about Chinese culture. However I have been interested in Chinese culture, I have wanted to know Chinese traditional culture and the differences between the two countries about daily life. During this OIE, I learn a lot about Chinese tradition. I feel the difference of culture and tradition." (C1 Columbian student).

This term of OIE added a lot of interactive time, through which the Chinese and Colombian students communicated with each other, narrowed the distance between each other, and at the same time, increased a lot of cultural knowledge. This cultural knowledge could not be learned in the textbooks. EFL learners could not fully understand the entirely different cultures in common teaching methods, some students from this term of OIE thought that learning and understanding other cultures through textbooks was often one-sided, which also led to their inability to understand how learning about other cultures could help them learn English, thus reduced their willingness to learn about other cultures. The phenomenon of reducing willingness to learn about other cultures had negative effects that English lost its role as a language tool.

At the same time, online communication also made them more willing to tell the history of their own country through their own experience. For example, in the online meeting, the topic was traditional food, and a Chinese student shared a dish from his daily diet: radish and rib soup. The Colombian student immediately introduced a similar soup in his country: turnip and beef soup. This dish is served as breakfast in their country and is prepared in a slightly different way. This kind of exchange let the Chinese and Colombian students felt the cultural similarities and differences between the two countries. It made both students from China and Colombia more interested in different cultures from China and Colombia.

Finally, these online communications prompted Chinese students and Colombian students to reflect on their own culture. For example, Colombian students were surprised when a Chinese student shared the true story of the Chinese headmistress who spent a lot of money and energy to establish a school only for female students from the remote countryside to encourage them to receive higher education for change the female students' destiny. "The story never happened in our country, the true story let me feel the different world views between China and Colombia. It reflects our own culture. (C1 Columbian student).

In conclusion, students in both groups viewed cultural learning as an extremely important learning outcome of this term of OIE, which offered a completely unexpected and interesting way to learn about a different culture.

4.2 English Skill

Intermediate English proficiency students in this term of OIE felt that their language skills were enhanced by this experience. Frequent conversations in English increased fluency and vocabulary. Also, because of the personal presentations, many of them had to prepare vocabulary in advance to make their presentations completer and more perfect, an act that increased the vocabulary of the Chinese students. To convey their ideas more accurately, Chinese students needed to correct their grammatical errors, which is also a great exercise for their grammar.

"One of the most frequently mentioned language skills is the increase in vocabulary. In the usual classroom, students can only recognize new words through books and teacher's explanations, and in the time after class, students can only memorize words through word books and related software, without using words in time, only the process of input, which leads them to believe that such a method of word learning is not efficient. However, through this online OIE, they can learn words with a purpose, and at the same time, they will use them in time for effective output, which deepens the impression of unfamiliar words, and thus improves the efficiency of word learning." (P4 Chinese student)

"During personal presentations and one-on-one exchanges, I often prepare a lot of content in advance because I need to present a certain topic, which involves words I am not familiar with. Whenever I encounter such situations, I would promptly look up the relevant words and use them. For example, when I was preparing a presentation on the topic of traditional Chinese festivals, I didn't know how to express the word red envelope in English, but after I translated it with a word program, I realized that it should be translated as 'red envelope', which I used frequently in my presentations later on, and it made a deep impression on me, and I still remember this word today." (P11 Chinese student).

In addition to the expansion of vocabulary, the improvement of speaking fluency was also often mentioned by students. They believed that they had very few opportunities to practice speaking in their normal lives due to the lack of a relevant language environment and that most of the English classes were more focused on listening and reading improvement. This term of OIE enabled them to have a language environment to practice speaking frequently, thus improving their fluency (P10 Chinese student).

The number of people who mentioned the improvement in word pronunciation and grammar was relatively small. However, some beginner English level students reported that when prepared for their presentations in advance, they often didn't know how to make sentences to express their ideas, and very often they were only able to use very basic sentences, which made it impossible for them to express their ideas correctly. Therefore, when they prepared materials in advance, they used relevant software to translate or learn, to enhance their grammatical accuracy. During the process, they thought that they were overly reliant on relevant software then their English skill was not prompted (P8 Chinese student).

4.3 Motivation

OIE gave students a language environment in which they could engage in effective output and enabled them to use English in an immersive way, an approach that greatly increased their motivation to learn English.

"In the past, I have improved my English through boring English books and English classes. I couldn't effectively utilize English as a language tool. However, this OIE allows me to use English frequently and I deeply understand the concept of "English is a language tool. I am also very motivated to study and make up for the lack of English." (P9 Chinese student)

"As an English major in Colombia, I had more chances to study English than others, but I did not understand the meaning of learning English, I had no motivation to learn English, and I also had no thoughts to travel around the world and enjoy the different culture. But in this term of OIE, I have been attracted to Chinese culture and enthusiasm and have learned a lot about the local culture. This is different compared with my own country's culture. It also let me know that English is the world language, I want to learn English well to communicate with people from other countries and cultures." (C5, a Columbian student)

English as a language tool requires EFL learners to use English frequently, and they can only learn English more fully if they do so with a purpose. They used English as a language tool to communicate with Colombian students in this term of OIE, they also wanted to fully understand the content of the communication. During the process, they had a purpose for English as a language tool to help people communicate with each other without barriers. In addition to this, the weekly online communication meetings with the VooV meeting created a large amount of language environment and cultural knowledge input, which made them feel the benefits of English learning, thus making them more motivated to learn.

It should be noted, however, that some students with beginner English proficiency felt that the OIE did not increase their motivation to learn English. Due to their poor speaking skills, they were unable to effectively interact with the Colombian students, thus leading them to overuse tools for translation in their communication, leading to an over-reliance on the tools and dented their self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

Focusing on exploring the Pedagogical Benefits of OIE for EFL learners, this dissertation revealed the great potential of OIE among English EFL learners from non-native countries. The findings of this dissertation provided more possibilities for the future development of OIE especially between EFL learners, and the diversity of the communication audience could make the OIE activities unfold more smoothly. However, in the course of the experiment, the researchers found some factors that may affect the effectiveness of the activities. First, OIE was suitable for people with intermediate English levels. Most of them expressed positive perceptions. Second, due to the thirteen-hour time difference between the students in Colombia and China, this was also a greater challenge for OIE with China and Colombia. Colombian students joined the online communication in the morning while Chinese students started to communicate with Colombian students in the evening due to jet lag challenge. Therefore, when similar experiments are conducted in the future, the exchange participants may choose a country with a smaller time difference from their own country.

The experiment covered in this thesis has a few shortcomings. First, the number of volunteers involved in the experiment was relatively small and so was the example of the experiment, and therefore it was not representative of the accuracy of the pedagogical benefits that each student experiences when participating in similar activities. Second, the participants in this experiment had only intermediate levels of English proficiency, and there were no beginner or advanced-level EFL learners, so it was not possible to make a comparison between the three. In the future, similar experimental participants should include advanced-level EFL learners so that comparisons can be made between the three, leading to more experimental sources and conclusions.

Acknowledgements

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