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Dr. Rita Szaszko: Students' reflections on online intercultural encounters during educational processes

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Abstract: At present, students can experience a wide range of intercultural encounters by exploiting various online opportunities. In higher education, different educational contexts also lend themselves to developing intercultural competencies via virtual intercultural contacts involving teachers and students. There is research evidence that intercultural competence development can enhance the participants' educational processes if implemented with appropriate methodological tools in an adequate framework (Pegrum, 2008). Consequently, it is regarded as a relevant aim to gain insights into the potential of online intercultural encounters on various online platforms in university contexts. The goal of the present qualitative interview study was to explore students' experiences with various manifestations of virtual intercultural encounters within the framework of their higher education studies in and out of class. Qualitative data was gathered via a semi-structured interview protocol, and the investigation was conducted with 15 university students who were specializing in teacher training. The results of the content analysis revealed that the participants experienced a positive inner drive and favorable attitudes towards various forms of online intercultural encounters involving both interpersonal (e.g., online live face-to-face communication) and non-inter-personal ones (e.g., watching films in the target language). Furthermore, it was found that using the camera during interpersonal encounters is a controversial issue for the participants.

Keywords: online, intercultural contact, university students

1. Introduction

Creative and stimulating learning environments have long been regarded as key elements of successful motivating educational processes. Furthermore, in contemporary educational contexts, particularly in higher education, internationalization (also referred to as comparative, global, multicultural, transnational, borderless, or cross-border education with slightly different connotations, Knight, 2004) has emerged as an advantageous component that is proposed to be exploited in various educational contexts. The higher education internationalization principles of the European Union (European Commission, 2016) and different manifestations of international mobility among teachers and students, along with various globalization processes (Bialystok & Cummins, 1991), have resulted in the increased relevance and priority of intercultural knowledge and competencies. Enhancing intercultural contacts/encounters and related 21st-century skills can be implemented by exploiting online opportunities inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, the rapid advance of info-communication technologies (ICT) along with the importance of the pedagogical aspects of digital environments (Molnár, 2020) as well as the emergence of digital remote education in 2020-2021 can be regarded as stimulating alternatives and challenges for both teachers and students (Anthonysamy, 2022; Chiu, Lin & Lonka, 2021; N. Kollár, 2021). Consequently, it is regarded relevant to gain insights into the nature of university students' online intercultural contacts. The aim is to explore what direct and indirect intercultural encounters the students experience; that is, what students' perceptions can be detected as related to their virtual intercultural encounters within the framework of their higher education studies in and out of class.

2. Theoretical background

The Council of Europe (2016) set it as a primary objective to develop university students' global and intercultural competencies (along with many others). Global competence constitutes various skills (analytical and critical thinking, empathy and flexibility, ability to interact effectively in situations of cooperation and conflict-resolution),

knowledge and understanding (knowledge and critical understanding of global issues, history, politics, etc.), intercultural communication and the psychological concept of self, attitudes (openness toward and respect of people coming from other cultures, global-mindedness, tolerance, and responsibility), and values (accepting human dignity, cultural diversity and principles of democracy and equality as fundamental values).

The conceptualization of intercultural contact can be approached from different perspectives. One approach is that it is limited to face-to-face communication (Gudykunst, 2002), and intercultural contact is seen as the communication between individuals of different nations/ethnicgroups/cultures (Sousa, Goncalves, & Santos, 2019). A broader definition is that intercultural contact is any encounter between two foreign cultures. More precisely, intercultural contact is: a) direct spoken or written exposure to a person who is a member of an L2 speaking community (direct/interpersonal contact), b) indirect encounter with the target culture and language through influential others and via cultural products (e.g., books, websites) (indirect/non-interpersonal contact) (Szaszko, 2010). Recent intercultural contact research also emphasizes the interrelated nature of direct and indirect intercultural encounters (Vezzali et al., 2017), which can be done both off- and online. In school contexts, online indirect intercultural contacts can be manifested, e.g., via films – on YouTube and other appropriate online platforms – selected for educational purposes (Roell, 2010), which can enhance students' foreign language (FL) learning motivation and intercultural competence development simultaneously (Pegrum, 2008). Along with linguistic development in FL teaching and learning processes, the European Commission (2016) also emphasizes the importance of multi-lingual competence, cultural awareness, and expression (Kormos & Csizér, 2007) involving creativity as a transversal skill.

Students have many opportunities to experience various forms of online intercultural encounters. For instance, YouTube has a beneficial nature that can enhance the accessibility and quality of teaching, as through this technology, more students can be reached, and their motivation can be enhanced (Wilkes & Pearce, 2011). Miller (2016) emphasized that the most striking function of YouTube videos lies in their representational applications that provide students with images, for example, showing new stories, conducting interviews, and documentary films. YouTube can be regarded as the primary source for educational videos online, but other resources are available. For example, teachers can use the free access -only educational content TeacherTube, which also offers a library of audio and photo content. Kahoot or Mentimeter serve as further examples, which can be exploited for educational purposes in many ways, e.g., for quizzes, surveys, and various types of interactive tasks. In sum, digital education has multiple benefits for students as they can use various tools, platforms, and sites with online tasks, and they can communicate with their peers and teachers online (Bernhardt, Furcsa, Sinka & Szaszko 2021).

3. The interview study

3.1. Method

The participants of the focus-group interview study, 15 university students specializing in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at primary school (from grades 1 to 6), were selected by purposive sampling. These female students aged 21-25 have experience in various forms of online education and in different contexts: remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic, e-learning courses, and online sessions, including international virtually extended (VE) courses implemented both in and out of class (typically in their homes). Their command of English was evaluated as ranging between B2-C1 (Council of Europe, CERF, 2001). The data was gathered by applying a 15-item semi-structured interview protocol to elicit data via three focus-group interviews. The interviews were conducted during 2022 and 2023, and the data procession was done using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 2005) to detect the emerging influential elements of online intercultural encounters as perceived by the participants.

3.2. Results and discussion

The findings of the content analysis show that the students' virtual intercultural contacts are set in and out of class with four emerging main patterns: 1) context, 2) online camera usage, 3) timemanagement, and 4) technical issues (Figure 1).

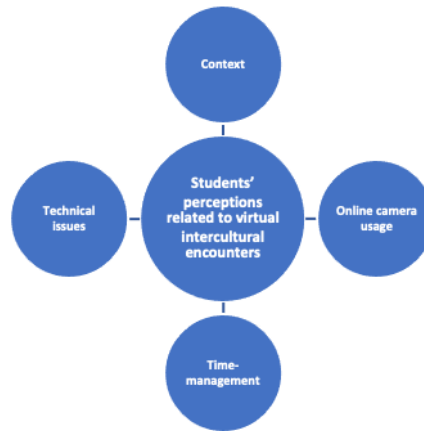


Figure 1 The four main patterns of students' perceptions related to their virtual intercultural contacts

The focus group interview data identified a group atmosphere, a certain level of camera usage anxiety, strict time management, and screeching sound technical issues regarding virtual intercultural contacts for educational purposes outside the classroom.

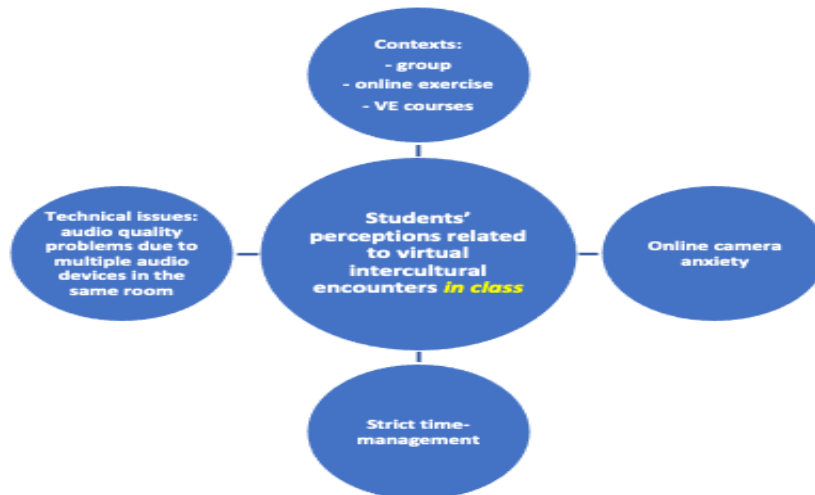


Figure 2 Students' perceptions related to their virtual intercultural contacts in a classroom context

Figure 2 shows that regarding the participants' perceptions and experiences related to their online intercultural contacts, it was detected that the student's perceptions of a particular intercultural encounter are dependent on what type of in-class situation it occurs: during an online activity or an international VE course session with frontal, individual work, pair-work when the students go online and interact with students from another country while being in their physical classroom. In-class online activities imply indirect intercultural contacts, e.g., Kahoot, Mentimeter, watching a topic-relevant online video (YouTube) of film, reading short supplementary materials (articles, reviews, stories, pieces of literature, descriptions of sights, etc.) as listed by the participants. VE courses may be fully online or in a blended format; however, the participants experimented merely with purely online VE sessions. These courses can connect university student groups located in two or more cultural environments or countries. These courses can provide opportunities for students to expand their horizons, improve their intercultural competencies and awareness, and get exposure to direct interpersonal encounters (COIL Consulting, 2023). Furthermore, the content analysis also revealed that online camera usage is a controversial issue for students as some of them switch them on at ease regardless of the fact that they talk to their teachers, peers, or foreigners, while for others, it is a source of anxiety. Some students even refuse to use it for many reasons, mainly security and self-esteem issues, or it is a sign of disengagement (Schwencks & Pryor, 2021). During the interviews, it was also detected

that the time management of virtual intercultural encounters is stricter in class than in home environments. The data revealed that regarding online videos (e.g., YouTube), students' optimal concentration span is 6-7 minutes maximum. Furthermore, watching time-consuming full films online in the target language is welcome by the students but not regularly. Watching films and doing related online tasks are good options, and they can generate meaningful in-class discussions with many intercultural elements and topics (empathy, intercultural conflict, stereotypes, acculturation, etc.) depending on the film. Finally, technical issues can occur during in-class virtual activities due to a lack of proper Wi-Fi signals. Also, one can hear a screeching sound or echo during a video or audio call when several people go online with multiple devices in the same room without using headphones or speakerphones and do not mute their audio when not speaking.

In terms of education processes related online intercultural contacts outside the classroom, a more flexible context, camera usage and time management as well as two types of technical issues were mentioned by the participants.



Figure 3 Students' perceptions related to their virtual intercultural contacts out-of-classroom context

Out-of-class context means online presence in the participants' homes when they are not in the same classroom with their peers and teacher on campus. Similar to classroom work, students can do various online tasks (interactive and non-interactive) and can have international VE online sessions. When doing virtual exercises involving reading and/or writing, students can manage their schedule, which means more flexibility and freedom for them. While all the students have mobile phones and some form of Internet access in their homes, from a technical point of view, the challenges are mainly a lack of proper devices (e.g., laptop or computer) and the lack of **adequate** space where the student can work separately. A VE meeting from home can mean a one-to-one call on an online platform (Zoom, Microsoft Teams), a small group call, or a whole class call. Camera usage anxiety emerges to a lesser extent as the students have less pressure to switch it on if they feel uncomfortable with the online camera on. Concerning technical challenges, an overburdened Internet network in the student's home **and** the lack of the students' proper digital **competencies** of how to handle different virtual platforms and tools are the **primary** sources of difficulties (Kisné Bernhardt, Furcsa, Sinka & Szaszko, 2021; Magyar et al., 2021; Magyar & Ambrus, in press).

4. Summary

The present descriptive study gained insights into the nature of student teachers' online intercultural encounters during their online learning activities both physically on campus and in -home settings. The qualitative data revealed that the participants were exposed to the target culture and speakers both in interpersonal (direct contact with native and non-native speakers of the target language) and non-interpersonal ways (indirect contact via cultural products, e.g., films, applications). Four relevant areas emerged in the data: context, camera usage anxiety, time management, and technical issues concerning both in and out -of -class situations. Overall, in-class online activities are stricter, while out-of-class online tasks and sessions provide more flexibility for the students. Based

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on this focus-group interview data, it can also be concluded that online intercultural encounters can have favorable effects on student's attitudes toward the target culture, language, and its speakers. Also, virtual intercultural contacts affect their intrinsic motivation for gaining further information about the target culture and seeking further opportunities for intercultural encounters, which is a great potential that teachers can rely on during their educational processes.

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