Bolstering Intercultural Communication among EFL Learners in Online Conversation Clubs

Fortalecimiento de la comunicación intercultural entre estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en clubes de conversación en línea.

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Abstract

Conversation clubs are excellent resources for practicing a new language. They bring together individuals with diverse perspectives and backgrounds to engage in enriching language activities and discussions that promote intercultural consciousness and intercultural skills. While previous studies have emphasized the importance of conversation clubs, our study shows explicitly how conversation clubs promote intercultural communicative competence by practicing the target language through an autonomy-based design. The study revolves around the question: How can intercultural competence be fostered among learners of English as a foreign language in online conversation clubs using an autonomy-based design?

We draw on a qualitative and descriptive case design following Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza (2008). Our descriptive case study involved conducting conversation club sessions with four students by adapting materials and plans and complying with the Program of Education in Foreign Language regulations. Recordings of the sessions, transcripts, and journal entries served as primary data. The findings indicated that conversation clubs fostered students' intercultural communication by 1) diving into cultural differences through multimodal materials, 2) recognizing and questioning cultural stereotypes, and 3) immersing in students' cultural worlds by referring to standard popular references. This study challenges the idea that foreign languages can be learned independently of culture. Interculturality emphasizes the relevance of a community in which ideas can be exchanged and opinions expressed. Conversation clubs are ideal spaces to foster interculturality and autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy, intercultural communicative competence, conversation clubs, practice, responsibility, reflection, culture.

Resumen

Los clubes de conversación son excelentes recursos para practicar un nuevo idioma ya que permiten integrar variedad de personas con múltiples perspectivas y contextos con el fin de promover la conciencia y habilidades interculturales por medio de actividades y discusiones enriquecedoras. Si bien previamente ya se ha explorado la importancia de los clubes de conversación, nuestro estudio demuestra explícitamente cómo los clubes de conversación promueven la competencia comunicativa intercultural mediante la práctica de la lengua meta siguiendo un enfoque de diseño de clubes basado en la autonomía. El estudio gira en torno a la pregunta ¿cómo se puede fomentar la competencia intercultural entre los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en los clubes de conversación en línea utilizando un diseño de clubes basado en la autonomía?

Este estudio se basa en un diseño de caso cualitativo y descriptivo de acuerdo con Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza (2008). Nuestro estudio de caso descriptivo consistió en llevar a cabo sesiones de clubes de conversación con cuatro estudiantes en las que se adaptaron materiales y planes que siguen los lineamientos del Programa de Educación en Lengua Extranjera. Como datos primarios se usaron las grabaciones de las sesiones, las transcripciones y las anotaciones en el diario de campo. Los resultados indicaron que los clubes de conversación fomentaron la comunicación intercultural de los estudiantes mediante 1) la inmersión en las diferencias

culturales a través de materiales multimodales, 2) el reconocimiento y el cuestionamiento de los estereotipos culturales, y 3) la inmersión en los mundos culturales de los estudiantes mediante referencias populares estándar.

Este estudio cuestiona la idea de que las lenguas extranjeras puedan aprenderse independientemente de la cultura. La interculturalidad hace hincapié en la importancia de una comunidad en la que se puedan intercambiar ideas y expresar opiniones. Los clubes de conversación son espacios ideales para fomentar la interculturalidad y la autonomía.

Palabras clave: Autonomía, competencia comunicativa intercultural, clubes de conversación, práctica, responsabilidad, reflexión, cultura.

Resumo

Os clubes de conversação são excelentes recursos para praticar um novo idioma, pois permitem integrar uma variedade de pessoas com múltiplas perspectivas e contextos, promovendo a conscientização e as habilidades interculturais por meio de atividades e discussões enriquecedoras. Embora a importância dos clubes de conversação já tenha sido previamente explorada, nosso estudo demonstra explicitamente como esses clubes promovem a competência comunicativa intercultural através da prática da língua-alvo, seguindo um enfoque de design baseado na autonomia. O estudo se concentra na seguinte pergunta: Como se pode fomentar a competência intercultural entre estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira em clubes de conversação online utilizando um design de clubes baseado na autonomia?

Este estudo se fundamenta em um desenho de caso qualitativo e descritivo, de acordo com Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza (2008). Nosso estudo de caso descritivo consistiu em conduzir sessões de clubes de conversação com quatro estudantes, nas quais materiais e planos foram adaptados de acordo com as diretrizes do Programa de Educação em Língua Estrangeira. Como dados primários, utilizamos gravações das sessões, transcrições e anotações de um diário de campo. Os resultados indicaram que os clubes de conversação fomentaram a comunicação intercultural dos estudantes por meio de: 1) imersão nas diferenças culturais através de materiais multimodais; 2) reconhecimento e questionamento de estereótipos culturais; e 3) imersão nos mundos culturais dos estudantes mediante referências populares padrão.

Este estudo questiona a ideia de que línguas estrangeiras podem ser aprendidas independentemente da cultura. A interculturalidade enfatiza a importância de uma comunidade onde seja possível trocar ideias e expressar opiniões. Os clubes de conversação são espaços ideais para promover a interculturalidade e a autonomia.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia, competência comunicativa intercultural, clubes de conversação, prática, responsabilidade, reflexão, cultura.

I n current globalized times, integrating intercultural Communication (IC) into language teaching is of paramount importance. As Lázár (2003) states, foreign language teaching should focus on intercultural awareness and intercultural skills of discovering the other for language learners to become interculturally competent in an increasingly globalized world. Intercultural communication in foreign language teaching is a growing movement that emphasizes the need for language educators to recognize and critically address the complexity of dealing with cultural contexts. In foreign language teaching, conversation clubs have provided opportunities and spaces for EFL learners who want to communicate better and practice the language. These clubs have been encouraged in academic environments such as universities, language institutes, and international settings.

The present article is based on an undergraduate research project that systematized four months of academic and professional experience of a tutor who led conversation clubs remotely (Ávila-Ávila, 2023) with upper intermediate EFL college students. The conversation clubs revolved around international and local topics. As part of the Strengthening Foreign Language as an Institutional Commitment to Curricular Internationalization project, the National University of Colombia opened different voluntary practice spaces for students of different curricular programs. This article shows that conversation clubs can be implemented so that student participants can develop their intercultural communication competence and autonomy. The study followed a qualitative case study design.

Since the 2000's foreign language teaching scholars such as Byram (2008), Hoff (2020), and Fantini (2020) have supported the integration of cultural aspects in language teaching. In Colombia, intercultural communication has been studied from critical, decolonial pedagogies that integrate diverse worldviews (Gutiérrez, 2022; Fernández-Benavides & Castillo-Palacios, 2023; Holmes & Pena-Dix, 2022; Álvarez-Valencia & Miranda, 2022). Most studies on IC come from face-to-face and formal learning environments. There is a need for studies that use intercultural communication in informal online learning spaces. Therefore, with this research, we seek to explore the potential of integrating IC into an online conversation club at the college level. This article revolves around the question: How can intercultural competence be fostered among learners of English as a foreign language in online conversation clubs using an autonomy-based design?

This article is organized as follows: the first section explains the background of studies on interculturality in national and international contexts. The second section presents the primary constructs and theories on autonomy in foreign language learning and the basis of conversation clubs. The third section describes the research design and data collection instruments. Finally, the fourth section illustrates the qualitative analysis, which corresponds to the findings according to Holliday (2007).

Theoretical Framework

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

In the field of foreign language education, Byram (2009) proposed that "teachers should plan their teaching to include objectives, materials, and methods that develop the specific elements of intercultural competence (...). Teachers of language need to become teachers of language and culture" (p. 331). In this vein, students develop the abilities to discover the world around them, discover themselves in a globalized world, establish connections between that global diversity and their local reality, adopt attitudes, gain skills to be citizens of the world through versatility, empathy, curiosity, and respect for diversity.   Huber and Reynolds (2014) defined ICC as "a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills applied through action" (p. 16) that allows learners to acknowledge other cultural affiliations, interact appropriately, and build relationships with people from those affiliations. Huber and Reynolds (2014) stated four key components in ICC: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions. Attitudes should embrace openness to various cultures and a willingness to question norms shaped by one's cultural background. Knowledge involves grasping a variety of beliefs and customs, identifying cultural biases and assumptions, and understanding the role language plays in societal communication. Skills include the capacity to discover, interpret, comprehend, and analyze both personal and others' cultural settings and experiences. Lastly, actions aim to break down stereotypes, oppose discrimination, mediate conflicts, promote positive attitudes, and work with culturally diverse groups. Therefore, language learning becomes a primary tool for communicating with individuals from diverse social and cultural contexts since language cannot exist in isolation as it reflects worldviews, belief systems, and cultural nuances. Thus, learners not only develop their linguistic proficiency, engage in cultural understanding, proficiency but engage in a process of cultural understanding and develop other values such as empathy, respect, and cooperation, among others. Additionally, ICC learners recognize different communication styles, cultural references, social norms, and the relativity of their cultural perspectives.

When teaching, foreign language teachers and students experience the predominance of surface or visible culture in textbooks. This approach includes addressing culture from general aspects such as tourist sites, vacations, historical events, and food. In contrast, deep culture, or invisible culture, "can be understood as those complex meanings related to the norms, worldviews, beliefs, values, and ideologies that, in general terms, are shared by a group or community" (Hinkel, 2001, as cited in Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018, p. 188). This means that, according to a more critical take of ICC framework, a broad range of resources and texts that integrate information at a global level must transcend surface approaches to instruct students in concepts such as "democratic values, human rights, and respecting "difference' in a world that is still intolerant and prejudiced" (Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018, p. 190).

Recent perspectives emphasize the need for updating ICC models to reflect current educational needs, such as questioning students' motivations and biases towards diverse cultures (Hoff, 2020). This involves novel approaches to identity and language-culture connections and adapting educational practices to enhance learning (Hoff, 2020). Furthermore, integrating ICC is crucial for the internationalization of higher education (Maíz-Arévalo & Orduna-Nocito, 2021). Fantini (2020) also underscores the importance of developing ICC for diversity and internationalization. Thus, preparing students for a globalized world requires incorporating international curricula, opportunities for cultural exchange, and intercultural skill development. At the national level, recent studies on intercultural approaches in ELT are flourishing, taking up critical stances. Fernández-Benavides & Castillo-Palacios (2023) highlight the role of culture in shaping identities and behaviors. Gutiérrez (2022) advocates for a critical, intercultural pedagogy to understand diverse identities and mindsets in the classroom. Similarly, Holmes & Pena-Dix (2022) and Álvarez-Valencia & Miranda (2022) emphasize a decolonial approach to intercultural communicative competence, integrating indigenous worldviews and multilingual practices in higher education settings. Jaramillo-Jaramillo (2024) discusses the importance of articulating interculturality in policies such as Colombia's National Bilingual Program, suggesting that ICC enhances second/foreign language teaching by helping students navigate bi-multilingual interactions.

Based on the discussion above, in this study, ICC is understood as a multifaceted set of skills that can be acquired and developed to mediate and interact effectively in diverse cultural contexts. This competence requires not only a specific linguistic proficiency but also the adoption of attitudes and actions, as well as the acquisition of knowledge and skills to understand and value cultural diversity. Furthermore, it is an essential element in educational practices and language acquisition for students to deal with the complexities of an interconnected world.

Conversation clubs in foreign language learning and teaching

Scholars have described communication as "a way of transferring messages from the addresser (the speaker/writer) to the addressee (the listener/reader)" (Soyunov et al., 2014, p.41) and, therefore, "dealing with the reality above, learning how to be a better communicator is important for all of us. Better communication means better understanding of us and others" (Ibid.). Conversation clubs provide opportunities and spaces for EFL learners who want to communicate better and practice the language. They are also tools that have been used over time in different contexts. Artists and activists, for example, organize sessions to widen social circles and discuss politics, cultural norms, and meaningful community issues. This kind of club has been common

in academic environments such as universities, language institutes, and international settings. (Malu & Smedley, 2016, p.11).

In the Colombian context, conversation clubs such as those conducted by Acevedo-Fuenmayor and Oviedo-Jaramillo (2023), through semi-structured interviews and recorded observations, showed that conversation roles are pivotal for student engagement, motivation, confidence, and oral fluency when learning and speaking English. Regardless of the context, an English club is a "group of people who meet, join, or act together to participate in an activity for a common purpose that has been structural, especially to learn the English language" (Hamadameen & Najim, 2020, p. 286).

According to Malu and Smedley (2016), in community-based English clubs, there are different roles: the club leader or facilitator and the club participants. The latter can have diverse backgrounds, educational levels, professions, and other beliefs, cultures, and perspectives. This creates a diverse group that enriches the conversations as much as possible. Furthermore, the conversation club leader must provide a safe, supportive, and respectful learning environment in which collaborative work is encouraged and activities are organized based on the interests of the participants.

Lastly, conversation clubs are seen as a valuable learning resource, as they allow for real connections to be made between participants' knowledge of the foreign language since "activities that provide opportunities for learners to communicate meaningfully with each other are more interesting, enjoyable, and memorable. In the long run, such activities have more of an impact on enhancing speech intelligibility" (Nunan, 2003b, p. 116). Moreover, considering that it has been found that some learners feel that it was difficult to speak English because "they did not have ideas to express because they did not think deeply or critically" (Rahmawati, 2021, p. 212), conversation clubs are a tool to encourage critical thinking, inspiring participants to arrange their ideas in a coherent and logical order to convey values in a fluent way.

Setting

This study was conducted during the weekly online conversation clubs in the second semester of 2023 in the framework of a virtual internship. The internship responded to the strengthening strategy of the *Programa de Formación en Lengua Extranjera* [Foreign Language Training Program] PFLE as proposed by Castaño (2023) at Universidad Nacional de Colombia. In the 2nd semester of 2023, 10 seniors from the Philology and Languages - English undergraduate program interned as language tutors. This was the pilot to support the English courses offered remotely in the regional branches of La Paz, Palmira, and Medellín. Tutors taught remotely from Bogota, and their students who participated were enrolled in the National University. Tutors provided students with a safe academic environment to implement strategies, materials, methodologies,

and pedagogical practices to guide and facilitate the learning process. To this end, the tutor proposed an action plan consisting of four weekly practice sessions and six tutoring sessions. In the researcher's case, the practice sessions were distributed in two conversation clubs and two workshops. The conversation clubs conveyed the tutor's professional and academic background and their students' interests.

Sampling and participants

Patton (2002) explains that purposeful sampling is a technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select relevant cases for the most efficient use of limited resources. This study used purposeful sampling as four National University of Colombia students from the Medellín branch voluntarily participated in the online conversation clubs. The tutor reached out to students who participated and attended all sessions. They filled in a consent form and agreed to participate in the study. They also provided a pseudonym to use in the transcripts. The students' ages ranged from 19 to 24. Three of them lived in the metropolitan area of Medellín, and one lived in the municipality of Rionegro. Regarding their academic background, the students were in the School of Engineering. In terms of their foreign language training process, only one student had an advanced English level (C1) and made constant use of the language because he worked remotely for a company based in the United States. In relation to motivational factors, the other three students were enrolled in the language program offered by the University as they wanted to find better job opportunities.

The tutor was also a researcher. She was not only in charge of planning, running, and directing conversation clubs within the framework of an online internship but also subsequently conducted an analysis of intercultural components and reflected upon her own perspectives and experience. These functions represent a significant advantage as they allow us to connect the planning and execution phases of the online sessions.

Tutor's positionality: At the time of the study, the tutor was a student majoring in Languages. She has experience teaching abroad in Germany, as a tutor in EFL programs and currently teaches English to children, adolescents, and adults. Her interest in interculturality stems from her own international experiences, where she witnessed firsthand the importance of this aspect when learning a language and discussing her roots and background in multicultural contexts.

Tutor's thesis advisor: The advisor was a Colombian University-based scholar with international experience. Before becoming the advisor of the tutor researcher, she lived in North America for eight years. She helped frame the theoretical and methodological tenets of the research study with data organization, analysis and writing of the research study.

Pedagogical design

The tutor planned the conversation clubs drawing on the pedagogical philosophy of the Program: autonomy. She also used multimodality (Halliday, 1978; Tardy, 2005; Van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress, 2010) and intercultural communication in her pedagogical design. The tutor and her thesis advisor also gathered planning and instructional material. For the pedagogical design, the tutor developed lesson plans using Canva, first brainstorming topics of interest and integrating a learning strategy to meet the communicative objectives of the session. Furthermore, the tutor curated authentic materials. The materials were not adapted but were used as an input or introduction to the topic we talked about. Among the materials, we had informative material (news), and material from the internet (videos, shorts, websites). Finally, the pedagogical planning followed the internship guidelines and principles for autonomy as established by the Language Program PFLE pedagogical vision.

First, we addressed how students can become dependent on their teachers for the development of academic activities. This dependence may arise due to the lack of attention to fundamental pillars of autonomy, such as the heterogeneous approach to learning objectives. Within its different definitions, autonomy can be understood as the "capacity to think on one's own, to organize, decide, and propose" (Lagos-Bejarano & Ruíz-Granados, 2007, p. 11).

Learner autonomy is defined as "the ability to take care of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3) and it appeals to the student's responsibility and critical reflection on their learning process. A responsible learner embraces "the idea that their efforts are crucial to progress in learning and behave accordingly" (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p.3). David Nunan (2003a) lists nine steps to gain autonomy in language learning: encouraging the use of the second language outside the classroom, setting specific learning objectives, promoting decision-making, and allowing students to participate actively when planning and leading classes. Meanwhile, teachers tailor content, topics, and activities to the student's needs and context.

The following is an example of how an autonomy-based design was put into practice by planning and negotiation of learning objectives.

Figure 1. Slide to introduce the objectives of the session

The component of setting and negotiating learning objectives has been reflected in the conversation clubs' planning and development. Regarding the learning objectives, Nunan points out that, as a first step towards autonomy, one way to "give students a voice is to make the objectives of the teaching clear to them; in this way, making the objectives of each session explicitly known and involving students actively in the process, rather than simply informing them" (2003a, p. 196). In the case of the practice spaces, titles and images related to the session's theme were used so that students could draw their own conclusions about each club's theme and its purposes.

Research Design

Given the nature of this study, we followed a qualitative approach. Drawing on qualitative descriptive case study designs according to Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza (2008) and Yin (1984), this study explored how learners of English can foster intercultural competence through practicing a foreign language in virtual conversation club spaces using an autonomy-based design. Cohen et al. (2017) note that this type of research provides clear, practical examples and focuses on understanding individual or group perceptions of events. Likewise, the tutor was a participant observant as she assumed the role of conversation club leader and researcher. This study also follows the interpretivist tradition, in which the research aims to comprehend participants' experiences within their contexts rather than achieve generalizable results.

Data Collection

The tutor-researcher collected qualitative data through the following instruments: the tutor's journal, session transcriptions, lesson plans, and instructional materials. After running the conversational clubs, the tutor reflected upon each session and organized her notes and quotes from participants' comments into categories. These categories were based on the linguistic, communicative, and attitudinal components of the participants of these spaces. All sessions were video-recorded and transcribed. Students signed a consent to record the session and were informed about the academic purposes of the recording under Act 1266 of 2008. Once each session was over, the tutor used Whisper AI, an automatic speech recognition (ASR) system, to transcribe the audio. Finally, post-editing was carried out. Students' words were taken as provided. Data collection instruments are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Data collection instruments

Data collected	- Transcriptions of conversation clubs supported by AI (240 mins)
	- Instructional materials
	- Lesson plans (four)
	- Tutor- researcher journal
	- Data Analysis

For the data analysis, we followed Holliday's (2007) perspectives on qualitative analysis and Stranger- Johannessen & Norton's (2017) proposal on retroductive coding. This type of coding involves combining priori codes based on theory and literature and inductive codes derived from reading the data collected. Raw data were gathered from the data collection instruments, prioritizing those referencing intercultural communication and providing various details of the practice session. We then proceeded with the data by color coding according to the emerging codes from theoretical framing and inductive reading. Once we, the researcher and the supervisor, coded the data, we interpreted, triangulated, and developed the theoretical coding for each category. Finally, the researcher and her supervisor collaboratively wrote the argument for each category (Holliday, 2007).

Findings

In this section, we present the findings and discussion emerging from the conversation club spaces in response to the research question: how can intercultural competence be fostered among learners of English as a foreign language in an online conversation club space using an autonomy-based design?

*Table 2.* Ways to foster Intercultural Competence in conversation clubs

Research question	Categories
How can intercultural competence be fostered among learners of English as a foreign language in an online conversation club space using an autonomy-based design?	- Diving into cultural differences through multimodal materials - Recognizing and questioning local stereotypes - Immersing in students' cultural worlds

Diving into cultural differences through multimodal materials

During the practice session, students addressed their intercultural communicative competence by exploring other cultures and dealing with aspects related to both visible and invisible cultures.

In the excerpt, the tutor prompts students to recognize cultural assets from a European country. The tutor gives initial context on a news report and inquiries into the participant's prior knowledge of certain countries. In the following excerpt from conversation club number 4 this is illustrated.

Figure 2. Slide introducing cultural differences
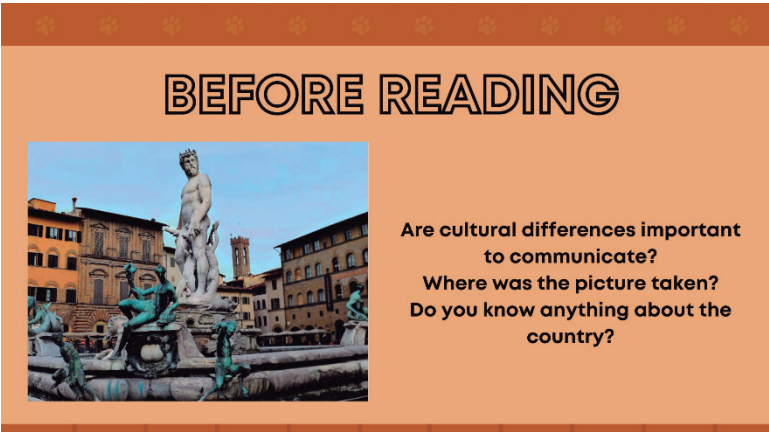
Tutor: So, first of all, where do you think the picture was taken?

Mariano: Maybe Greece or Italy. (...)

Tutor: Ok. And about Italy, what do you know about Italy?

Mariano: That they eat a lot of pasta. The language is very, very beautiful. They are so tall. Italian music is good also.

Tutor: Do you know any band from Italy?

Mariano: No, but I just, I have a song (sings the song)

Tutor: Yeah! I know that song! Ok. Do you know anything about their traditions, their behaviors?

Mariano: Well, in general, people say that European, they smell bad because they don't take showers. But that's something that I don't know. It's just general.

(...)

Tutor: Ok. Any other ideas about their behaviors, traditions, or ways of thinking?

Mariano: Yeah, well, it's all that I know. I'm not sure. I would say Germany.

Tutor: Why?

Mariano: The architecture looks like Germany.

Tutor: What do you know about these countries? For example, about Germany.

Mariano: About Germany, I know that people there are a little bit brava.

Tutor: Angry (...) Maybe some other things about politics. Like what?

Mariano: Yeah, maybe like they were very dependent from Russia two years ago. They had a little bit sympathy I would say to Russia, especially the east part of Germany. They discriminate each other like we discriminate here in Colombia.

Tutor: Ok, Like nowadays? Currently?

Mariano: Yeah, currently. They discriminate against each other based on the place that they were born.

(Transcription Conversation Club 4, October 2023)

The tutor used multimodal materials in two moments: during the initial activity to provide enough authentic input and in the main communicative activity. Understanding material authenticity considering Roberts & Cooke's (2009) stance "unlike invented materials, authentic materials draw on language data collected in real-life context (p. 625). As of conversation clubs, authentic material includes different

formats to demonstrate English use outside formal learning contexts. In this case, those formats (e.g., short videos, opinions, and news shared through social networks, etc.) were shown. The previous example uses a DW Instagram post on news about tourist misbehavior in Italy. The tutor designed an activity taking the report as it was produced for a general audience, not designed specifically for language learners.

Prompting conversations about other cultures also requires the use of multimodal materials. Rather than only relying on linguistic forms, multimodality theory focuses on semiotics. These are "the actions, materials, and artifacts we use for communicative purposes" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 285). Gestures, voice, spatial orientation, and our use of digital technological devices are examples. Expanding this definition, Kress (2010) highlights that semiotic resources are "socially made and therefore carry the discernible regularities of social occasions, events and hence a certain stability; they are never fixed, let alone rigidly fixed" (p. 9). In the example, the tutor decided to ask questions about the conversation topic and presented additional tools such as images, keywords, and timelines.

In the excerpt, the student provided only minimal information about other countries. Some recalled food or common prejudices from their perspective, such as Europeans smelling bad or "I know that people [in Germany] there are a little bit brava." Multimodality promises to be practical tools for prompting these conversations about other cultures: in the conversation club, for example, the participant carried out exploration by using real-life media resources. This prevents from solely relying on personal assumptions and encourages a deeper, nuanced understanding of cultural differences through materials that showcase varied cultural contexts, behaviors, and values.

Figure 3. Slide introducing communicative activities with multimodal materials

Recognizing and questioning local stereotypes

The tutor fostered intercultural communication with their students by getting to know them and asking about their hometown. In the excerpt below, a student explained where they lived. This was important as the tutor was in a different location. The following excerpt from Conversation Club number 1 provides additional context.

> Gabriel: I live in Medellín. Well, not in Medellín. It is the city where their airport is located and its town, out of the metropolitan area, but just to make things easier, I would say, I will say that it's Medellín. It's the city where everything blooms.
>
> (...)
>
> Tutor: Ok. Question. So, you don't live in the city, I mean, in Medellín but like in the countryside? Or like out of the metropolitan area but it is urban, it has big edifications, or…
>
> Gabriel: Ok, yeah, I do not – Okay, yeah, so I don't know if you've ever traveled in Medellín.
>
> Tutor: Never, no, never.
>
> Gabriel: You gotta get here. Well, it has a metropolitan area. We called it Área Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá. It's vast variety of cities, but that are connected by the metro actually, but the airport, like the international airport is not located in the city nor metropolitan area, is out of those places and it is in a, I would say it's a mid-developed city that is called Rionegro. And we have and we have a huge tunnel that is a like a masterpiece of the engineering work here in Colombia that connects the airport, my city to Medellín and it's like 20 minutes.

(Transcription Conversation Club 1, September 2023)

This interaction prepared the student to engage in a target language conversation with people who may share their background.

The excerpts below illustrate another example of how going local supports intercultural communication. In this session, the tutor provided background about pet peeves and their relationship with cultural norms. For example, in some cultures, lateness is perceived as ruder than in others. After introducing the notion of pet peeves, the tutor asked participants to address pet peeves in Colombia.

Figure 4. Slide about pet-peeves

Figure 5. Questions about participants' local context

In response to the prompts above, the student elaborated a personal example of how he would apply the concept of pet peeves from his perspective as a Colombian from Antioquia, colloquially known as a paisa. The tutor laughed about this example in the beginning, but also asked the student to use the target language to develop his idea on pet peeves. To further clarify, the term rolos was originally used to describe people living in Bogotá who moved from other parts of the country. Now, it is now used to refer to people from Bogotá.

> Dante: Usually here, people say that rolos are boring and the way that rolos talks could be annoying because rolos talk like they were asking something.

The tutor engaged in further dialogue to share the perspective of *rolos* as she herself identifies as *rola*.

> Tutor: Yeah, it's true, yeah, for rolos most of the things, may -could be effective and in the other way it's the same I would say. Regarding the rolo-and-paisa rivalry I agree, I think we're constantly competing but that's why I asked you for more examples with specific actions that we find annoying.

In this exchange, we can see how the student freely expressed his preconceived ideas about how people from Bogota speak. In further elaboration, the tutor does not tackle this preconception explicitly but presents her perspective and negotiates a middle ground to make the student understand the tutor's perspective. By engaging in dialogue, the student and teacher transcend the shallow belief about "*rolos*' way of speaking being annoying". For the tutor, this might have stemmed from the historic competition between the two largest and wealthiest regions in Colombia.

In the following conversation club session, Dante even showed a deeper reflection on how people, not only in Colombia but in other parts of the world, find annoying certain ways of speaking. In the session, Dante was comparing his example of aversion to the Spanish variety of Bogotá with examples from other parts of the world.

> Dante: Okay, so maybe I'm not sure, maybe in United States to speak Spanish in some places in United States is not okay that that could be I think that's more racism -that is more racism but what else France yeah, they do not like it if you do not speak French. Yeah, I think that is more racism, but what else? in our country, yeah, I will say.

Dante's further look into international comparisons made him find the link between rejecting ways of speaking and racism. For him, this was clear in the case of rejecting the use of Spanish in the US, which he openly labeled as racism. After recalling the situation of some people being rejected or not supported if they traveled to France and did not speak French. He finally realized that linguistic discrimination as a form of covered racism also happens in Colombia. Participating in the conversation clubs and dialogue to understand different perspectives helped Dante dig deeper into his initial aversion to the way people different than him speak. His understanding of the relationship between rejecting ways of speaking and discrimination became clearer after these discussions.

In Dante's experience, as described above, regional differences and rivalry are elaborated and negotiated through dialogue. In this sense, we can assert that opening dialogical spaces to address intercultural communication in foreign languages can be nurtured by looking deeper into students' and teachers' normalized cultural and linguistic preconceptions. Instead of directly attacking these preconceived ideas

or imposing the tutor's or politically correct ones, the tutor and student engaged in dialogue to actively listen to multiple perspectives. The excerpts above shed some light on how dialogue can promote reflection and further analysis of the roots of cultural beliefs. Even at a small scale, remote online conversation clubs allow for the exchange of cultural perspectives. A next step to take, from a critical intercultural stance, is going deeper by tackling and debunking these assumptions more explicitly.

Immersing in students' cultural worlds

Popular cultural references constituted an essential component of the conversation clubs. Some of them were introduced by students themselves, as in the following example, where Dante described the types of music he listens to: "I can come from Megadeth, and then I could be listening to 'Lover' by Taylor Swift".

The tutor's materials conveyed another example of popular culture in the conversation clubs. In the example below, the tutor initiates the conversation club by referencing Tinder, the mobile app. The students start discussing the use of these applications and what they think about them. Then, students create their own Tinder-like profiles using the target language.

Figure 6. Slide on students' cultural worlds

In this case, intercultural communication transcends cultures that are far away and touches on the ways of self-representation; as Cerón (2009) contends, intercultural communication is "the capacity developed by the second language learner to analyze and understand personalities and thinking of people from a place other than their country of origin, comparing them with the realities of their own culture" (p. 310).

With the advent of modern technologies and ways of connecting, the tutor mentioned a media platform that students were familiar with as a topic for the conversation club. Rather than encouraging students to participate in this type of social practice, the tutor resorted to their previous knowledge on the topic as a source for speaking in the conversation clubs. Before the activity, students were surveyed and indicated that they had used the app. Both international culture and media and pop cultures were addressed to further connect with students' lives beyond academia. In these current times, intercultural communicative competence interacts with media and pop culture at one's fingertips through a mobile phone.

Conclusions

Conversation clubs boosted intercultural communication by exposing participants to diverse cultures, addressing local and international stereotypes, and integrating participants' cultural worlds and language practices meaningfully. In each session, perceptions of interculturality, culture, and even autonomy converged to facilitate foreign language learning. The tutor promoted questioning visible and invisible stereotypes, and participants were invited to develop their ideas and expand their knowledge of other societies by incorporating diverse multimodal materials in the sessions.

Participation in the conversation clubs led to discussions about the inherent socio-cultural nature of language. In this way, students recognized how intercultural communicative competence serves them in a globalized world and their local context. In addition, participants reflected on their intercultural interactions and recognized cultural biases inherent in their standpoints through ongoing conversations about participants' beliefs, prejudices, backgrounds, and daily lives.

We challenge the idea that foreign languages can be learned independently from culture. Foreign language learners need to become more familiar with intercultural communicative skills from the first stages of language learning, applying them to their own geographical and political context. Conversation clubs allowed participants to transcend their comfort zone by getting exposed to different social norms and points of view and questioning stereotypes.

Intercultural communication and conversation clubs emphasize the relevance of a community in which ideas can be exchanged and opinions expressed. We call for pedagogical practices that build communities that appreciate cultural diversity, empathy, respect for difference and foster long-term intercultural skills to fulfill the demands of a globalized world.

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