



Cultural identity construction and English as a lingua franca in online virtual exchange

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Abstract

This study explores how students perceive the construction of cultural identity in online intercultural encounters and the impact these perceptions may have on their relationship with English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). This paper presents findings from a mixed-methods study conducted with university students in Germany, France, Israel, and Spain, focusing on English language learning experiences within the context of a Virtual Exchange (VE) project. Results from qualitative data of (n=356) participants indicate considerable differences in how students perceive their roles in intercultural interactions, along with the benefits associated with ELF participation. The results moreover emphasise the importance of reflective practices and open discussions concerning identity construction and language use. The value of initiating dialogues and reflecting identity in the ELF classroom is discussed.

Keywords: *English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), identity construction, intercultural communication, Virtual Exchange (VE).*

1. Introduction

Cultural identity as a subdomain of social identity has yet to be explored in VE settings. A common assumption is that speakers in lingua franca conversations are “representatives of their individual mother cultures” (Meierkord, 2000, n.p.). However, it is not clear to what extent participants in VE projects perceive themselves as cultural ambassadors rather than as individuals. To answer the question *Who am I?*, individuals construct complex, multi-faceted, and shifting identities consisting of personal and social identity domains (Vignoles et al., 2011). The social identity domain is a broad concept encompassing cultural, national, regional, and other group affiliations and plays an important role in communication and social interaction (Byram, 2023). Social factors, such as an individual’s affiliations with a wide range of social groups based on, for instance, gender, social class, ethnicity, and language (e.g., Deaux, 2018; Kramsch, 2013), are a central aspect of identity construction. Therefore, the effect of VE projects on participants’ cultural identities poses a research interest.

Although people frequently regard themselves and others as distinct individuals, there are many situations in which they think, feel, and act primarily as members of a social group, and where collective concerns take precedence over individual differences (Ellemers, 2012). Social contexts that require collaboration, such as those created by VE projects, offer students the opportunity to construct, negotiate, explore, and reflect on their identity when collaborating with people from different linguacultural backgrounds.

VE projects that use ELF as the means of transcultural communication provide authentic communication opportunities on an equal footing (Hoffstaedter & Kohn, 2015) or a potentially more equal footing than in a Native-Speaker (NS)-Non-Native Speaker (NNS) constellation. Generally, learners in ELF communication appear to feel more confident and less concerned about making errors, as the emphasis is on communicating effectively (Nicolaou & Sevilla-Pavón, 2023). This paper reports on a mixed-methods study conducted with ELF students as part of a VE project and examines student perceptions of cultural identity construction and ELF.

2. Method

The study was conducted during a six-week mentored VE project in the spring of 2023. A total of 356 university students from Chile, Israel, France, Spain, and Germany participated in the VE, which was offered as part of students' regular English classes. The participants were enrolled in Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral programs at their respective universities, studying a range of courses (e.g. Business Studies and Software Engineering). The students' English proficiency ranged between A2 and C2. The groups were composed of three or four students on average. At the beginning of the project, the participants gave their consent to participate in the study. The participants then responded to an online survey containing demographic questions and a suite of validated questionnaires, e.g. the Cultural Intelligence Scale (Ang et al., 2007). After the VE, student perception of the VE experience was gauged using a post-project questionnaire that included open-ended questions about their cultural identity and relationship to English and ELF communities in general.

In total, there were 356 post-project questionnaire responses. In this study, we report on the qualitative analysis of open-ended questions from the post-intervention questionnaire based on a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim is to explore the following Research Questions (RQs):

- 1) To what extent do students who participate in a VE project using ELF feel they represent themselves as individuals rather than representatives of one or more cultures?
- 2) What were the students' perceptions of interacting with other non-native English speakers during a VE project?
- 3) In what way did the VE influence students' relationship with the English language?

3. Results

3.1. Results concerning RQ1

151 participants responded to RQ1, *Did you perceive yourself as an individual rather than a representative of one or more cultures?* Seven students who completed the questionnaire chose not to answer this question, which might indicate that they felt uncomfortable or found the question difficult. The distribution of participants' answers can be seen in Figure 1.

42% (n=63) of participants confirmed that they perceived themselves solely as individuals during the exchange. Several highlighted the uniqueness and diversity of individuals as the primary reason for their inability to represent the culture(s). The following statements provide insights into the students' reasoning behind their perspective:

- “Each person is unique, and I cannot be responsible for the whole culture” [P232].
- “I’m just an individual, so I cannot speak for a whole country” [P190].
- “Why should I represent 83 million others?” [P34].

Within a student group composed of at least two individuals from the same cultural background (e.g. two out of four students from Germany), an Israeli student noted the significance of individual differences between himself and another Israeli student:

- “I feel that I represented myself and my opinions only. Of course, I did talk about my country and religion, but mostly I emphasized my opinions. You can see the differences in thought between me and another Israeli participant; we are both Israeli students, and each has a different opinion and represents something different” [P145].

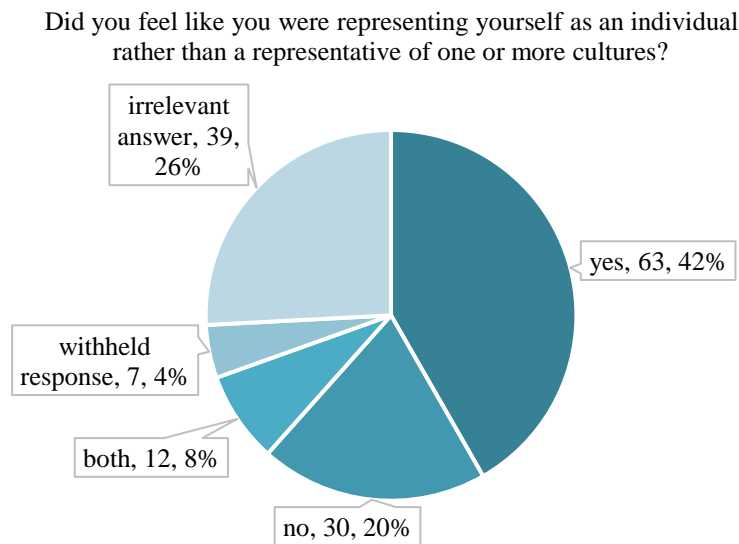


Figure 1. Distribution of answer codes to RQ1 (n=151).

Some students wanted to clearly indicate their differences or distance themselves from their culture(s):

- “I did explain why I couldn’t identify with certain stereotypes or where the difference is between the common behavior in my culture and my behavior” [P219].
- “I represented my values more than the values of our whole culture, as I see some things differently than other members of our culture” [P253].

20% (n=30) of students expressed a strong sense of cultural representation. Some students felt responsible for sharing valuable insights and knowledge about their culture(s):

- “[The exchange partners] only know us as representatives of our culture. And they aren’t able to know which of our behaviour is culture-related and which is individual” [P37].
- “They do not know a lot about my culture, so I have to explain it in the best possible way” [P219].
- “Me as a representative of my culture because my traditions and beliefs belong to my culture” [P358].
- “One student assumed that everyone in their group was representing their culture”
- “Everyone in my group understood himself as a representative; I hopped into my role” [P275].

A couple of multicultural students explicitly commented on representing or not being able to represent more than one culture:

- “I felt like I represented several cultures” [P171].
- “[I did not feel like a representative] because I don’t know everything about my two cultures” [P50].

8% (n=12) felt they represented both themselves and their culture. One student reasoned: “Both, because I am part of German culture and I grew up here, but of course, I am an individual person” [P233]. Another student felt it was contextual: “Both and depends on the situation” [P329]. P257 reflected: “In the meetings, I mixed my personal experiences and preferences with the general behaviour of German people. That is why sometimes I felt both like an individual and a representative.”

To see how cultural background may relate to feeling like a representative of an entire culture, the distribution of responses to the questions PP07 (“Did you feel like a representative of an entire culture when talking to your partner(s)?”) and BG01 (“Do you have a pluricultural background?”) were checked for interaction with a Pearson’s Chi-Square test in SPSS (version 29). The Chi-Square test results ($X^2(2,150)=1.71, p = .43$) indicated that BG01 and PP07 were statistically independent from one another. Consequently, cultural identity constellation (BG01) and feeling of cultural representation (PP07) did not interact.

3.2. Results concerning RQ2

153 participants responded to RQ2, *How did interacting with other non-native speakers of English change your view of people who don’t speak English as their first language?* The distribution of answers is illustrated in Figure 2.

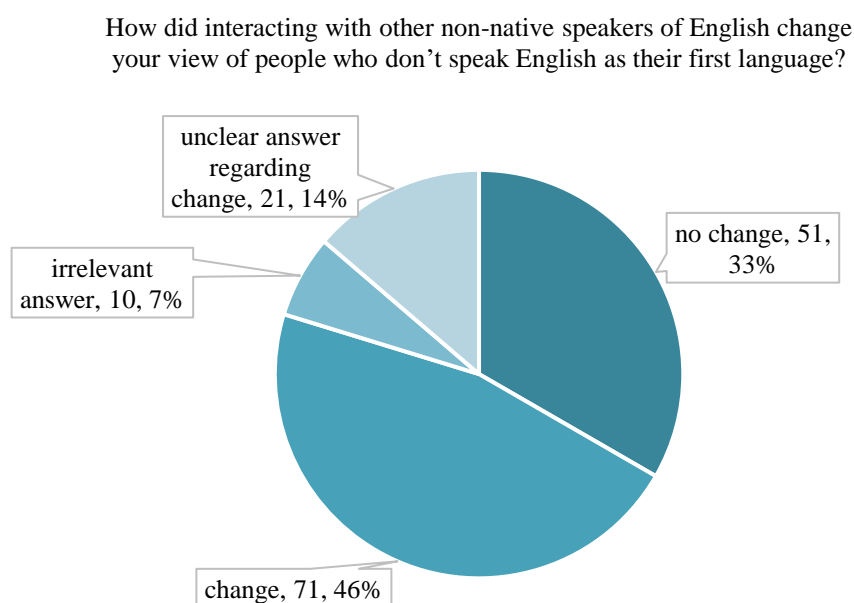


Figure 2. Distribution of answer codes to RQ2 (n=153).

Out of 153 participants, 33% (n=51) explicitly stated that there had been no change in their views on NNS. 9% (n=14) stated that they were already used to speaking to other NNS as a reason for not changing their views.

The data showed that students compared their proficiency among the whole group (e.g. “Level of their English was quite the same as ours” [P264]; “We Germans do speak better English than our counterparts from Spain” [P34]) or individually (e.g. “It’s good to know that it’s not only me having a problem with speaking English perfect fluently” [P191]; “They are not better in speaking than me” [P 289]).

46% of students’ responses to the question indicated a change in attitude, involving more awareness and acceptance of NNS. This is reflected in the following statements:

- “Understanding that they might have an accent or make grammar related mistakes (just being respectful and trying to help if someone misses a word)” [P219].
- “Pardon small mistakes” [P360].
- “It doesn’t matter as long as you are kind” [P37].
- “It’s ok to make mistakes” [P209].

One student reflected on the advantage of a multilingual approach: “We all got the same problems by learning the language. It’s easier to communicate if we mix the languages” [P49]. In the context of the ELF constellation, students mentioned increased motivation to improve their language skills (“Gave me the drive to improve my English so I won’t be misunderstood” [P344]) and lower anxiety (e.g. “You do not feel like you are under pressure” [P260]; “I felt more safe because I saw that people from other countries do not speak English perfectly” [P202]).

3.3. Results concerning RQ3

135 participants responded to RQ3, *In what way did the VE affect your relationship with English?*. 91 students (59%) described a more positive attitude towards English because of the VE, whereas 27% reported no change in their relationship with English. Only one student reported a more negative attitude towards English because of the VE. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the responses.

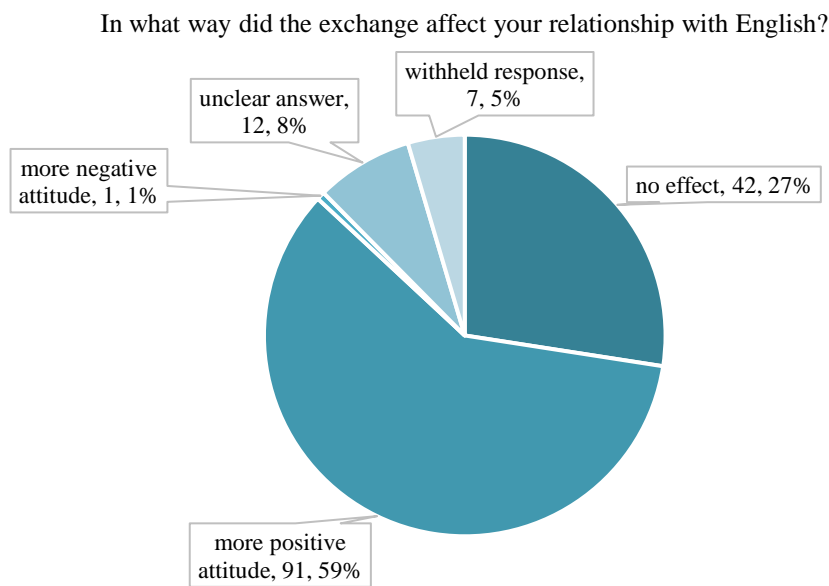


Figure 3. Distribution of answer codes to RQ3 (n=153).

54 students (35 %) explicitly commented that they felt more confident, comfortable, fluent, or safer because of the VE. Other students commented that the VE was useful in helping them realise that they need to enhance their English skills.

- “I realised that I need to work on my communication skills and vocabulary in discussions” [P186].
- “I recognized that English is important to communicate with other people I want to improve because it was sometimes not fluent” [P45].

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study explored students’ perceptions of ELF in a VE project and its impact on their (cultural) identity construction. The research findings for RQ1 demonstrated the complexity and diversity of the students’ cultural identities and identity attitudes in the VE setting. A possible reason for this range of perspectives could be the students’ cultural background (e.g. individualist vs collectivistic culture). This and other possible reasons should be explored in future VE research projects.

In answering RQ2, some students mentioned not speaking ‘perfect English’, implying an ideologically monolithic approach to English. Nonetheless, the answers also show that the VE project improved some students’ levels of

tolerance towards other NNS. Additionally, the project and the questions encouraged self-reflection on language proficiency and English perspectives.

The analysis for RQ3 showed that many students felt more confident, comfortable, fluent, or safer and were more motivated to improve their English because of the VE. This aligns with previous research results (e.g. O'Dowd, 2021). A more positive relationship with English suggests VEs can be effective in enhancing learner attitudes and motivation. The findings show that in VE projects involving ELF-speaking participants, students' perceptions of their role and the benefits they derive from the ELF constellation vary considerably. In terms of pedagogical implications, engaging students in reflective discussions and reflections of ELF, including myths such as 'perfect English', language varieties, and traditional assumptions perpetuating Standard Language within guided VE projects is valuable. Materials to prepare themselves for such discussions are available to teachers (Hall et al., 2022). Similarly, prompting discussions about students' cultural identities can be beneficial to potentially gain a deeper understanding of their identities. The types of guidance and materials for university students and teachers needed in VEs require more exploration. Further research should examine the extent to which students' self-reported views align with their behaviours during VEs. Moreover, the potential impact of the medium (e.g. a videoconference, the physical classroom, or virtual reality environments) on students' identity construction should be investigated.

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