

FOSTERING THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE THROUGH ONLINE INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGES IN AN EFL
GROUP IN ANTIOQUIA

A Thesis Presented by

SANDRA LILIANA GONZÁLEZ

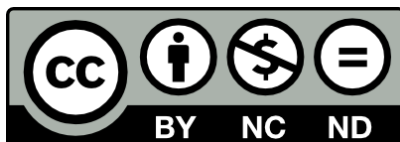
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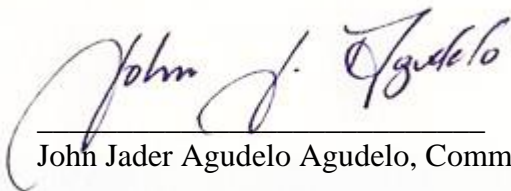
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DEDICATION

First, I thank God and his wonderful mercy for the opportunity to do and accomplish this Master. Secondly, to my family, especially my mom Luz Fátima González for all her help and patience over these years; my grandmother Clementina Aristizábal who is my model to follow; my couple Diego Ramírez, who was a great support and encourager during this process, and my appreciated students for their commitment and great job during their participation in this research project.

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ABSTRACT

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2023

M.A, SANDRA LILIANA GONZÁLEZ, B.A. UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE ORIENTE
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The rapid increase of ICT incorporation in foreign language education and the pandemic caused by Covid 19 have allowed educators to harness different tools and modes of communication to support language teaching and learning processes. One of these strategies is online intercultural exchanges (OIE) as an emerging approach to foster not only language proficiency but also intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among English as a foreign language learners (EFL). In this sense, this research aims to determine how participation in OIE can contribute to the development of ICC in an EFL group from a vocational and education institution in the East of Antioquia. This research is a qualitative case study carried out through Elliott's (2018) code-technique analysis of three data collection instruments focus group's transcriptions, online class video recordings and participants' diaries. Findings suggest that students' participation in OIE could boost the development of some ICC components, such as Attitudes, Knowledge of other cultures and my own, and Skill of interpreting and relating; furthermore enhance some English and digital literacy skills through the teacher's support. In

conclusion, promoting ICC through OIE per se does not ensure the achievement of that competence without participants' motivation and teacher's orientation and support.

Keywords: information communication technology (ICT), online intercultural exchanges (OIE), Virtual exchanges (VE), intercultural communicative competence (ICC), English as a foreign language (EFL), Digital Literacy (DL), English as Lingua Franca (ELF),

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Introduction

Over the last decades, Information and Communication Technology (henceforth ICT) has gained prominent importance in human life practices in different scenarios. Education is not the exception, especially in language teaching and learning, where ICT affordances have influenced changes in teachers' practices and students' learning processes (Helm & Guth, 2010). Thorne and Smith (2011) acknowledge the impact of technologies in foreign language education due to the adoption of some tools and strategies to promote a more communicative and interactionist approach. In order to foster not only linguistic but also pragmatic competences, sociocultural aspects such as language learners' background and diverse cultural practices may influence language acquisition.

ICT incorporation in foreign language education has allowed stakeholders to use various tools to support language teaching and learning processes (Alvarez, 2019; Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; Hagley, 2016; Izmaylova, 2017; Thorne & Smith, 2011). For instance, language educators and learners have at their disposal various online digital resources such as Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS), Social Networking Sites (SNS), digital stories, blogs, wikis, podcasts, and tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication, among many others that facilitate the development of language learning tasks.

Undoubtedly, ICT has significantly shifted how language learners and teachers interact nowadays, moving from face-to-face sessions to online communication (Alvarez, 2016; Catalano & Muñoz, 2021). These emerging trends of interactions and online learning mediated by technological devices such as laptops, cellphones, tablets, and smartphones, among others, increased considerably during the emergency faced during the pandemic caused by Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021 (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; González-lloret et al., 2021). This unforeseen situation

forced most educational institutions, teachers, students and academic professionals worldwide to harness diverse means of interaction, such as video conferencing platforms, online chats, mobile applications or social networking, to support their teaching process (Catalano & Muñoz, 2021).

Those online communication technologies have positively impacted language teaching and learning processes. Hence, they allow learners to overcome physical boundaries between countries and facilitate internet-mediated interactions with people from varied backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, races, and languages. The incorporation of those technological tools to mediate communication has contributed to and facilitated the fostering of a sociocultural approach in foreign language learning processes (Alvarez, 2016; Thorne & Smith, 2011; Catalano & Muñoz, 2021) through the usage of diverse internet-mediated communication platforms allowing students to get in contact with real international informants of their culture.

Different concepts related to the use of computers to mediate communication and language teaching and learning processes are used, such as mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), internet-mediated language learning (IMLL), among others. For this study, the researcher will focus on computer-mediated communication (CMC), the umbrella term from which the other ICT affordances derive in English as a Foreign Language Teaching and Learning field. Otherwise, most participants used laptops or computers to participate in this project. Additionally, the platform where international interactions occurred was mainly designed to run as a web application on computers. Although it can run on mobile devices, it is not well-supported yet. It becomes more challenging to use the platform through cellphones.

CMC tools were inaccessible some years ago. However, they are becoming more common among foreign language learners and teachers nowadays due to the widespread use of ICT, interconnection and globalization (Godwin-Jones, 2016; Helm & Guth, 2016; Hoskin & Reynolds, 2020; O'Dowd, 2016). These online interactions are being implemented widely in foreign language teaching and learning through synchronous or asynchronous communication means or social networking sites (SNS). One of the goals of CMC is to foster language learning and intercultural communication (Alvarez, 2016; Alvarez & Fernandez, 2019; Avgousti, 2018; Belz, 2003; Byram, 1997, as cited in Guth & Helm, 2016; Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; Hagley, 2016, 2022; Leinkaintis, 2020).

Internet-Mediated Intercultural Communication constitutes a wave in the English as a Foreign Language Learning process supported by CMC that was not initially thought of for educational purposes. However, educators have progressively taken advantage of this way of communication to incorporate some strategies such as online intercultural connections for language acquisition purposes and intercultural awareness development. Some researchers such as Gruber and Bailey (2021), Helm and Guth (2016), and O'Dowd (2016, 2018) define those transnational online exchanges as internet-mediated interactions among geographically distant language learners from diverse culturally social groups who did not often share their mother tongue, and both are learning a target language to establish a channel of communication through the development of a task for both group of apprentices. These types of interactions have coined diverse denominations such as Telecollaboration, Virtual Exchanges (VE), Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), Internet-mediated Intercultural Foreign Language Education (ICFLE), Online Intercultural Exchanges (henceforth OIE) (Avgousti, 2018; Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Helm & Guth, 2016) its denomination may change depending on the region those

interactions are implemented and its features (See table 1). They all aim to increase EFLL's awareness of their own and others' different cultural backgrounds, work collaboratively on a project designed by their teachers, improve a target language learning, develop skills related to global citizenship and improve their digital literacies as well.

Recent studies have yielded positive results regarding the implementation of online intercultural exchanges (OIE) in the development of participants' own cultural awareness, multiple literacies, intercultural understanding, and general improvement in foreign language proficiency (Alvarez, 2018; Alvarez & Fernández, 2017; Belz, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2016; Hagley, 2016, 2020, 2022; Helm, 2014; Helm & Guth, 2010; O'Dowd, 2016; O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019; Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020; Walzem, 2020). Additionally, its implementation seeks to foster intercultural competences and awareness about participants' own and other cultures, helping students to develop some skills, such as meaning negotiation with peers from international contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2016; Gruber & Bailey, 2021; O'Dowd, 2016; Walzem, 2020), digital literacies (Helm, 2014; Helm & Guth, 2010;) and one of the most promising, intercultural communicative competence (henceforth ICC) (Alghasab & Alvarez-Ayure, 2021; Álvarez & Fernández, 2017; Byram, 2001; Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; Council of Europe, 2016; Helm & Guth, 2010). Many studies promote ICC by using OIE through social networking sites, mostly in synchronous modes. However, this study proposes to investigate the promotion of ICC development through the exchange of information using different forums on a Learning Management System (LMS) in an asynchronous mainly communication mode among an EFLL group from Colombia and different Japanese students, analyzing only Colombian participants' evidence due to some limitations to contact Japanese tutors and the implementation of some data collection methods with the transnational counterparts.

Higher education institutions have recently shown increased interest in including strategies to promote intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in their curricula and syllabi. This interest aims to internationalize tertiary institution curricula and prepare students for global citizenship (Calle Díaz, 2017; López-Rocha, 2021). Furthermore, the vocational and educational institution where this research was carried out has included Virtual Exchanges as a strategy stated in its resolution 237 of 2018 to enhance reading, writing and communicative EFL skills among apprentices, and there is lack of investigation related to their results among students from the Eastern of Antioquia, where the EFLL group belong to. There are some research articles about their effects on other international counterparts; however, there is a paucity of literature about Colombian and Eastern Antioquia students' development of ICC in this institution.

Considering the above arguments, the significance of ICT in foreign language teaching and learning lies in the possibility to implement of novel pedagogical practices, such as Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE), to promote a more sociocultural approach to language teaching and learning (Thorne & Smith, 2011) emphasizing on interactions and language use bearing in mind the cultural backgrounds of the language learners. In this sense, the research gap underpins the scarcity of academic studies related to fostering the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) through the internet-mediated interactions of EFLL from an official vocational and educational institution in the Eastern of Antioquia, Colombia, through participation in asynchronous multimodal forums on an LMS platform, highlighting that many of those online interactions and studies related to this theme have carried out through social networking sites or more informal modes. Moreover, this research project holds significance as well because around twenty percent of the OIE have been done with non-native English

speakers, using English as a lingua franca (Avgousti, 2018), and most of the studies found in the literature report interactions among peers from English-speaking countries. For the purpose of this research, English online intercultural exchanges among a Colombian EFL group and Japanese peers are the phenomenon to study, focusing on the development of certain components established in the ICC theory. Having in mind the basic English level of Colombian participants, and their asynchronous participations through an LMS platform and not social networking sites, as many of the previous studies have been carried out.

This proposal seeks to determine to what extent an EFL group's participation in Online Intercultural Exchanges from an official vocational and educational institution in the East of Antioquia–Colombia, may help the development of their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) through forums on an LMS platform. This investigation seeks to answer the following research question:

How may an English as a Foreign Language Learner (EFL) group's participation in Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) foster their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) development?

In order to answer this, the researcher proposes the following general objective:

- Determine to what extent the development of ICC may be fostered through an EFL learner's (EFL) participation in OIE, analyzing participants' own reflections registered in their diary, focus group participation and class recording videos.

As specific objectives, the researcher proposes.

- Describe how these online interactions were held and how Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) might foster some ICC components after an EFL group's participation.
- Identify the impact of these Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) on students' English language skills and digital development.

Theoretical framework

This research adopts a sociocultural approach, aligning with the 'social turn' in language learning discussed by authors such as Thorne & Smith (2011), Alvarez (2018), and O'Dowd (2011). This perspective emphasizes the interaction with real informants from diverse cultures, considering social and background features that enable learners to acquire not only linguistic knowledge but also communication and pragmatic skills. Vygotsky, a proponent of the sociocultural perspective, emphasizes language not only as input but also as a resource for daily activities (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Additionally, he introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which allows learners to enhance their abilities by interacting with more capable peers. This concept becomes crucial in our globalized world, which demands citizens who can work collaboratively and communicate effectively with people who are culturally diverse. In this sense, learners can put into practice the target language in real contexts with real people and develop certain skills that allow them to establish connections with their counterparts. For this purpose, ICT has facilitated interactions among groups of people who are culturally different and have a common objective of learning English as a foreign language. Considering social and cultural differences, this strategy seeks a more interactionist approach among transnational EFL groups. Those interactions underpin not only language learning but also intercultural awareness. Connecting with international peers was challenging to implement in EFL classrooms some years ago. For that reason, this research draws on theories and concepts from the ICT field, such as CMC, OIE and LMS, which are the means to facilitate interactions with international peers and foster their ICC.

This section discusses the theoretical foundations and concepts that form the basis for this investigation. The first concept discussed is intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in

foreign language learning, considering the model developed by Byram (1997, 2021). The second one is the implementation of online intercultural exchanges (OIE) as a strategy to foster ICC in contexts where English is the target language of interaction and implies an e-moderation process to allow participants to interact successfully in this strategy. Finally, a report on some previous international and national research projects based on the implementation of OIE in foreign language education to foster the development of ICC.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Considering current trends such as migratory processes, globalization and ICT proliferation, the immersion of intercultural competence (IC) in foreign language teaching and learning has gained considerable importance in recent decades (Álvarez, 2014; Lopez-Rocha, 2016, 2021). On the one hand, tertiary educational institutions have sought to internationalize their curriculum, establishing connections with worldwide educational institutions and fostering physical and virtual mobility, which implies teachers to perform in intercultural scenarios. On the other hand, the growing interest in higher education institutions to develop intercultural skills besides linguistics among their students (Alvarez & Fernández, 2019; Calle Díaz, 2017) as an integrative part of second language acquisition prone to equip their learners with strategies to communicate personally or through online environments in interculturally diverse contexts.

In foreign language learning, Belz (2003) defines Intercultural Competence (IC) as awareness and understanding of different attitudes, beliefs, values, and linguistic practices in a specific context. Curiosity and openness mainly rule the development of IC toward “people who are perceived as different in terms of cultural meanings, beliefs, and behaviors they exhibit” (Belz, 2003, p.45). Additionally, IC requires setting aside disbelieves and prejudices toward

others' meanings, assumptions, and demeanors. Byram (2012) and Fantini (2012) also agree that Intercultural Competence (IC) is a set of skills required to interact meaningfully and adequately with people from distinct cultural affiliations. Furthermore, Byram et al. (2021) broaden the definition of Intercultural Competence to include the nature of these interactions between native speakers and foreign learners of that language, stating that it is not recommended to model themselves as native speakers regarding the understanding of another culture. They acknowledge diverse forms of intercultural interactions carrying out those exchanges with people from the expanding countries (Kachru, 1992) which are learning English as a foreign language, and it serves as a lingua franca to interact (Jenkins, 2009).

In this sense, IC entails an ability to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction that is successful for both oneself and the other, becoming a mediator between people of diverse backgrounds. Whilst Byram (2021) makes a distinction between IC and ICC, he states that in the former, "individuals can interact in their own language with people from another culture [...] overcoming cultural differences and enjoying intercultural contact" (p.96) while the latter ICC is defined as "the ability to interact with people from another social group in another language" (p. 97). Considering the definitions mentioned above of IC and ICC, López-Rocha (2016) suggests that ICC seems to be an extension of IC.

ICC differs from sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences because the former refers to the ability to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds in a target language. In contrast, sociolinguistics refers to understanding the social aspects of the language in terms of norms, codes and rules. Pragmatic refers to the use of the language in a specific context. This means that sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences are adapted and enhanced through the knowledge about others' cultural practices, implying the development of certain

attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating; discovering and interacting, as well as critical cultural awareness toward the other culture. In this sense, ICC goes beyond the linguistic knowledge of a language and its practices and the ability to interact meaningfully with people culturally different whose participants' backgrounds differ.

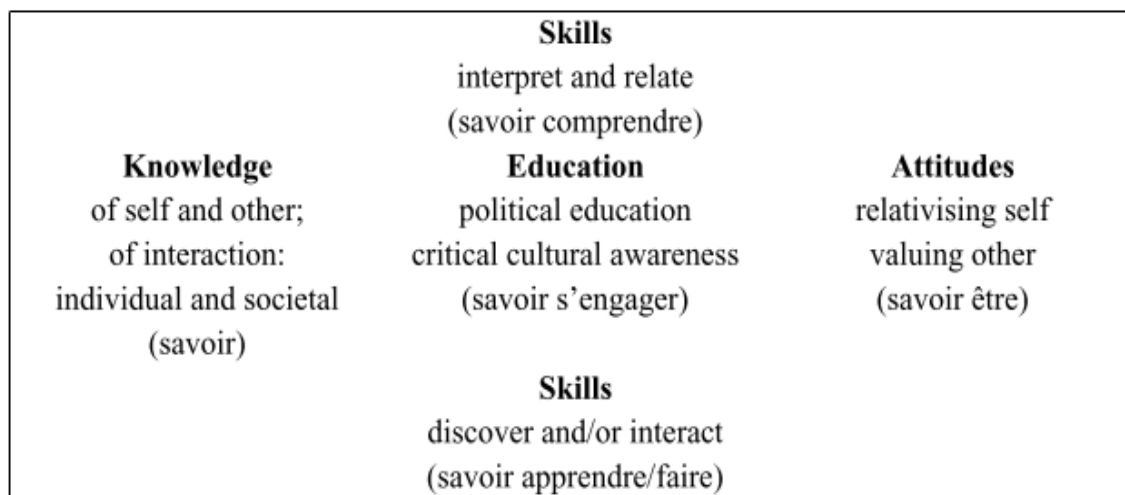
Though Byram (1997) widely introduced the construct of ICC during the 1990s, it has experienced considerable adaptation after that time, taking into account some issues regarding migratory processes and the vast use of ICT in language learning. This theoretical approach was initially thought for physical mobility where people traveled to English-speaking countries, considered norm-providers in the inner circle (Kachru, 1992), and Byram called them the sojourners where they should learn not only the hosts' native language but also their cultural features.

However, Byram's (2001, 2021) model proposes Intercultural Communicative Competence as a social and cultural aspect that allows us to establish connections, meaning negotiation and mediation through a target language, deconstructing the idea of culture resembling those "language natives." Aligned with some authors, such as Alvarez (2016), Alvarez & Fernandez (2019), O'Dowd (2018), Izmaylova (2017), and Catalano & Muñoz (2021), language learning entails cultural aspects not only of the target culture but also others from the expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1992) where English is learned as a foreign language.

The ample evidence regarding the importance of ICC in foreign or second language learning has been understood from diverse viewpoints. However, it remains its basis on the components that integrate this model, as shown in figure 1, and they will be briefly discussed

below. The following chart represents the components of Intercultural Communicative Competence based on Byram's (1997) model.

Figure 1. Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997)



Dimensions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in EFL Education refers to individuals coming from distinct origins, being able “to interact with ‘others’, to accept other perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, [and] to be conscious of their evaluations of difference” in the actual process of communication (Byram et al., 2001, p. 15). According to Byram (1997, p.43), ICC is a model that consists of 5 distinct components, as shown in figure 1, “These components are attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, and interpretive and relating skills. [...] The interplay of these components raises the fifth, which is critical cultural awareness or an evaluative orientation”. Considering the features and objectives that each component entails, they will be briefly described.

Attitudes: This component involves “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultural groups and belief about one's own.” Furthermore, there is an

“interest in discovering other perspectives on the interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena in the cultural practices and products of both one's own and others' cultural groups” (Byram, 2021, p.84). The prevalence of a “willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality, distinct from seeking out the exotic or the profitable.” In this component, “the intercultural speaker is interested in the other's experience of daily life in contexts not usually presented to outsiders through the media nor used to develop a commercial relationship with outsiders; is interested in the daily experience/culture of a range of social groups within a society and not only the culture of the dominant group”. This component also aims “to engage with the conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction” (Byram, 2021, p.84).

Knowledge: This component aims to gain an understanding “Of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's cultural groups, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction” (Byram, 2021, p.85). It also seeks to understand about

“(a) historical and contemporary relationships between one's own and one's interlocutor's cultural groups, (b) the means of achieving contact with interlocutors from other cultural groups (at a distance or in proximity) nationally or internationally, of travel to and from, and the institutions which facilitate contact or help solve problems [...] (e) the memories of one's interlocutor's cultural groups and the perspective on them from one's own cultural groups (f) the definitions of geographical space in one's own national cultural groups, and how these are perceived from the perspective of other countries”. (Byram, 2021, p.85).

These two previous components are the core to fostering the other skills such as interpreting and relating and discovery and interaction.

Skills of interpreting and relating: This component focuses on the “ability to interpret a document or event from another cultural group, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own.” It conveys that the intercultural speaker “can ‘read’ a document or event, analyzing its origins/sources – e.g., in the media, in political speech or historical writing - and the meanings and values which arise from hegemonic or ethnocentric perspectives (stereotypes, historical connotations in texts) and which are presupposed and implicit, leading to conclusions which can be challenged from a different perspective.” Additionally, this skill allows to “identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present,” it also entails misunderstandings of representativeness of expressed ideas (Byram, 2021, p.86)

Skills of discovery and interaction: This component refers to the “ability to acquire new knowledge of cultural groups and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction” (Byram, 2021, p.86). An intercultural speaker “can use a range of questioning techniques to elicit from informants the allusions, connotations and presuppositions of a document or event and their origins/sources, and can develop and test generalizations about shared meanings and values (by using them to interpret another document; by questioning another informant; by consulting appropriate literature and establish links and relationships among them (logical relationships of hierarchy of cause and effect, of conditions and consequence, etc.).”

Furthermore, this component allows participants to “identify similar and dissimilar processes of interaction, verbal and non-verbal, and negotiate an appropriate use of them in specific circumstances” (Byram, 2021, p.86) and the usage of their expertise in verbal and nonverbal conversations (for instance, written messages, formal presentations, informal gatherings, or business meetings) to reach agreement on specific circumstances that can be an amalgamation of symbols from their diverse cultural systems present within their interactions.

Critical cultural awareness/political education: The fusion of the other four mentioned components raised this one, defined as “An ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of a systematic process of reasoning, values present in one's own and other cultures and countries” (Byram, 2021). An intercultural speaker is able to “use a range of analytical approaches to place a document or event in context (of origins/sources, time, place, other documents or events) and to demonstrate the ideology involved” (p.90). Additionally, this skill allows learners to “interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges, negotiating where necessary a degree of acceptance of those exchanges by drawing upon one’s knowledge, skills and attitudes and ability to develop a reasoned response” (p. 90). This could represent learners’ struggles with their own and others’ thinking, especially when there are differences in the value systems and beliefs. In this sense, the intercultural speaker should be able to negotiate and reach an agreement on those divergences.

ICC has been fostered not only in physical environments generated by immigration processes or international mobility (Byram, 1997) but also for implementing online or virtual interactions (Helm & Guth, 2016; O’Dowd, 2011, 2016). Thanks to the widespread use of the internet, ICT and technological appliances, several EFL stakeholders have adopted the use of those trendy tools to promote not only linguistic skills but also intercultural awareness and

competences (Álvarez & Fernández, 2019; Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; Helm & Guth, 2016; O'Dowd, 2016; O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019).

In order to assess the development of ICC, some researchers, such as Garrett-Rucks (2012) and Marckzak & Krajka (2016), have mentioned either quantitative and qualitative techniques. For physical intercultural interactions, one of the techniques is the BASIC stands for Behavioral Assessment Scale of Intercultural Competence, consisting of a 1 to 5 Likert scale where an external observer checks and evaluates intercultural behavior. Self-reports through the Intercultural Development Inventory IDI is a self-assessment 5-point Likert scale with 50 items where the intercultural speaker assesses their performance in intercultural scenarios; as well as INCA stands for Intercultural Competence Assessment technique that consists of a combination of two kinds of measuring: questionnaires and role-plays. For online environments, ICC requires more qualitative techniques based mainly on a formative assessment rather than a summative (Garrett-Rucks, 2012). Formative assessment allows researchers to analyze each participant's gains in a more personalized way. Diaries, portfolios, observations, self-reflections and peer assessment are some of the techniques used where a researcher could evidence the presence of some of the dimensions as mentioned earlier proposed by Byram (1997, 2021). Qualitative measuring techniques are less likely to be applied, considering their procedures are time-consuming; however, they provide deeper details and accounts of intercultural participants about their ICC development.

To succeed in an increasingly multicultural world, it is crucial to nurture intercultural communicative skills among EFL students. They need to be more sensitive to cultural differences, appreciate their own culture, and embrace others'. As globalization presents new challenges, learners are expected to become global citizens (Calle Díaz, 2017). To equip them

for this changing world, and as a result of the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers have started implementing strategies supported by ICT affordances, such as videoconferencing platforms, synchronous communications, chats, and mobile applications (González-Iloret et al., 2021). These tools facilitate contact with EFL learners from around the world who are culturally diverse and learning a target language. In this context, Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) have become an opportunity for teachers to incorporate the cultural component into their classes and create a unique learning experience. In the following section, OIE will be explored in-depth.

Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE)

OIE is a strategy that has significantly increased in popularity to promote intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and language teaching and learning by utilizing technology such as computer-mediated communication tools (Hagley, 2016; Helm, 2014; Izmaylova, 2017; O'Dowd, 2011, 2018). This strategy involves computer-mediated interactions among international groups of language learners from different cultural backgrounds who do not share their mother tongue and are studying a target language under the guidance of a teacher (Avgousti, 2018; Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Helm & Guth, 2016; O'Dowd, 2011, 2012, 2016; O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019). OIE has become increasingly important in foreign language teaching as it allows for a diversification of teaching practices for English foreign language (EFL) learners who have limited opportunities to interact with international peers and promotes their intercultural communication (Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; Hagley, 2016). Additionally, these interactions can enhance participants' language proficiency and digital literacy skills (Alvarez & Fernández, 2019; Helm, 2014; Helm & Guth, 2010).

According to O’Dowd (2018), the umbrella term is Virtual Exchanges, which refers to internet-enabled interactions between two transnational groups of students of different cultural backgrounds learning a target language under a teacher’s guidance and support. It has mainly been coined in Europe and the U.S.A., while OIE is e-tandem or teletandem in Latin America (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022). E-tandem refers to two distinct foreign language interlocutors interested in learning their pen pal’s native language splitting their interaction into half-participation in one’s native language and the other half of the interaction in the other’s native language. Those transactions occur in both languages (Helm, 2014; Godwin-Jones, 2019). Teletandem refers to those internet-mediated collaborative interactions between two groups of foreign language students from two countries who belong to official educational institutions and support each other to enhance their online partners’ language proficiency (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022).

Considering the main features of these virtual exchanges, the approach, the participants, and the purpose, they can be named differently, as summarized in Table 1. It provides some websites where interested practitioners could join those platforms that promote international interactions. However, some of them are not free of charge, and sometimes, participant institutions must pay to join them.

Table 1. Different approaches to virtual exchange in higher education (O’Dowd, 2018, pp. 6-7)

Approach to Virtual Exchange	Associated terminology and well-known examples	Main Characteristics	Current situation
Subject-specific virtual exchange (1): Foreign language learning initiatives	Common Terminology: “Telecollaboration”, “Online intercultural exchange” “E-tandem” “Teletandem” Examples: Cultura Teletandem	Development of foreign language competence, intercultural communicative competence and digital competence Practitioner-led initiatives Often bilingual	A large body of research and practice publications An online platform for finding partnerships, tasks and training: www.unicollaboration.eu Recent establishment of an academic organization -UNICollaboration

Subject-specific virtual exchange (2): Business studies initiatives	Common Terminology: "Global virtual teams" Examples: X-Culture	Preparation of online intercultural skills necessary for the workplace Practitioner-led initiatives Data from exchanges shared for research purposes	Growing body of research and practice publications Growing community of practice: http://x-culture.org/
Service-provider approaches	Common Terminology: These were the first initiatives to coin the term "Virtual exchange" Examples: iEarn Global Nomads Soliya Sharing Perspectives	Development of intercultural awareness, critical thinking, and digital literacies Facilitator-led exchanges "Outsourced" by universities to service-providers to service-providers who provide platform partners etc.	Many of the organizations are working together in the Virtual Exchange Coalition.
Shared syllabus approaches	Common Terminology: "COIL" "Globally networked learning environments" Example: Coil Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities (COIL)	Addition of international perspectives to the course syllabus Development of digital competence and intercultural competence Often classes develop a "shared syllabus."	In the US: COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities

Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) has traditionally been focused on bilingual collaborations, with around 80% of exchanges being conducted in English or Spanish (Avgousti, 2018). However, recent advancements in internet-mediated connections have the potential to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence by allowing participants with diverse heritage and cultural backgrounds to interact synchronously or asynchronously through the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). The implementation of OIE as a strategy plays a crucial role in fostering the development of the ICC in today's globalized world because most studies have taken place in physical scenarios. However, with the spread of the internet and CMC during the last two decades, many researchers have studied how online scenarios fostering collaboration among international students and teachers worldwide can enhance this skill, especially with learners with low communicative abilities. In earlier forms of OIE interactions, were primarily between learners of English and native speakers of that language, utilizing

written-text-based communication methods such as email exchanges (O'Dowd, 2016; Avgousti, 2018). However, some examples of OIE in literature have also used English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) between learners of English, native speakers of English, or groups of non-native speakers (Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; Godwin-Jones, 2019; Hagley, 2021; Helm, 2014).

Regarding students' communicative skill improvement, some scholars (Helm & Guth, 2016; O'Dowd, 2016; Walzem, 2020) have reported that authentic English communication occurs when language learners interact with others who do not share their native language due to students are forced to use the target language to establish that channel of communication. In this sense, the negotiation of meaning allows them to discuss cultural 'rich points' and elicit cultural behavior from 'real' informants in the target culture (Hagley, 2022; Izmaylova, 2017; Thorne & Smith, 2011). Nowadays, it is possible to establish those connections with the "real informants" through the massive use of CMC, which increased considerably during 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic generated by the Covid 19 virus (Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; González-lloret et al., 2021). This situation increased the use of other means of communication, such as videoconference platforms, and the adoption of other strategies in teaching processes. In EFL contexts, the implementation of OIE has been increasing during the last decades due to the rapid proliferation of different means of online communication, allowing interactions with worldwide EFLL groups.

That is the case for this research project that is not carried out with native English speakers, instead, interactions take place among Colombian EFLL from a vocational and educational institution and Japanese higher education students who are learning English as a foreign language.

Highlighting some of the benefits of OIE, several authors such as Alghasab & Alvarez-Ayure (2021), Hagley (2016, 2018, 2021), Helm (2014), Helm & Guth (2010), Godwin-Jones (2019) have pointed out the crucial importance of teacher guidance before, during and after the implementation of this strategy as well as their teaching strategies to reflect on the development of participants' ICC. For this reason, OIE implementations require following a step-by-step protocol proposed in terms of the presentation of the tool where the exchanges will be developed, its socialization, and its management to carry out those interactions through learners asynchronously, synchronously, or mixed. The process where students get familiar with the platform, content, and its participants (pen pals) developing certain autonomy in its management is called e-moderation (Salmon, 2000). This term was coined by Gilly Salmon (2000) due to the increasing use of online learning environments during the twenty-first century. For this reason, it is essential to explain some of the stages of the e-moderation and its importance in promoting not only autonomy among OIE participants but also digital knowledge about managing the platform and ensure their accurate participation in the OIE.

E-moderation for the implementation of OIE

This model was proposed by Gilly Salmon (2000), who defines it as a five-step scaffolding process to moderate student and teacher interaction that usually takes place in an online platform or virtual environment, mainly for educational purposes. She highlights five essential stages when learners use any Learning Management System or Online Platform during students' learning process and enrollment into online courses.

In the first one, the author suggests *access and motivation*, enabling our learners to log into the platform, interact with other participants, and identify the different tools it could offer and their use.

In the second stage, *online socialization* participants should discover and get familiar with specialized tools to make interactions. In this phase, the tutor must guide learners on how to post in a forum, subscribe to it, activate notifications, and reply to it. At the same time, how they can include audiovisual material or images in their post. This stage also focuses on providing netiquette rules, defined as the norms and set of rules that must be considered when you communicate in online environments, especially when sending written messages (Universitaria, n.d.).

In the third stage of e-moderation, we will find *information exchange*, and it is probably the most crucial process to achieve this research aim because participants familiarize themselves with the tasks to develop, ask questions, allocate online roles and encourage group members to participate actively posting on the LMS, asking some questions and answer questions asked by others. Stage four is related to *knowledge construction*; during this, the tutor should provide more freedom in the activities, facilitate the learning process, and encourage group members to analyze theories and practices while enhancing the group to develop its own life and history. Finally, the five stages refer to *Development*, where the members encourage reflection about the different learning processes as individuals or as a group and encourage group participants to transfer their skills to other work fields.

The previous scaffolding process is crucial regarding the use of an LMS or any online platform, as Alghasab and Alvarez-Yure's (2021) evidenced in their project. They demonstrated in their study the importance of implementing pedagogical guidance before learners start participating in telecollaborative interactions. A pre-training course related to the management of the platform where their participants carried out the exchanges and managed its content might

reduce learners' dropping out of the strategy and moderate the anxiety levels that might represent these types of projects.

Other international and national studies focusing on the different forms of intercultural exchanges among students from different countries as a strategy to foster their ICC development will be described below.

Literature review

OIE projects have increased considerably due to their benefits to promote ICC (Alvarez & Fernández, 2019; Byram, 2021; Godwin-Jones, 2019; Helm & Guth, 2010; Izmaylova, 2017), language proficiency (Catalano & Muñoz, 2021; Hagley, 2022; Walzem, 2020) and digital literacy (Alghasab, M., & Alvarez-Ayure, 2021; Helm, 2013; Guth & Helm, 2010). This strategy has been implemented worldwide in different educational institutions, in elementary, high school and higher education institutions; in different modes of interactions synchronously, asynchronously or mixed, in different platforms, social networking sites (SNS), learning management systems (SML), or through blogs or chats, as a prominent strategy to align with the new demands of twenty-first-century skills.

International studies

Some collaborative global projects are designed for higher education students to get involved in different contexts with specific goal-oriented tasks and academic purposes. These projects focus on fields of knowledge, such as Administrative Management, Entrepreneurship programs, Environmental Issues Management, etc. Some examples of these global communities of learning are Unicollaboration (Guth & Helm, 2010), Erasmus (Hoskin & Reynolds, 2020), and VOX pen pal schools, among others. Their main aim is to promote virtual mobility where

students from tertiary institutions can connect with others who are also studying in higher education from other countries. However, these websites are not free, and participants must pay a charge to participate.

Other forms to carry out OIE are through the use of other technological tools such as asynchronous websites. For instance, Abid et al. (2020) conducted a telecollaborative project for three months among Tunisian and American students. Students participated posting multimodal texts, images, photos and videos on the same blog, and their counterparts read and commented. The researchers collected information through a questionnaire, one of the quantitative assessment techniques of intercultural competence and found that Tunisian students reported they learned how to ask questions, respond accurately, and promote interaction. The authors concluded that the blog facilitated student interactions, although they were carried out asynchronously.

Regarding these asynchronous online interactions, Hagley's (2016) study was carried out on an LMS that was Moodle. His project lasted eight weeks among learners of six different nationalities. Most of the participants were from Colombia and Japan. Learners are registered on the LMS and start posting in 4 different forums. The author mentioned the importance for Japanese students to interact with international peers as an opportunity to become more linguistically and interculturally competent, referring to the ability to exchange information effectively with people from international cultural backgrounds and interact by replying and answering their counterparts' questions through forums. The author pointed out multiple benefits for Japanese students in terms of intercultural competence because those interactions allowed them to get to know from first-hand informants other customs, traditions, gastronomy, and lifestyles, among others, considering their low possibilities to travel abroad. Hagley's study evidenced positive aspects of EFL learning, such as improving linguistic skills and raising

cultural awareness and self-confidence in low-level English students. However, he also identified challenges, such as a lack of response from some international peers, exclusive use of asynchronous communication, and students' heterogeneous language proficiency level. Another hindrance is that some teachers were not knowledgeable enough to use the platform on both appliances, computers and cell phones, which becomes pivotal to succeed in those exchanges.

Contrasting with Abid et al. (2020) and Hagley (2016), who carried their projects on formal educational platforms, Izmaylova (2017) conducted her investigation on a social networking site (SNS). Her study investigated how telecollaboration affects' intercultural competence development among American college and Colombian university students during an 8-week project. Learners posted using their mother tongue and the target language for commenting on the website. They had a different topic to post in. They answered some pre- and post-surveys and carried out a portfolio with their reflections based on some questions given by the investigator. The author highlights the understanding of culture definition in a more depth, robust and extended concept by the participants, furthermore the language proficiency improvement. Participants also identified cultural importance when interacting with people from other contexts. However, an English course per se does not provide those chances to develop a more cultural view. The teacher's role and strategies to foster intercultural competence among learners were of paramount importance since the author mentioned that students were not as interested in learning the cultural aspects of the course. However, students' interest emerged when they discovered similarities and differences between Colombian and American cultures. In this sense, their perceptions seemed to shift after the implementation of this unit.

The three previous authors have highlighted the importance of online telecollaborative projects regarding ICC fostering, language proficiency and cultural learning. However, none of

them mentioned the effect of those experiences in terms of digital literacy enhancement, as Helm (2014) did. She highlighted that virtual exchanges, which is the name for internet-mediated collaboration among educative programs used in Europe, can help to develop certain digital literacies, as she mentioned

“expressing themselves through video [...] students also learn to access multiple resources so they have immediate access to, for example, online dictionaries, encyclopedias and search engines should they need to seek a word they don’t understand information about an event they are not familiar with as it is discussed, support their arguments with evidence.” (p. 47)

The author also pointed out that despite virtual exchanges have great acceptance among European institutions, they are not fully incorporated into educational institutions curriculum, they continue to be an additional activity where teachers’ time, effort and commitment is not rewarded. Nonetheless, this strategy continues representing a great possibility to promote virtual mobility among institutions.

Virtual mobility is another concept that some European countries have used to highlight telecollaboration projects among tertiary programs. For instance, Walzem (2020) carried out a project to estimate the effectiveness of the video-conferencing program in enhancing English language interactions between Taiwanese and Japanese university students. The strategy made part of an ESL- program-based conversation class, but 7 of the 18 classes were dedicated to intercultural teleconferencing—approximately 50% of these seven classes went to the chat portion and the other 50% to a written response. Learners usually had those online exchanges once every two weeks. The topics for the video conferencing were: 1. Getting to know you. 2.

Compare your educational institutions. 3. Media (favorite TV programs, movies). 4. Friends. 5. Hypothetical situations (this elicited participants to provide their opinions, argue their ideas and question others' reasons). Finally, participants kept a diary reflecting on their experiences after every video chat. The author presents the following conclusions: Language teachers worldwide elicit their learners to practice the target language among their peers. In fact, this becomes challenging because learners feel shy or reluctant to do it, especially when it is a foreign language different from the learners' cultural background. The implementation of this strategy had great acceptance among the participants, and it is probably the most feasible option to foster intercultural exchanges and language practice among foreign language learners thanks to technological affordances. Some studies are carried out in Colombia and other countries with similarities to this. Participants interact through asynchronous and synchronous platforms with international peers who are learning a target language and differ in their mother tongue. The analysis of the information is through questionnaires, interviews, diaries and self-assessment. Using an LMS to evaluate ICC has different possibilities, such as tests based on learners' knowledge acquisition during their interactions with their international peers, a learners' diary and opinion pools. Considering the development of ICC more attitudinal, behavioral and sociolinguistic gains, Marczak and Krajka (2016) suggest a more formative than summative assessment. For instance, they state other ways to evaluate those components, such as a learner's portfolio, diaries, opinion polls and self-evaluation through the teacher's guidance.

The previous studies were carried out in international scenarios, although two of them include Colombian participants, the results focus on the pen pals' achievements. The following section presents some studies conducted in diverse institutions from elementary to tertiary education in Colombia.

Local studies

Areiza (2020) and Ramirez-Lizcano (2020) implemented a similar OIE using multimodal resources in an elementary educational setting among Colombian and American elementary students. They drew the importance of this strategy on raising students' awareness of cultural differences, eliciting cooperation with international colleagues, and fostering linguistic skills. In Areiza's study, OIE fostered a community of learning with international teacher peers.

In higher educational institutions, there is evidence of two studies conducted through social networking websites and online communication applications. That is the case of Alvarez and Fernandez (2019) and Catalano and Muñoz (2021). The former investigation occurred through Livemocha with second-year English class students from tertiary education in Cali, Colombia. The authors collected the information through screen recordings, student logs, two surveys and a focus group. That inquiry followed a multiple case study methodology providing ample and robust description of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009, cited in Alvarez & Fernandez, 2019). That strategy lasted 16 weeks (an academic semester) with an intensity of two hours three times a week. The researchers intended to establish which dimensions of ICC Byram's model appeared more frequently in the data set related to the objectives of each dimension. The analysis of the data utilized various analytical methodologies. Firstly, a theoretical or deductive thematic analysis approach was employed. In line with that, their analysis focused on identifying the components and curricular objectives of the ICC model by Byram (1997, 2021). Secondly, in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the students' proficiency in intercultural skills, statistical analysis was conducted for the different curricular objectives within each ICC dimension. This allowed researchers to determine the intercultural dimensions that emerged throughout the analysis of the information gathered. In

short, the most frequent dimensions of ICC were Attitudes and Knowledge and Skills of interpreting and relating, while Skills of discovery and interaction was less recurrent. In the same form, Critical Cultural Awareness was hardly promoted since Livemocha did not deliver contents or language tasks that potentially led to discussing sensitive social or cultural issues. The latter research promoted virtual mobility through two groups of twenty tertiary education pre- and post-service teachers from the University La Salle (LS) in Colombia and the University of Nebraska Lincoln (UNL) from the USA. These researchers used WhatsApp as an online means of interaction for their affordances regarding ease of connection through mobile instant messaging (MIM), multimodal content sharing, accessibility, and low cost. They developed a 6-week project where both groups of learners were assigned a pen pal and different cultural topics. The aim was to analyze those online interactions under the Narrative Inquiry approach, allowing the researchers to construct meaning from personal experiences, bringing participants' varied worldwide views.

Some Virtual Exchanges (VE) have been carried out in a vocational and educational training institution in a large-scale project using Moodle, an LMS platform, to promote asynchronous interactions among diverse groups of tertiary education Colombian students and groups of either Japanese or Chinese or Taiwanese or Thai or Arab nationalities. Colombian counterparts have been mainly from Japan. Their English master level ranges from basic to intermediate. Students usually post multimodal information (texts, videos, images or audio) about personal issues, their hometowns, everyday life, and other topics in different forums for two months (Hagley, 2016, 2022). Students have a task to develop over the two weeks because there is a pre-, during and post-activity (Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2014). In the pre-stage English teacher provides learners with English structures necessary to address the topics on the

forum; during their participation teacher provides feedback, supports in terms of language use and motivates learners to respond, and the post-activity teacher analysis with their students' challenges, drawbacks and learnings of their participation. Teachers play an important role as moderators and guides for their students to participate properly in those interactions.

Based on the previous literature background of OIE implementation locally or internationally to foster ICC and other competences, it is valid to say that over the years and with the massive use of ICT, there are multiple possibilities and varieties to implement them in foreign language classes. To conclude this section with Avgousti's (2018) study, she said that synchronous and asynchronous online interactions are possible using CMC tools, such as video conferencing platforms, LMS, and social networking sites. Additionally, the most common Web 2.0 technologies used in intercultural exchanges were asynchronous, such as e-mails or forums, due to the ease of replying and linguistic pressure in synchronous modes. Skype, blogs, and, as well as forums and platforms created for the needs of the students. The author also pointed out high participation from Latin American countries; around 55% of the studies she analyzed have been done in America. After English, the most common foreign target language was Spanish, followed by German and French.

Settings

This research project was conducted in an official vocational and educational training institution in the Eastern Region of Antioquia in Colombia. It has many branches in the whole Colombian territory. Its headquarters are mostly located in the capital cities of all the Colombian Departments and near municipalities offering higher education programs for students as technologists, technicians, or operators. All the programs must include English as a foreign

language according to its resolution 0237 of 2018, where learners must receive English training to accomplish the program curriculum and achieve a B1 level minimum. Furthermore, that resolution states the Virtual Exchanges (name used by the institution and the project) as a strategy to improve English reading, writing and communication skills. It also provides professional training to the other 23 municipalities from the Eastern Region of Antioquia. The educational approach is Task-based language teaching (Gonzalez-Lloret, Marta & Ortega, 2014) and focuses on passive and active skills for foreign language instruction. This establishment has different agreements with other national or international tertiary educational institutions to incorporate courses or strategies in favor of students' professional development. One of those strategies is the IVE Project, which consists of asynchronous or synchronous intercultural exchanges with Asian students to promote their English communicative skills. This strategy has been implemented in some other institutional branches around Colombia.

Participants

The participants in this project were a group of 8 adults from an official vocational and educational institution located in a town in the Eastern Region of Antioquia. It was a mixed group aged between 17 to 35 years old, and most were women (seven women and one man). This sample was taken from an intact group of 17 people who received English classes as a Foreign Language during a semester. This sample was selected considering the accomplishment of the three tasks, participation in the four mandatory forums, analysis of those participations on their research diary and active participation during class discussions.

All the apprentices must accomplish the requirements demanded by the institution curricula aligned with the national regulations and following the guidelines given in resolution

0237 of 2018, where the English component is mandatory for all the programs demanding a B1 level in concordance with CEFR standards.

This group had a four-hour English class weekly from June to December 2021. However, they participated in the OIE from October to December 2021. As a result of the emergency faced by the pandemic caused by the coronavirus in 2020 and 2021, all the sessions were held through a synchronous conferencing platform with their teacher researcher, and students' pieces of evidence were handed out through the platform Google Classroom to be revised.

It is important to highlight that some of these learners belonged to low-income families who had not had the opportunity to interact with people from other countries previously, and their knowledge of English as a foreign language was shallow. The whole group participated in the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVE), which aims to promote online interactions among learners from worldwide countries with Japanese students who are studying in tertiary education programs. IVE is the name coined by the project leader, as it was explained in the theoretical framework that is a denomination in European countries. Therefore, the researcher will refer to these interactions as OIE in this study. Students had to deal with two platforms. One for participating in the OIE was through Moodle, and the other, to upload their evidence for the English class, was through Google Classroom. In the latter, the researcher checked students' evidence and provided feedback to them.

Methodology

This research project was conducted through a qualitative paradigm within interpretative research, considering it a socially constructed reality where “there are multiple realities, or interpretations of a single event” (Merriam, 2009. p.8). To provide meaning to participants’ perceptions or understand a phenomenon, a case study is considered the most suitable method, as Yin (2018) explained in his definition of a case study as an empirical method that inquires deeply into a real-world phenomenon and its context to describe and understand it.

Considering the characteristics of a case study, it is important to keep in mind that the case can serve various purposes, such as (a) testing existing theory, (b) illustrating an extreme or unusual situation, (c) representing a typical scenario, (d) providing new insights, or (e) serving as a basis for long-term analysis (Yin, 2018). The first, second and fifth features; testing existing theory, illustrating an extreme or unusual situation and serving as a basis for long-term analysis, underpin the purpose of this investigation, which seeks to determine how the implementation of OIE that is considered the unusual situation, in an EFL setting may help a group of students develop their ICC based on Byram's model proving existing theory in a specific setting, and provide a base for deeper analysis of it. This paradigm allowed the researcher to gain a broad understanding of each participant’s attitudes, interpretations, opinions, reflections, thoughts, and knowledge of an unusual circumstance they were exposed to, such as their participation in OIE interacting with Japanese pen pals using English as lingua franca and fostering some dimensions of ICC.

The following section will describe the phenomenon that constitutes students’ participation in the IVEProject. For the purpose of this research, OIE is the name that has been

coined. Furthermore, participants' features, the implementation of these OIE during an 8-week period and data collection instruments and their analysis.

The IVE Project

The International Virtual Exchange (IVE) project is a strategy led by Eric Hagley, an associated professor at Hosei University in Tokyo, who is the head of this initiative. It aims to promote online interactions among learners from worldwide countries studying in tertiary education programs. It also seeks to provide an opportunity for Japanese students to interact with foreign peers due to the low possibilities for physical mobilities. This Colombian vocational and educational institution has participated for around seven years with apprentices and instructors from different zones of Colombia since national English instructors massively and freely make part of these exchanges.

Online interactions among the EFL group of students are possible due to the spreading of CMC tools such as e-mails, online messages, chats, forums, and wikis. This strategy is carried out during two periods throughout the year, from mid-April to June and from October to December, lasting around eight weeks. These online exchanges typically occur asynchronously on a large open platform through posts on distinct forums; due to time-zone constraints among Colombian and Japanese participants, few could participate in the synchronous sessions. Although most interactions occur asynchronously, there are few synchronous online encounters where students can connect through a videoconference incorporated in the same LMS. In this case, only one participant could attend two synchronous online videoconferences due to time-zone differences. They are mainly at 7:00 in the morning in Colombia; at that time, learners

usually go to study or work. For that reason, only 1 of the 8 participants could join two synchronous real-time international interactions.

Participants in this international online exchange always have access to the platform, allowing them the flexibility to participate at their convenience by posting on the four mandatory forums and responding to messages from their pen pals, if they have any. The project lasts eight weeks, from October to the first week in December, during which Colombian and Japanese participants exchange information on the topics discussed in the forums. Although there are various forums with ample topics to share opinions and activities, such as karaoke, recipes, and puzzles, students first need to reply to peers' posts on those that are mandatory and then those who might interest them.

The platform allows to keep records of students' participation during those two months, how often students log in on it, how many posts they reply to, how many multimedia or multimodal resources they use in their posts. This analytics information allows teachers to see their students' engagement on it and make decisions to promote more active participation.

Considering that all the instructions were given virtually, it was necessary to implement a series of procedures to follow pre, during, and after the synchronous sessions and support the synchronous communication with Colombian students using other channels such as WhatsApp or emails to be in touch easily in case learners have any questions towards their English classes or participation on this project.

The next stage describes the implementation of those OIE, the instruments used to collect data, and the procedures to analyze the information.

Implementation of the OIE strategy in English classes

EFL Students' participation in OIE

To promote those interactions among Colombian learners and their international pen-pals, firstly, participants had received English instructions in a three-month term before they joined the OIE, and they had acquired certain mastery to accomplish the different tasks proposed in the project. Secondly, during the class instructions, some online activities to foster students' curiosity towards other wide world cultures were carried out, such as listening comprehension, including iconic tourist places around the world to teach comparatives or superlatives, flags of different countries to teach nationalities, famous worldwide characters to teach professions and so on. Thirdly, students' interest in participating in these internet-mediated international exchanges was also considered due to the high commitment, responsibility, and active participation demanded by the project.

Seventeen EFL Colombian Learners and the researcher teacher are registered in the IVEProject LMS platform, where students will participate for eight weeks. Learners from other countries are also registered on this platform, where they actively post and reply to Japanese or other international peers' messages published on different forums. Most participants are from Colombia and Japan because the latter's government sponsors this initiative through the Hosei University as a strategy to implement virtual mobility among Japanese learners and transnational peers since there were not many international students in this Japanese university.

Before students get involved in the first forum, participant teachers usually receive training in using the LMS platform to guide learners in their interactions. It becomes crucial to moderate the process of activating their username, setting their profiles, adding a headshot if they

want, getting them familiar with the forums to create one and to reply to their peers, and transferring this information to our participants (See Appendix A)

Considering Salmon's (2000) five-stage model related to scaffolding moderation in virtual environments. The researcher first applied access and motivation, elaborating a video tutorial in her mother tongue to explain how to log into the platform and guide students during the online synchronous sessions. The second stage was online socialization. The third and fourth stages occurred when participants registered their participation through a research diary that was a three-column word chart and reflected on comparisons, opinions, perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge gained during these interactions.

At the beginning of the implementation of this strategy, it needed to be clarified for the participants how to use the platform. It was of paramount importance to socialize with the learners about how to use Moodle, which was the LMS selected to upload the posts and take part in these online interactions. It involved guiding students step-by-step, starting from the registration process, moving to access the platform, and getting familiar with the online environment, as Salmon (2000) describes in her model of e-moderation. It was also required to use the application for mobiles and explore the platform to familiarize learners with this technological device. We were not allowed to have face-to-face encounters, basically, this strategy and the e-moderation process were carried out online through the Google Meet videoconferencing tool. As mentioned, e-moderation plays a crucial role in carrying out these OIE successfully, allowing students not only to participate in reading Japanese pen pal's posts but also to reply with messages accompanied by images, photos, videos or voice recordings.

The first stage must ensure learners' access to the platform, registration with their institutional e-mail account, and familiarization with the LMS (See Appendix A). The second has to do with the interactions that apprentices started doing through their posts in the first forum, how to reply to those posts, or how to create a new multimodal conversation (it might include images, voice messages, text or videos). The instructor spent around a whole 4-hour class to get learners familiar with the online environment. The researcher explained how to introduce an image, record a voice message, some rules of netiquette, reply to their online partner's posts, and start a new conversation if they did not receive any response from the other participants.

The third stage, information exchange, was also developed when the EFLL group interchanged information with their pen pals. Colombian students used to read some posts from other participants before they typed theirs. Secondly, they searched for information on the website or images to share with their international partners. Thirdly, they chose one of the online partners to post the information where the researcher suggested using the Acknowledging, Answering and Asking technique, however, whether it was the first post, the participant should include a greeting, share the information, close with a question and a farewell for the transnational peer. At least three times a week, participants needed to check if there was a reply from their counterparts. In case they receive a new message, they should reply as soon as possible if they need to revise their text. Colombian learners could send it to their research teacher, and she would check it, or during the synchronous sessions could also be revised. Once learners got the message, they were suggested to apply the Acknowledging, Answering and Asking technique to foster more interactions with their Japanese pen pal. Sometimes, during the synchronous sessions, EFLL and the teacher researcher analyzed some surveys done by the

leader of the project to demystify some beliefs or prejudices that Colombian students might have. For that reason, class recordings made part of the information analysis for this research.

When learners had accomplished their participations in the four posts, learners needed to keep a record of their different interactions and replies in their three-column Word chart research diary where they made a reflection or comparison among cultures finding out some differences or similarities, their perceptions of their international peers, and their knowledge not only culturally acquired but also their English proficiency during these OIE, and the interactions with the transnational peers.

It is crucial to mention that the researcher revised students' diary with one or more screenshots of their interactions with their Japanese pen-pals in each forum, and she provided some feedback or asked some questions to the students to inquire for more details or expand their reflection (See appendix G). The diary consisted of a Word file chart with three columns that participants must fill out and include screenshots of their participation on the forums. This instrument aimed to have evidence of students' participation in their interactions with their pen pals, reflect on their opinions, feelings, attitudes, and knowledge towards the foreign culture and third, as a resource of information to deepen through their participation in the focus group. Therefore, the teacher provided some feedback when the information written down was ambiguous or unclear (See Appendix G). Furthermore, the focus group data helped expand or clarify participants' perceptions of Japanese culture, language learning, and digital skills. This fount of resources was analyzed following Elliot's (2013) system of codification, labeling coincidences of both data sources and selecting those categories that were repeated in both methods (EFLL's diary analysis and focus group).

In the following section, I will describe how students' participation in those forums was done and how the topics taught previously during the first three months were connected to the themes that learners needed to include in their participation. The protocol that students and the researcher usually followed before, during, and after their interactions in these OIEs to foster the development of their ICC and English proficiency will be described further.

The first forum took place from Oct 11 to 23rd, and the topic was "Us and the places we live". The aim was to exchange daily routine information among the participants. They should introduce themselves, talk about their countries and hometowns' features, ask other members of the group questions, and reply to those messages. Learners were asked to search for information about their hometowns regarding location, traditions, places to visit, weather, and local products. Afterward, they should include that information in a text to introduce themselves and post it on the LMS, allowing their international peers to read the information about their villages and reply to those posts. We usually spent two hours of the class reviewing students' drafts before posting on the forums to check the use of language, spelling, grammar, and all aspects necessary to make their message clear and understandable for their online peers. Most of the components related to language instructions were previously taught during the first three months. For this reason, learners could write their information, and the teacher's role focused on revising students' writings before posting, suggesting changes, socializing some posts about the experience and guiding students to upload the information, among others.

Furthermore, students could include multimodal resources in their posts; they mostly preferred to use images and text. Some peers used voice recordings and pictures to illustrate their hometowns better. The instructor reviewed their posts in the following session to see if they

received any replies from their international pen pals, including comments, questions, clarifications, further information, etc.

The second forum took place from Oct 24 to Nov 6. The theme was “Homes in our culture.” Learners were asked to describe what their homes looked like, what type of materials were used in their construction, their size and distribution, and their opinions about the kind of house they lived in. Participants also needed to identify differences between traditional or modern houses and some traditional objects that participants might have in their houses. The main objective of this was to make comparisons between different ways of living in Japan and Colombia. Identify some features in students’ hometown buildings and the diversity in their pen-pals houses, appreciate and understand other ways of living, for instance, well-distributed small spaces in some Japanese houses and variety in Colombia houses and Japan, appreciate and make comparisons in terms of the designs, materials, locations, areas, among others. As well as share information about their family dynamics when they usually gather at home and what kind of traditions they have. In this forum, we followed the same guidelines as in the previous one: students first searched for information, wrote a draft, the instructor checked their writings and participants posted on the forums. The researcher also reviewed students’ earlier posts to see if there was something to reply to. They started preparing their post with their teacher orientation regarding language use, punctuation, capitalization, word choice, and specific structures to request information, thank for replies, give an opinion, and offer apologies, among others.

The third forum was open from Nov 7 to 20th. It was “Modern vs. Traditional culture.” In this section, students should post about common traditions in their hometowns and reply to some questions: Why should or should not participants keep their traditional culture? How does each of the countries protect its traditional culture? This forum focuses on researching

participants' cultural practices and reading about their transnational peers'. During the online synchronous sessions, participants and the instructor discussed some of the e-partners' traditions and Colombian's as well, posting on the forum those that students still practice or do not, which were practiced by their family members and how to keep them alive. Students could exchange different information related to Colombian culture and have an approach to their international peers' traditions through images.

The fourth forum lasts from Nov 21 to Dec 4. The topic addressed in this was "Heroes in our culture." Participants should present a real person who positively impacted their lives or inspired them to succeed. They were also asked to include people who had been considered a hero or heroine in their countries, providing some reasons or describing attitudes about their chosen person. At the same time, participants needed to identify some models of leaders in their international peers. Before students participated, they received some insights from their English teacher, asking students about some heroes or heroines in their country; whom did they remember? Why was this person important? Why do they consider this person a hero or heroine? Students mentioned national characters such as Policarpa Salavarrieta, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and Jaime Garzón, referring to some outstanding values in mind when choosing their character. These values included bravery, intelligence, courage, and social activism.

These forums were available on an LMS platform where teachers could evaluate students' participation more in a quantitative rather than a qualitative paradigm. The platform offers a report about apprentices' participation regarding the number of posts they replied to or uploaded, the number of words used for it, the type of multimedia resources used (images, voice recording, or video) and the level of engagement. To assess students' participation from a more qualitative perspective, where they expressed their opinions, findings, comments, and knowledge

gained from this experience, the teacher requested their EFL students to record their posts in the four mandatory forums using the word chart (see table 2) designed by the researcher.

Table 2. Chart for students' reflections after their posts in the OIE. (Researcher's creation)

Intercambios Virtuales Internacionales – auto reflexión.
¿Cómo estos intercambios virtuales han promovido su competencia lingüística en inglés? ¿Cómo han promovido o no el desarrollo de una conciencia intercultural?

Fecha	Pantallazo de participación	Similitudes o diferencias de mi cultura con la de los pares.	Opiniones personales (Inquietudes, sentimientos, apreciación)	Aprendizajes respecto a la otra cultura

In that chart (see Table 2), students registered a screenshot of their participation in each forum, including their counterparts' replies to their posts and reflections. They were asked to report some similarities and differences from Japanese culture, feelings, attitudes, and knowledge gained in this experience, not only about the international culture but also their language learning process. The apprentices were given instructions on the activities they had to carry out, starting with a reflection emphasizing the importance of interculturality and their opinions regarding their participation in this project. They were also instructed to regularly check the forums where they

participated for any response from their Japanese partner, even on weekends and days different from the English class. In this way, if Colombian students received a new post or comment from their Japanese pen pal, they could bring their text to respond to their international partner during the synchronous sessions to be revised. Another suggested idea to promote interaction was the technique of Acknowledging, Answering, and Asking a question. This means that they would express gratitude for the question or comment posed by their Japanese pen pal and provide an answer to that question. If Colombian students did not know the answer, they would search on the internet, for example, "What is the most exported flower in Colombia?" or "What is the most important festival?". Finally, Colombian students would conclude with another question to maintain the conversation thread. If they did not receive a response after a week, the apprentices were encouraged to make two or more contributions to another international partner or in another forum out of the four established ones.

Data collection methods

Students' diaries about their participation in these OIE

Taking into account the rationale of this study that seeks to determine to what extent an EFL group participation in OIE may foster the development of ICC, pointing out those components from the ICC model (see theoretical framework) that emerged through the triangulation among participants' diary, a focus group transcription and class video recordings. The analysis of these three data collection methods, representing a thick and robust source of information, allowed the researcher to answer the research question without considering another perspective or an external observer. The triangulation process involves different types, such as methodological, theoretical or peer research reviews. For the purpose of this research, the triangulation of different sources of information, such as online class recordings, participants'

diaries and focus group participation, were the options adopted from the beginning of the investigation.

The researcher read their participants' research diaries weekly to provide feedback or ask for further information if some ideas needed clarification. Apprentices expanded their reflections and shared their charts on another platform different from the LMS where this project was carried out. They used google classroom; in this sense, they updated their reflections and shared them with their research teacher.

As mentioned above, this investigation underlies a qualitative paradigm where learners construct the meaning of their experiences towards a situation, event, or phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Bearing in mind this paradigm features that focus on understanding the importance of experience, placing the researcher as the primary source in data collection, supported through online class recordings through three months and their analysis, carrying out a process inductively and providing a detailed description of learners' participation in the OIE, these allow the researcher to use a kind of research diary to record participants' reflections. In this case, learners wrote about their interactions in the three-column Word chart proposed (see Table 2), which became a sort of students' journal due to participants were requested to register their feelings, opinions, learnings and discoveries about the culture and the language, as well as similarities or differences between our and their cultural domains, once they have received a reply from their pen pal or they had read other participants' posts. The information in the research diary was based on some dimensions recognized in the ICC theory (see conceptual framework).

Focus group at the end of students' participation in OIE

A focus group was also carried out at the end of EFLL's participation in this strategy, aiming to expand learners' reflections written in their diaries and deepen some opinions that could need clarification. It was recorded through a video conference platform, and an extension program was used to transcribe around one hour of recording and 25 pages of transcription. Participants were invited to have a dialogue where they gave their opinions, appreciation and gains related to some issues found in their diaries. For instance, their attitudes and feelings towards Japanese pen pals, their perceptions toward this strategy, and knowledge acquisition not only interculturally but also in English proficiency compared to 6 months before, when they had not taken an English course. Similarities and differences that they mentioned in their reflections were also addressed in order to assess the development of their ICC. The information was triangulated considering their reflections on their diaries, their opinions in the focus group and the online class recordings.

Online classes recordings

Online classes video recordings were also part of the instruments to collect information through six months from July to December 6th. The researcher recorded all the sessions for several reasons: to share with her apprentices in case the topic worked during the synchronous session was not clear enough, and learners could watch it again. As well as a tool to identify some components of ICC during the analysis of some surveys related to OIE participants' lifestyle practices. Those surveys were carried out by the project leader and shared with all the participants of this project. Class recording served as an important source of information to determine students' participation in the OIE, platform moderation, check of Colombian participants' posts and feedback provided to them.

In addition, these recordings allowed the researcher to keep evidence of some analysis of some surveys related to pen pals' lifestyles and demystified some preconceived ideas that Colombian participants had about their Japanese pen pals.

These collected data methods were implemented to determine to what extent an EFLL group's participation in OIE may foster the development of their ICC and the impact on students' English language skills and digital literacy. The procedure to analyze the information registered by the participants in their diaries, the video recordings and their responses in the focus group was through a decoding process following Elliot's (2018) coding systems (see Appendix E).

Data analysis

Through a color-coding procedure (Elliott, 2018), the researcher analyzed only the 8 participants' diaries with their reflections about their participation in the four forums. Additionally, the class recordings from October to the first week of December were also analyzed, focusing on discussions, reflections, feedback and students' gains from their participation in the OIE regarding their development of ICC, English language proficiency and digital literacy. Finally, the recording of the focus group that took place with the same eight participants in order to triangulate the information with both sources of data and determine the most common and repeated aspects mentioned by the participants concerning the five dimensions of ICC and establish to what extent its objectives were reached or were not based on what was found in the different data collection instruments. For this research based on a case study methodology, the three data collection methods represented thick information sources sufficient to answer this project question and its objectives. However, an external observer is also

a technique for ICC assessment that, in this case, was not included because of the scarcity of expert teachers in this realm, specifically in the Eastern region of Antioquia and in the institution where this project was carried out. In addition, the researcher considered participants' diaries and the other two sources of information as reliable.

Once this data was gathered, a nickname was assigned to the participants who met all the requirements in an Excel spreadsheet. They were asked to register their reflections on a research diary that has a three-column Word chart with information about their participation in the four mandatory forums and other additional forums that they wanted to include and their involvement in the focus group through a dialogue related to how their participation in OIE have influenced in their attitudes toward Japanese pen pals, similarities or differences found in the Japanese culture and ours, knowledge acquisition from that culture, teacher's role during their participation on this strategy, English performance during the OIE and the use of the platform. In this sense, eight learners' research diaries and responses in the focus group were analyzed and considered for this project. The observation of class recordings complemented those opinions. Once the information had been gathered from students' diaries and their participation in the focus group, it was transferred to an Excel file assigning each participant a nickname. All the information taken from their diaries, their participation in the focus group and some additional information from the video recordings were saved on each participant's file. Their different categories were selected by matching the commonalities among the eight participants with most of their responses.

Participants' names were changed by their name or last name initials to have clear whose information belonged to. After that, a color-coding process started, highlighting those opinions, expressions or comments repeated in several diaries, such as I liked, I did not like, I thought, I believed, I felt, and I was afraid of. Once this information was analyzed, the researcher

continued with some expressions related to the knowledge they might have acquired during those interactions, such as what I learned, I discovered, I found that, I did not know that, it was quite interesting, and so on. This dimension was also addressed during their participation in the focus group, where learners referred to some Japanese celebrations, representative places and cultural practices highlighted in the transcription using the color-code technique (Elliot, 2018). After this analysis, three big categories emerged. The first one focused on how EFLL participation in OIE boosted some ICC components, where three different codes emerged from this category: interest in discovering other cultures related to Attitudes, approach toward Japanese practices and products focusing on knowledge of the other culture and own, and identify cultural differences and similarities underlined skills of interpreting and relating. The second category had to do with Teacher's support to foster ICC among EFLL, where a code emerged from the data analysis that was demystifying beliefs through Class discussions based on the analysis of some surveys done by the project leader. The third category is OIE, enhancing some English and digital literacy skills in EFLL, focusing on enhancing EFLL's reading and writing skills and digital literacies.

Table 3. Categories and codes

Categories	EFLL participation in OIE boosted some ICC components	Teacher's support to foster ICC among EFLL	OIE enhance some English and digital skills in EFLL
Codes	Interest in discovering other cultures (Attitudes)	Demystifying beliefs through Class discussions.	
	Approach toward Japanese practices and products (Knowledge of the other culture and my own)		
	Identify cultural differences and similarities (Skills of interpreting and relating)		

Ethical considerations

Students were informed that their participation in this strategy made part of a research project where the whole class would participate as part of the syllabus. However, only 8 participants who met all the requirements would take part. The requirements were to participate actively on the platform, posting and replying in the four mandatory forums, register their participation on a type of research diary, writing some reflections about their participation and finally, participate in a focus group at the end of the intervention. For this reason, a consent form was sent to them through their emails since they did not have face-to-face classes and they resent it with their signature (See Appendix D). Participants' name was not revealed; instead, the researcher used their name and last name initial to label the information gathered and analyzed from them to keep their identities anonymous.

The researcher also asked permission to join the OIE strategy and informed about her intentions to conduct research only considering Colombian students' information. She emailed Mr. Hagley; he expressed willingness to help if the investigator needed it. (See Appendix B)

The name of the institution was kept anonymous in order to display the research results freely and avoid some political or administrative pressure from the institution. Furthermore, maintaining the confidentiality of the strategies the institution implements considering the researcher's labor relation with the institution in her condition of *prestación de servicios* instructor. Furthermore, this strategy is not open for all the courses; the researcher must register their group through the IVE leader, and it is limited to a certain quantity of participant groups from each vocational and educational training institution.

Limitations of this study

The information gathered and analyzed from the EFL group's participation in the OIE only considered Colombian students' participation in this strategy and instruments. Japanese students were not included in this research because the researcher had limited contact with them and their teachers. Additionally, there were many participants with different leader teachers and reaching an agreement could become challenging.

Another limitation of this study was that it was carried out mainly asynchronously due to time-zone differences. Colombian EFL could not connect to some synchronous sessions held during the eight weeks that lasted the project. However, students sent some messages using multimodal texts, including some voice recordings or videos, to participate in the forums.

Finally, a third party was not included to witness the results after the implementation of this research project. This decision was influenced by the scarcity of qualified teachers in the field of ICC in the Eastern Antioquia region, particularly in an official vocational and educational institution. The trustworthiness of the study rested on three sources of information: participants' reflections in their diaries and, their answers on the focus group and the researcher's observations from online class recordings.

Findings

This research sought to determine how an EFL group's participation in Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) may foster their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) development. Through the analysis of students' diaries, focus group transcriptions and class recordings underpinned by Elliott's (2018) color-coding technique. Three big categories emerged, and some codes for each one. The first category is related to how EFL group participation in OIE boosted some ICC components proposed by Byram (1997, 2001, 2021). Interest in discovering other perspectives constitutes one of the objectives in the Attitude component; based on the information analysis, the whole sample highlighted this feature in diaries, class recordings and focus group participation. Another code that emerged after the analysis of the data collection methods is Understanding of social groups' practices and products, which is related to the dimension of Knowledge of other cultures and my own, and the last code is related to Identifying cultural differences and similarities connecting with the Skills of interpreting and relating. The second category underpins the Teacher's guidance to foster ICC among EFL, including demystifying beliefs through Class discussions. Finally, the third category focuses on participants' enhancement of some English and digital skills. Focusing on reading and writing communicative skills and literacy in the usage of an LMS platform for the OIE participation. Each category with its codes will be explained below.

EFL participation in OIE boosted some ICC components

EFL's participation in the OIE provided them with opportunities to enhance certain components of the ICC model (refer to the theoretical framework) proposed by Byram (1997, 2001, 2021). However, simply participating in this strategy does not guarantee the development

of this skill. It requires the teacher's support before, during, and after implementation and allocating time for participants' self-reflection and discussions about them.

To determine whether EFLL has developed this ability, the researcher relied on the objectives stated in the theory of ICC for each dimension (see theoretical framework). The EFL group's ICC development was assessed using valid techniques such as diaries and self-reflection and the observation of the online class recording, following the approach suggested by Marczak and Krajka (2016). The acquisition of ICC was measured based on the features that emerged after analyzing the information under the Byram's model lens.

The analysis of the information revealed several significant dimensions, including interest in discovering other perspectives (Attitudes), understanding social groups' practices and products (Knowledge of the other culture and my own) and identifying cultural differences and similarities (Skills of interpreting and relating).

Interest in discovering other cultures (Attitudes)

After analyzing learners' diaries and focus group responses, the researcher noticed some changes in their attitudes toward their OIE participation. Analyzing students' records in their diaries, it was possible to establish that in the beginning, 37.5 percent of the participants (three of eight) felt uninterested and afraid to participate in this project. The researcher asked students about the possible reasons for their initial attitudes through the focus group, and they replied

"It happened due to this [the experience of participating on OIE] was my first time interacting with people from other nationalities" (SMV on Focus group, December 6, 2021. My translation)

"Our English level is still very basic, for this, I do not know if I can understand my partners [Japanese students] and how I can answer their questions" (JD on Focus group, December 6, 2021. My translation)

and "because we do not know how to manage the platform, I was scared" (SO on her diary, October 2, 2021. My translation).

Once participants followed the instructions during the e-moderation process to make their participation online, how to reply and structure their messages, one hundred percent reacted positively to the OIE strategy. In the beginning, students' participation in the OIE needed the teacher's guidance to structure their responses. After two weeks, they gained certain independence because they allotted time different from the classes to reply to their pen pals. Learners felt free to do it by themselves and ask for little help. It is noticeable because some of their participations were done on weekends or days different from the synchronous class (See Appendix H). They started becoming engaged when they received a reply from their Japanese pen pal. Through the class recording observations and the reading of EFLL's research diaries was possible to say that they switched from being frightened to being confident, from being uninterested to becoming engaged. Furthermore, it was observable that after two weeks of students' participation in the project, they could reply by themselves in a different schedule from the class time, becoming more autonomous. This shift in participants' attitudes allowed them to be open and curious about their online peers' lifestyle and participate more actively and independently on the other forums. Hence, they broadened their vision toward the foreign culture, making comparisons, indagating for their pen pals' lifestyles and willing to reply to their partners' comments through the forums.

As evidence of what was previously stated, SVM mentioned,

"To be honest, this experience [participation in the OIE] was quite cool because I could learn many things from the other cultures. In the beginning, I was afraid of interacting with an international peer. However, this [the strategy] allowed me to become more independent" (Reflection on her diary, Oct 24th. My translation).

Another participant, AL, also expressed,

"At the beginning, it [OIE strategy] seemed to me kind of monotonous because the interaction was with people from here [referring Colombian participants], but it [participation in OIE] becomes more interesting when people from further places [Japan] started interacting with me." (Reflection on her diary, October 10th. My translation)

These responses strongly indicate that learners changed their minds and attitudes toward the implemented strategy because they experienced fear and boredom. LA did not find interesting to exchange information with Colombian peers. However, these feelings were overcome once she could participate in the forums and interact with international peers. In this sense, these interactions allow them to learn not only linguistic aspects but also cultural features of Japanese culture because there was a change in her attitude, and she found interesting to exchange information with people different from her cultural background.

Approach toward Japanese practices and products (Knowledge of the other culture and my own)

This category represents one of the most relevant dimensions in an EFLL group's participation within the Online Intercultural Exchanges strategy to foster their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The participants displayed the different gains from the Japanese culture through their self-reflection registered in their research diary and participation in the focus group and expressed some fascination for some practices of the Japanese culture that some participants ignored.

The most common gains that EFLL expressed were related to Japanese celebrations, some representative places and cultural practices. As is evidenced through SO's diary, where she mentioned a word in Japanese that is "Keirou No Hi" according to her, this word represents a Day for respect to senior people celebrated on September 19th, where people write and send

letters to them. She also mentioned some lifestyle practices, such as Japanese punctuality cultivated from childhood.

Regarding celebrations, in YM's reflection on her diary, she mentioned the following;

“one of the most important events for Japanese is the summer festival, where there are plenty of food, music and people dancing the “bonnodori”, it is a traditional Japanese dance where most people attend and wear a kimono. This is a special Japanese outfit” (Reflection on YM's diary, October 18th. My translation)

Table 4. Extract from one of the participants' diaries.

SIMILITUDES O DIFERENCIAS DE MI CULTURA CON LA DE LOS PARES	OPINIONES (INQUIETUDES, SENTIMIENTOS, APRECIACIÓN)	APRENDIZAJE RESPECTO A LA OTRA CULTURA O RESPECTO AL IDIOMA INGLÉS
<p>En los demás países también es común encontrar festivales y celebraciones eluyentes a alguna conmemoración o fecha en especial.</p> <p>El día de la madre también es conocido como una fecha muy importante para recordar y agradecer todo lo que ellas han hecho por nosotros.</p>	<p>Una de las cosas que pude notar es que indiferentemente del país, las tradiciones culturales, en especial los festivales son de gran importancia, y la mayoría de ellas son sinónimo de gozo y alegría, lo cual se asemeja al folclor que nos caracteriza como país.</p>	<p>En Japón uno de los eventos más tradicionales es el festival de verano, donde hay mucha comida, música, bailan el bonnodori, que es una danza tradicional japonesa y la mayoría de las personas que asisten usan Kimono.</p> <p>Kimono es el traje tradicional japones.</p>

The participants also indicated some celebrations such as Mother's Day, which is also celebrated in this country, acknowledging the importance of this event for both Colombian and Japanese cultures.

ME in her diary highlighted another typical celebration, but it has been recognized for its origins in the United States. Therefore, this participant was surprised to see that Saint Valentine's celebration is held in Japan, although it has some variations concerning what the participant has experienced and seen in Colombia. She mentioned in the focus group that in Japan, men express their interest in a girl by asking her a question about the moon and depending on her reply, they

know if there is any possibility. Men wait a month after the girl's reply to know if they match and officialize their relationship or if they do not.

Regarding tourist places, learners identified and reported the names of some representative sites from Japan. For instance, ME mentioned in her diary Mount Fuji as an important tourist site for Japanese. As well as YM pointed out a forest that is also representative of this culture.

AL highlighted in her diary that she learned about the second biggest capital in Japan, Osaka, which is full of history and has different tourist attractions. The participant also mentioned the reasons why this city caught her attention and was mentioned in her reflections. Osaka is divided into three zones: one is Kita, which is quite modern, where the main square is located, and it has transportation facilities. The Minami region has its varied gastronomy offer, where the participant pointed out one of the traditional dishes called "Takoyaki," made of wheat-floured balls with octopus, ginger and seaweeds. The other region the Colombian student mentioned was Osaka's Bay, an attractive place with beautiful aquariums, shopping malls and museums.

Considering their cultural practices, Japanese pen pals show respect for their family traditions. For instance, SVM's and SO's diary also mentioned that when Japanese get home, they usually take their shoes off before getting in their houses. This practice surprised a lot to the participants because they ignored that the Japanese had that custom and also the tradition of waiting for all family members to have dinner together (See Appendix F). SVM made a comparison with the Colombian tradition that was popular some years ago, where families used

to gather around the dining room to have dinner together. However, we have missed some of our traditions, according to her.

These types of relations that SVM made in comparison with some cultural practices from their pen pal from Japan and those from Colombia emerged another code that focuses on recognizing those cultural products or practices that we have similar to the foreigners and those which are different. They will be explained in the following section.

Identify cultural differences and similarities (Skills of interpreting and relating)

Through the information exchange in the online forums with their international pen pals, Colombian EFL learners could identify some aspects of Japanese that are similar to their own culture and some aspects in which they differ.

For instance, one participant was surprised to identify that the Japanese also play football as Colombians do. In MAG's reflection, he said

“I did not know that Japanese also played soccer. I think because it is an international sport, it does not have borders and is also played in Japan.” (Reflection, October 30th, 2021. My translation)

Participants found other similarities related to the celebration of some special dates, such as Mother's Day or Saint Valentine's Day, because two participants of eight thought they were only American or Latin America celebrations. One of the participants, AB, was very surprised to discover that indigenous groups had also inhabited Japan; she thought they were only in America and some European countries.

When Colombian students read and replied to different forums, in some cases, they searched for further information on the internet to have a better idea about those topics that strongly indicate interest for them. This could be evidenced through AB's diary reflection and

posts related to a Japanese indigenous group (See appendix A), where she mentioned her interest in getting to know more about that community, and she searched on the internet for those indigenous peoples and figured out that it is a tribe and added a picture in her post what she looked into. Additionally, in her reflection, she stated that it was surprising to discover indigenous groups in Japan. She typed

"I did not know that there were indigenous peoples in Japan. I thought they inhabited only in America or Europe, not in Asian countries" (Reflection on her artifact, November 9th, 2021)

These interactions may allow participants to discover cultural similarities or differences between Colombian and Japanese lifestyles and broaden Colombian EFL learners' knowledge of their own culture. As SO mentioned, "I thought that I actually knew my country [Colombia] very well, nonetheless through these interactions, I discovered that there are some tourist places that neither I have visited, nor I knew their existence, for example, El Valle del Cocora" (SO research diary, October 28th, 2021) (See Table 5)

The participant also supported it during the focus group transcription, where she reinforced that

"Through my participation in these online intercultural exchanges, I could discover beautiful tourist places in Colombia, such as El Valle del Cocora, where I could learn that it was located in the Coffee Region in Colombia" (SO focus group, December 6th, 2021).

These excerpts display how the OIE strategy has great potential to foster not only intercultural competence but also local cultural knowledge and demystify some beliefs that participants could bring about other countries, as AB mentioned about the existence of indigenous communities in eastern nations.

Table 5. Extract from one of the participants' diaries

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Word document with the following content:

pero hay una pequeña diferencia ya que en Japón tienen una palabra específica para llamarle a esa cordialidad, la cual es "Omotenashi" que significa hospitalidad japonesa por excelencia.

Diferencias:
En Japón no dan la mano sino que realizan una reverencia como gesto para mostrar respeto a los demás, tienen la costumbre de quitarse los zapatos en la casa, son muy estrictos con la puntualidad y veneran y respetan mucho a los adultos mayores, pues los consideran como personas muy sabias.

como: el Monte Fuji y los santuarios en Kioto, ya que a través de relatos e imágenes puede conocer como viven, que hacen en su día a día y la música que escuchan.

Este foro fue mi favorito porque pude hablarle a los demás sobre la diversidad, el folclor y las festividades importantes de mi país como el día de las velitas y el Carnaval de Barranquilla.

Este espacio me permitió saber demasiado sobre la cultura de Japón pero también sobre la cultura de Colombia, algo que me pareció realmente increíble ya que pensé que conocía muy bien a mi país, pero no era así, pues habían lugares turísticos muy hermosos que yo no conocía, como el Valle del Cócora.

puntualidad, pues desde que son pequeños se les enseña a respetar el tiempo y a llegar 5 minutos antes de la hora establecida a los eventos y reuniones. También descubrí que:

- El 19 de septiembre celebran el Día de respeto por los ancianos "Keirou No Hi" en el que se les envía un mensaje y una carta para expresar toda la gratitud que tienen hacia ellos.
- El 21 de mayo de 1869 se abrió la escuela primaria por primera vez en Japón.
- El Monte Fuji es considerado el símbolo de Japón (fue inscrito en el Patrimonio Mundial en 2013).

In another YM's reflection, she associated with some anime games usually played in Colombia. The participant stated on the forum its name and how it is known in Colombia. Besides this, the participant demonstrates her interest in learning or trying another video game suggested by their pen pal. (YM's diary, November 12th, 2021).

It is observable in modern intercultural relationships through video games; in YM's diary, in her reflection, she associated some anime games played in Colombia with its name given by her pen pal in Japan. Besides this, the participant demonstrates some interest in learning or trying another video game suggested by her pen pal. Something similar was evidenced in CM's reflection (see Figure 1), where she was quite surprised that her Japanese pen pal could play a video game that only American people are used to playing it. In fact, her pen pal suggested a TV series, and the Colombian participant admitted to having looked it up and seen it and mentioned it was interesting.

Figure 2. CM's diary reflection on video games

1. Us and the places we live - Oct 11 - Oct 23

Self-introduction

19/10/2021

We have the similarity that we really like to play video games and we have two of them in common (Call of Duty and Legends and call).

My greatest feeling was knowing that in a country so far away they play Call of Duty, since I have only played with people from the United States, but I have never played with someone from Japan, I love knowing this.

I did not know that the movie DUNE existed, I saw it and it is super interesting, every day we can learn new things.

These two examples demonstrated intercultural connections through some hobbies or personal preferences, which represent a bridge to find similarities and recognize that Colombian and Japanese are not completely different. These types of OIE are suitable to carry them out among participants with the same range of age because it is likely to find common themes that allow them to connect easily. In this case, both are tertiary students learning English as a Foreign Language as a requirement for institutions and governments.

These cultural similarities allow EFLL group to increase their interaction in certain contexts because it is observable that students communicated more accurately in alike environments to their own culture, such as the case of the video games interaction, the existence of indigenous peoples or similar sports preferences. However, to carry out this strategy successfully was necessary to count on the researcher's guidance as well in order to support and

address Colombian students' interactions. Considering this, the following section focuses on the paramount importance of the teacher's role in this strategy.

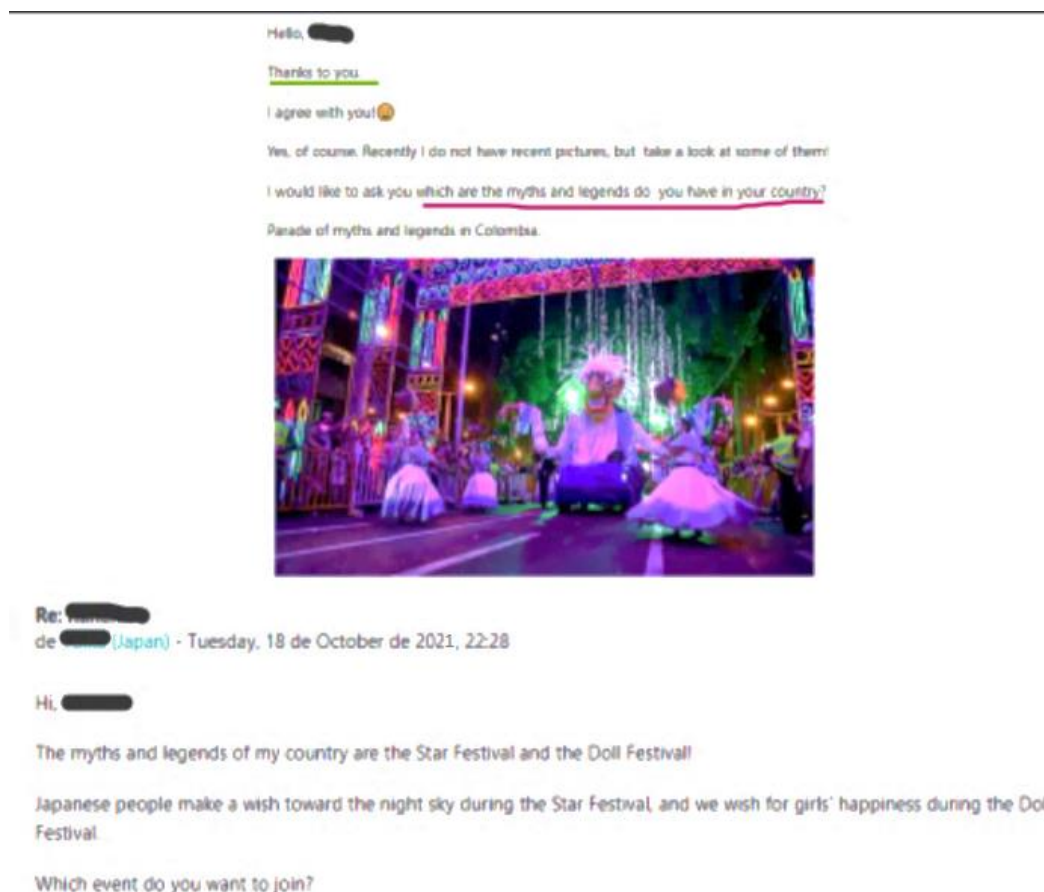
Teacher's support to foster ICC among EFLL

The researcher analyzed focus group intervention transcriptions, video recordings from her online classes and EFLL's diaries, and she found that the support of the teacher was essential before and during OIE participation to foster ICC development. This aspect was crucial because participants could familiarize themselves with the platform in which OIE took place through the teacher's support, guidance and scaffolding process. Her role as moderator in understanding the concepts or messages from the international peers allowed Colombian EFLL to communicate effectively and adapt their language to the context. Furthermore, the researcher shared some techniques with the project participants to maintain the flow of the interactions with their Japanese pen pals. One of those techniques is Acknowledging, Answering and Asking (See Figure 3). It was noticeable in most Colombian students' participation, as could be appreciated in the following figure.

Considering that all the interactions were through CMC during the Covid-19 pandemic when face-to-face encounters were not possible (Catalano & Muñoz, 2021).

Fifty percent of the participants (four) emphasized the importance of the teacher's instruction delivery in promoting more autonomous and independent participation on the platform. The other fifty did not mention or highlight the teacher's role in this process. Although, they admitted it was their first time interacting asynchronously through an LMS platform.

Figure 3. Implementation of the technique AAA (Acknowledge, Answering and Asking)



The moderation process helped learners effectively use the platform where the Online Intercultural Exchanges were held because Colombian participants were not familiarized with this, and it was their first experience interacting with international peers. Furthermore, fostering ICC implies that learners could communicate through multimodal texts sending and receiving messages from their international counterparts. Thus, e-moderation allows learners to be guided on the LMS to interact with them accurately and maintain contact. This is possible following the stages of the e-moderation process. As is observable in Appendix A. Although these interactions among Japanese and Colombian learners were mainly through CMC, during the focus group, the

research noticed that some of those interactions took place through Mobile-mediated communication, as AL expressed that

"since I did not have a laptop or computer, I had to participate using my mobile phone following the teacher's explanation and [class]recording" (Focus group, December 6th, 2021).

In the previous comment, we can observe that the student struggles with their mobile device management by herself which represents a drawback to participate in sending and receiving messages among Japanese and Colombian students. Consequently, the e-moderation process in its first stage, which is to get familiar with the platform (Salmon, 2000), was crucial to implement this strategy. In this sense, e-moderation was necessary to carry out the process of communicating with their international peers using alternative technological devices.

The arguments mentioned above can also be supported by 2 participants' excerpts from the focus group. AB said,

"the teacher had sent us instructions on how to enter the platform through WhatsApp. However, I could not do it, which was also my partner's situation, so we asked the teacher to explain this to us in our next synchronous session going through step-by-step and activating the user" (Focus group, December 6, 2021, My translation).

AL mentioned, "As I did not have a computer, it was more difficult to participate because I had to do it from my cellphone. Nonetheless, thanks to the teacher's instructions to enter the platform and identify the tools to design my posts, it was easier to participate in the future." (Focus group, December 6, 2021. My translation)

Since students were unfamiliar with the LMS platform to carry out OIE because it was their first participation in this strategy, they needed to receive some training in terms of its management to successfully participate in the exchange of messages with their international peers. The e-moderation process carried out by the researcher allowed learners to activate their accounts, make their posts, insert images, videos and voice recordings, and reply to their

messages (See Appendix A). In this sense, teachers' support was important mainly because of her role as a moderator, becoming the platform management an ally instead of an enemy.

Demystifying beliefs through Class discussions.

While participating in the OIE, Colombian students and their research teacher had the opportunity to analyze surveys conducted by the project leader, where apprentices discovered important aspects and demystified their beliefs about their international counterparts. Through participation in the OIE, the research teacher discovered the opportunity to demystify stereotypes that learners had about Japanese culture.

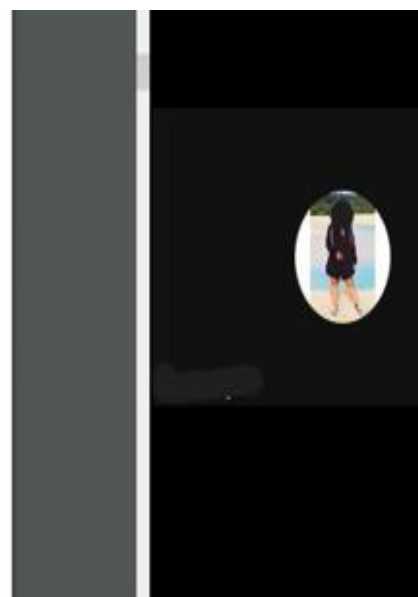
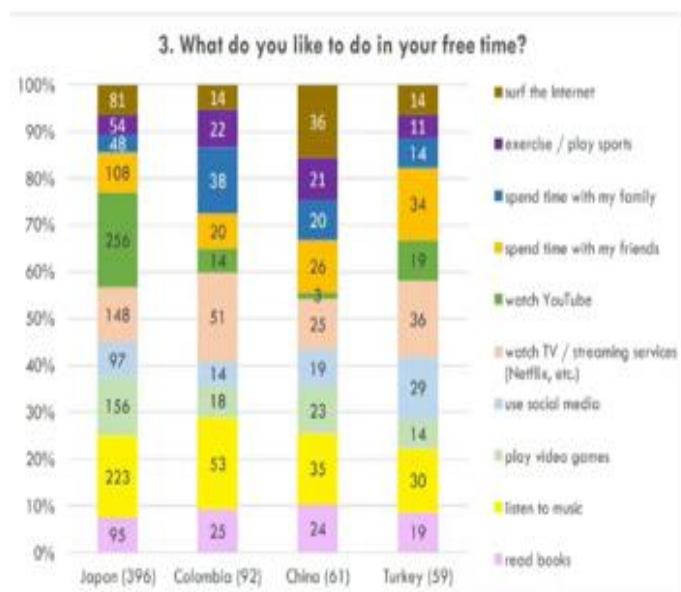
Figure 4. MAG's participation in Class discussions about the survey's results



These results were analyzed through class discussions during the synchronous sessions among Colombian students and their teacher-researcher. It was evidenced through the analysis of some surveys (see Figure 4) where around 14,6 % of the Japanese interviewed informed that they

actually drink coffee, which surprised the Colombian students who assumed the false stereotype that Japanese did not drink coffee but only drank tea. Furthermore, in the question related to free-time activities it was found that 60% (see Figure 3) of Japanese respondents liked watching YouTube and 39% used social media. These percentages were also surprising for local EFLL to discover that watching videos on YouTube was one of the most common free-time activities among Japanese, and also the use of social media because Colombian students expressed during the synchronous classes that they considered Japanese students quite disciplined and that they did not have time to use youtube or social media, or they do another type of activities such as reading books or researching. OIE allowed the teacher researcher and participants to discover some habits that their online peers use to do in their free time, and Colombian participants had a different conception of those issues.

Figure 5. AB's participation in the class discussions about the survey's results



OIE enhance some English communicative and digital skills in EFL

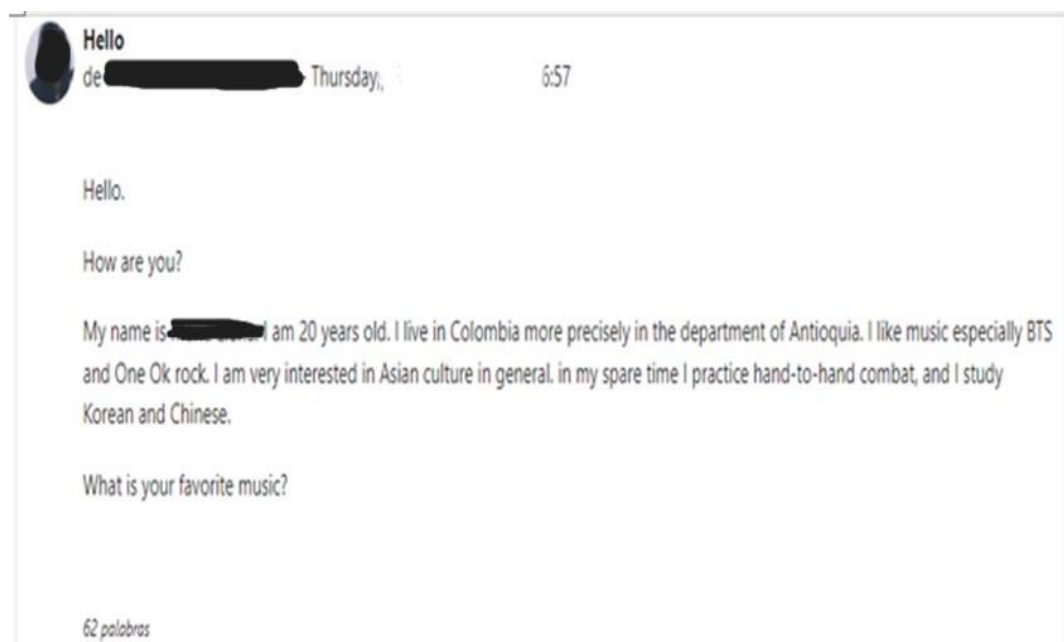
Considering only qualitative data collection instruments used in this research project, such as participants' dairies, posts and class recordings, to measure students' improvement in terms of English proficiency. 5 of 8 Participants recognized in their research journals and focus group that they enhanced their reading and writing skills while participating in this project. It was also possible to find evidence in some EFL's posts. In the beginning of the implementation of this strategy, some of the participants' posts were very short, with some difficulties in punctuation, the use of capital letters, language use and coherence. They also admitted the use of other technological tools to understand Japanese peers' messages, such as translators in the initial stage, and reduced their usage during the following weeks as one of the participants mentioned during the focus group.

Colombian EFL learners also acknowledge the platform's moderation process as crucial to participate effectively in OIE and interact with their Japanese counterparts. One hundred percent of the participants in this research project (8 of 8) accepted that it was their first time using an LMS such as Moodle and participating in this strategy.

Considering the interactions through multimodal texts (images, audio, videos or text) and EFL group's features where it was their first time participating in this strategy, their English level was basic, and their classes were online due to the pandemic caused by Covid 19. The fact to be able to register, create posts, and insert images, videos or audio, to post is enough demonstration of their achievement regarding digital literacy. Thanks to it, this group could interact with their international peers.

Half of the participants mentioned in the focus group and some class recordings that they had somewhat improved their English proficiency, especially in their communicative skills, not only writing but also reading, after participating in the OIE. The researcher could observe through class recordings several messages sent by the Colombian participants at the beginning and the end of the process, focusing on grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, semantics, and text structure, seeing an improvement in students' spelling, redaction, capitalization, punctuation and language use as could be evidenced in Figure 6 in ME's evidence of her first post (A) and another at the end of the project (B).

Figure 6 ME's evidence of her first post (A)



In the previous figure, it was possible to observe that the message was short (around sixty-two words), using very basic language without any connectors and with some punctuation inaccuracies.

ME's participation at the end of the project (B)

Colombian Culture
de [REDACTED]

Hello guys

This is a small sample of the cultural richness of my beloved Colombia. I want to show you one of our typical costumes and dances.

We perform this dance on July 20 at my school, the day of Colombia's independence, celebrating and commemorating our traditions. The dance is known as the Joropo, originally from the Colombian plains

On the other hand, there is the typical costume of the cumbia, originally from the Colombian Caribbean where African, indigenous and Spanish cultures merge.

83 palabras



In this post from the same participant, the researcher could evidence a more structured message with appropriate punctuation and capitalization. The length of the message is longer than the previous (eighty-three words), and her attempt to use some contrasting adverbs to provide more details about an idea she had stated at the beginning of her message.

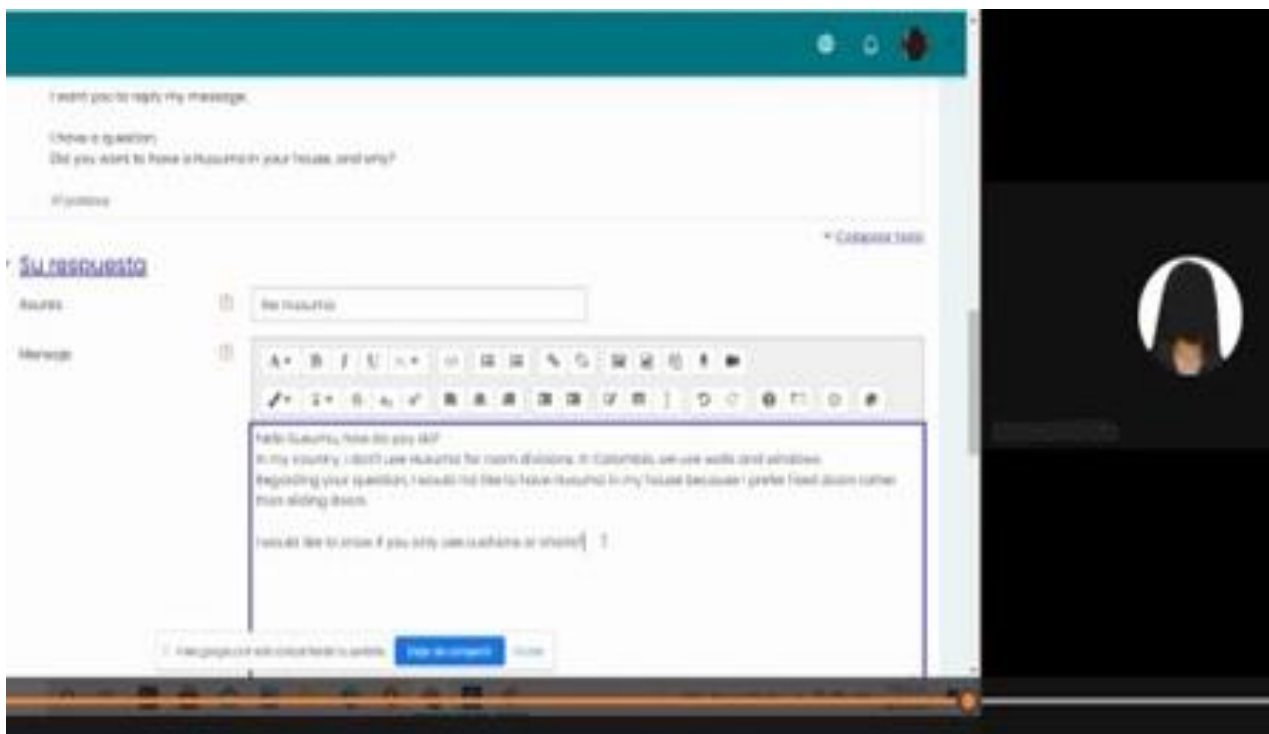
Furthermore, students mentioned during the focus group and some class recordings that they had a noticeable improvement in their English proficiency regarding their communicative skills in writing and speaking. Before students replied on the forum to their online peers, they

were required to read and understand their pen pal's messages in order to respond accurately. In some online classes, especially during the first and second week of starting the OIE, the researcher-teacher provided feedback or helped their participants to structure their post, as it is barely appreciated in Figure 7.

Another common aspect among the participants' responses, fifty percent of them expressed the sensation of improvement in their English language skills. They pointed out that this strategy helped them to improve some of them such as reading, speaking and writing. Focusing on the writing skills when SO mentioned in the focus group

“After my participation in this strategy, I can read text easier than before without using the translator [...] I also learned new vocabulary and reinforced the verb to be, simple present and past during my participation in the virtual exchanges.” (SO focus group participations. December 6th, 2021) (My translation)

Figure 7. Feedback provided by the research teacher in EFLL's posts.



Another participant, YM, highlighted the importance of participating in this strategy to improve their reading skills because she admitted that before this implementation, she did not understand the complete idea of the message. Hence, she used online dictionaries and sometimes google translator. Fortunately, at the end of the exchanges, she could understand the messages easily without using the translator.

“This strategy helped greatly with my reading skill because I could fairly understand the message at the beginning of the interactions. For this reason, I used online dictionaries, searching for unknown words and writing them down in my notebook or sometimes the translator. However, at the end of this project, I could understand those messages better, and I did not use the translator” (YM, focus group December 6th, 2021. My translation)

Discussion

This research shed light on some evidence that EFLL's participation in Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) somewhat boosted the development of certain components of ICC. First, interest in discovering other cultures, which has relation to attitudes; second, approach toward Japanese practices and products, acquiring knowledge of the other culture and my own; third, identify cultural differences and similarities that involve interpreting and relating skills. Furthermore, the teacher's support fosters ICC among EFLL through class discussions to demystify some beliefs. In addition, OIE enhance some English and digital skills in EFLL, strengthening their reading and writing abilities.

The findings of the study demonstrated that the participants identified several cultural similarities between the two countries, Colombia and Japan, including the celebration of special dates such as Mother's and Saint Valentine's Day, the practice of sports such as football, the existence of indigenous groups and similar preferences for video games. These cultural coincidences shared by Colombian and Japanese participants could be figured out through EFLL's participation in the OIE, their reflections in their diaries, and their participation in the focus group. Those similarities allowed the connection with their transnational peers to create bridges that promoted engagement through intercultural communication and understanding of beliefs, values and cultural practices (Hagley, 2016, 2020; López-Rocha, 2016; Ramírez & Cabrera, 2020). Referring to the attitude components in Byram's (2021) model, the author pointed out that "the intercultural speaker is interested in the other's experience of daily life in contexts not usually presented to outsiders through the media nor used to develop a commercial relationship with outsiders; is interested in the daily experience/culture of a range of social groups within a society and not only the culture of the dominant group". This was found in the

analysis of the information and those similarities that EFLL identify in their counterparts' daily life and they are not very well-known to others, they were only discovered through their interaction with Japanese students through the exchanges of messages on the OIE. Some information discovered by the learners about the Japanese lifestyle might be unveiled by searching the internet, watching T.V. and checking social media websites. However, the interesting point in this research is that Colombian participants made their own discoveries through the asynchronous message exchanges in English as a target language for both parts.

Furthermore, EFLL participation in these OIE reduced bias and stereotypes, which are often related to intercultural diversity, when learners found similarities among their cultures, they could notice that some cultural differences do not necessarily mean the existence of a conflict or cultural superiority by the culture host's as Byram (1997) mentioned in his study. Some authors such as Alvarez and Fernandez (2019), Helm (2014) and Godwin-Jones (2019) highlight the importance of implementing these strategies that allow EFLL to deconstruct some stereotypes and find similarities that facilitate communication, raising consciousness among our students. Those cultural coincidences and common interests, such as football, video games, celebrations or cultural practices contribute to establishing emotional connections with other people who are considered diverse, in this case, Japanese students, improving Colombian participants' motivation and engagement for learning English, which was the language used on those interactions (Alghasab & Alvarez-Ayure, 2021; Álvarez & Fernández, 2019; Izmaylova, 2017).

Additionally, learners acknowledge their pen pals' sensitiveness toward Japanese family relationships and norm acceptance, compared with her own context, where Colombian are often reluctant to follow the rules. In this sense, the previous result concurs with how geographical

space is defined within a particular national cultural group and how those definitions are understood by people from other countries (Byram, 2021).

It is also important to highlight the teacher's pivotal role as a moderator and guide during the implementation of OIE among Colombian and Japanese students within an LMS platform (Hagley, 2016, 2020, 2022). Their role favored fostering some components of the ICC model (Byram, 1997, 2001, 2021) by EFLL group's participation through multimodal asynchronous message exchanges. In this sense, learners were asked to post information following the acknowledgment, answer and ask a question technique to promote interaction among EFLL participants and reply to counterparts through four mandatory forums. Furthermore, the platform eased to build those intercultural relationships among learners because the interactions stimulated their curiosity and allowed them to get to know a different culture (Helm, 2014).

The previous arguments align with O'Dowd 2018 and God-wines Jones (2019), who mentioned that technological affordances might be useless without teachers' accurate orientation and moderation (Salmon, 2000). Teacher harnesses ICT tools to incorporate new teaching trends and facilitate learning, especially in second/foreign language education. However, it implies the development of digital literacy skills in order to address their students successfully, and OIE participation can contribute positively in this aspect, as Helm (2013) mentioned in her study where OIE elicited the use of online dictionaries to search unknown words, search machines to look up information or evidence to support students' arguments during their intercultural exchanges, and office tools to design digital presentations, write a report or share a document.

Catalano and Muñoz (2021) mention that a drawback was the disengagement of one of the participants because their pen pal was from Colombia, although she was studying at UNL

university in the USA. Researchers acknowledged their mistake of not having had regular check-ups on students to identify this situation and provoke thoughtful debates. Consequently, the researchers learned (too late, in their opinion) that a crucial aspect of using WhatsApp technology for intercultural purposes is the teacher's mediation along the communicative process as other authors as Hagley (2016), Izmaylova (2017) and Alghasab and Alvarez-Ayure (2021) have pointed out in their conclusions as the paramount importance the teacher's guidance, and their regular supervision of students' participation. Something similar was found in one of the participants in this research project, who mentioned her boredom due to her interactions with another Colombian pen pal. Her attitude changed when she could interact with a Japanese pen pal.

Several authors, including O'Dowd (2016, 2020), Guth and Helm (2010), and Helm (2014), have discussed the concept of OIE, which involves communication and collaboration between individuals from diverse backgrounds and across great physical distances. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the adoption of the OIE strategy, facilitated by the widespread use of information and communication technology tools (Catalano & Muñoz, 2021). Furthermore, the possibility to connect with different EFL groups worldwide, not exclusively with English-speaking country participants, has boosted the development of ICC in the expanding circles countries.

Highlighting the use of English as lingua franca in alignment with other research project results, whose participants valued the interaction with a non-native speaking peer (Alvarez & Fernandez, 2019) or elicited some shy or reluctant EFL learners to communicate using the target language with transnational peers who are learning it as well (Walzem, 2020). Alghasab and Alvarez-Ayure (2021) mentioned in their study the enhancement of some students' skills by

using a foreign language as a tool to share knowledge or opinions to justify or explain some similarities or cultural differences that could emerge during the interactions. At the same time, to ask or elaborate questions using the technique suggested during this strategy and promoting some of the dimensions in Byram's model.

Conclusions and further recommendations

In conclusion, the results of this study support the idea that participation in Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) is an effective strategy for fostering the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in English as a Foreign Language students. Observing the students' evolution in terms of confidence, commitment, and independence demonstrates the importance of direct interaction with people from different cultures to expand their intercultural understanding and appreciation. Additionally, the students' ability to respond outside of class hours indicates the high transferability of the acquired skills to real communication situations. These findings have significant implications for language teaching and learning, highlighting the relevance of OIE as an effective pedagogical strategy in the development of students' Intercultural Communicative Competence.

OIE is a promising alternative regarding English language proficiency and digital skills enhancement. For EFL learners at a basic level, asynchronous OIE mediated by written-driven text serve as a great strategy to help them gain confidence and develop some ICC components (Godwin-Jones, 2019; Hagley, 2016). This is accountable depending on the teacher's English instructions before the implementation, monitoring students' participation in the OIE and providing constant feedback, and suggesting appropriate pragmatic language use way in interactions such as greeting, expressing gratitude for receiving a message, offering apologies for the late reply, reply the message and insert some multimodal texts such as images, videos or voice recordings.

Considering the above conclusions, the notion of language focused on the socio-cultural approach is still valid because interactionism, even with non-native English speakers, influenced participants' motivation and increased the desire to use the language appropriately to

communicate accurately with their international peers. Furthermore, the vision of ELF fosters to deconstruct the hegemony of the native speakers. Participants did not have difficulties understanding and expressing their thoughts, opinions, and feelings toward their pen pals even though they were not from an English-speaking country. This situation helped those EFL learners who are reluctant or shy in class participate in OIE using a target language more comfortable with their transnational peers.

Finally, the implementation of strategies such as OIE that promote ICC equips EFL for a globalized world where ICC becomes essential. Those students who foster that competence are better prepared to face challenges and take advantage of opportunities in international contexts, whether in an academic, professional or personal field.

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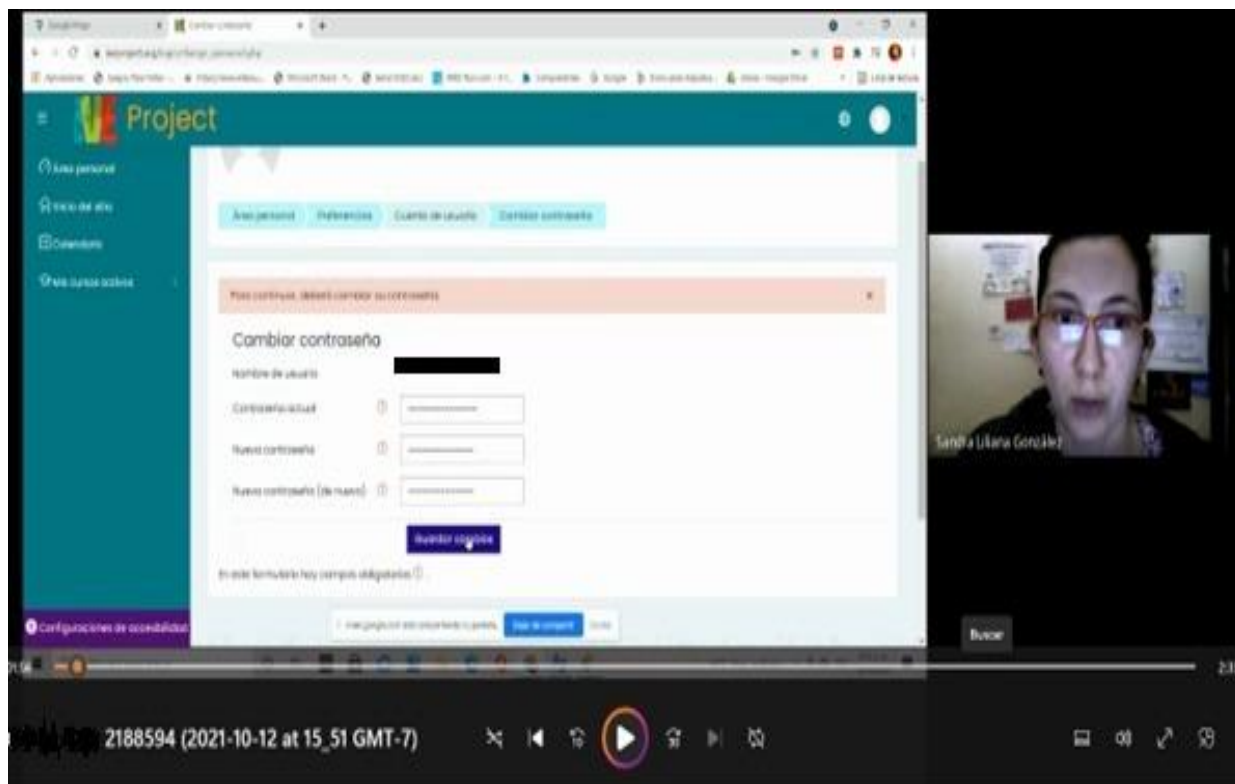
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APPENDIX A

E-MODERATION PROCESS TO PARTICIPATE IN OIE



Project

Inicio personal
Inicio del sitio
Calendario
Mis cursos activos

Inicio personal | Preferencias | Cuenta de usuario | Cambiar contraseña

Para continuar, deberá cambiar su contraseña

Cambiar contraseña

Nombre de usuario: [REDACTED]

Contraseña actual: [REDACTED]

Nueva contraseña: [REDACTED]

Nueva contraseña (de nuevo): [REDACTED]

Guardar cambios

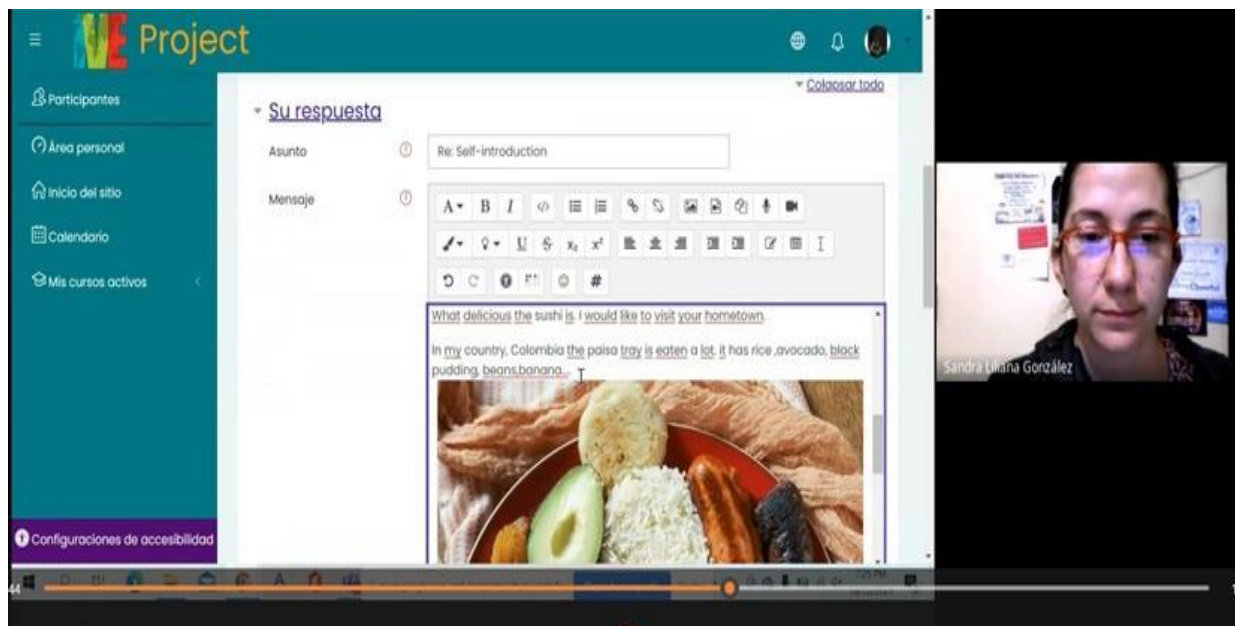
En este formulario hay campos obligatorios

Configuraciones de accesibilidad

2188594 (2021-10-12 at 15_51 GMT-7)

Sandra Liliana González

Buceo



Project

Participantes
Área personal
Inicio del sitio
Calendario
Mis cursos activos


Configuraciones de accesibilidad

Su respuesta

Asunto: Re: Self-introduction

Mensaje

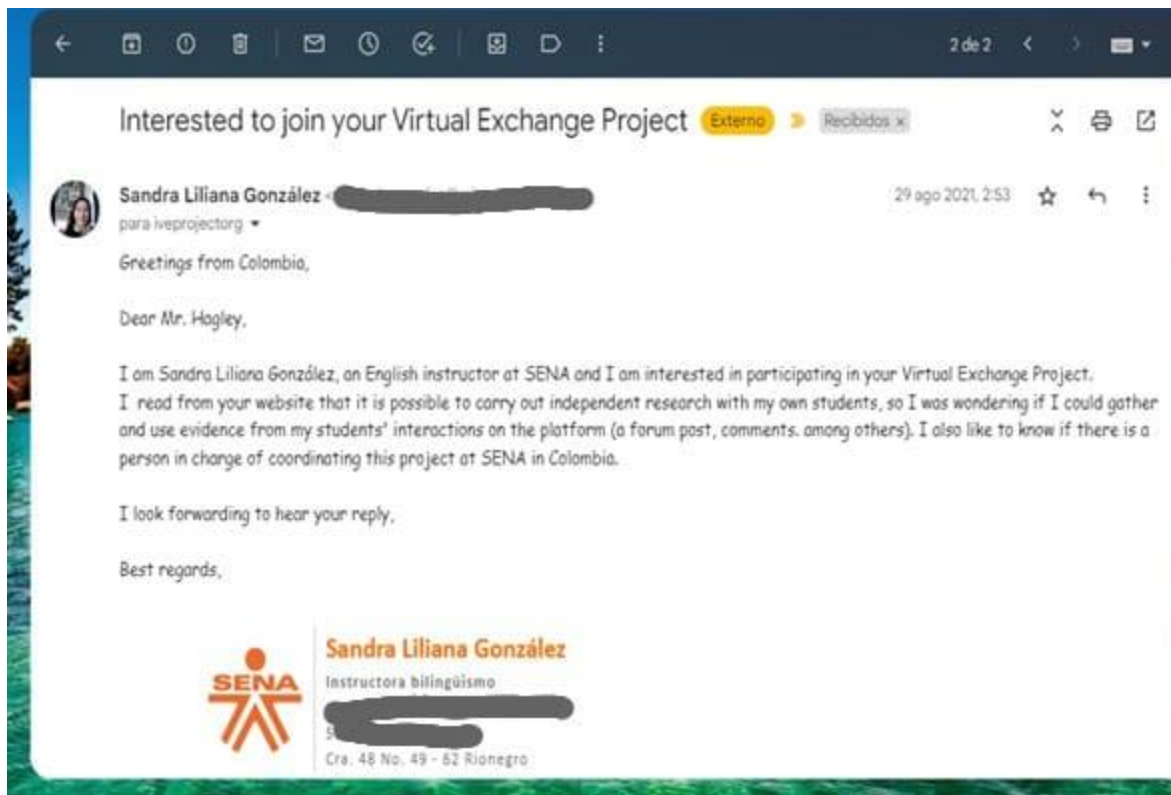
What delicious the sushi is. I would like to visit your hometown.
In my country, Colombia the paisa tray is eaten a lot. It has rice, avocodo, black pudding, beans,banana...



Sandra Liliana González

APPENDIX B

EMAILS SENT TO THE IVE PROJECT HEAD



APPENDIX C

EMAIL SENT TO THE PERSON IN CHARGE OF REGISTRATION OF STUDENTS

Omar Alexander Valderrama Espejo [redacted] 30 ago 2021, 11:01

Buenos días Sandra,

Con base en tu inquietud te comparto el mensaje enviado a los Centros seleccionados para participar en el segundo intercambio con APVEA en 2021. Considerando que los tiempos son amplios para la entrega de los datos, la información aplica de igual manera para tu Centro de Formación.

Cordial saludo Estimados Profesionales y/o Encargados,

Como es de su conocimiento desde el año 2019 se viene adelantando el Proyecto IVE (International Virtual Exchange Project) liderado por la Asia-Pacific Virtual Exchange Association (APVEA) mediante el cual se contribuye al fortalecimiento de las competencias lecto-escritoras en la lengua extranjera de los aprendices SENA y de los estudiantes del anillo Asia-Pacífico.

El segundo intercambio de esta vigencia iniciará el 11 de octubre, por lo cual se invita a adelantar la selección y envío de la información de cada aprendiz de formación titulada de su Centro que hará parte de esta iniciativa por medio de correo electrónico y utilizando el formato adjunto como base. Se sugiere que antes de iniciar el diligenciamiento del formato se revisen detalladamente los campos que se deben consolidar, con el fin de asegurar la efectiva entrega de la información.

Teniendo en cuenta el cronograma a continuación, el formato debe enviarse hasta el 24 de septiembre con el propósito de entregar oportunamente las credenciales de acceso a los aprendices participantes de la iniciativa:

Actividad	Fechas	Responsables
Selección y envío de información de aprendices a través del formulario	23 de agosto - 24 de septiembre	Profesional o encargado de bilingüismo en Centro de Formación
Envío de consolidado nacional a APVEA	27 al 30 de septiembre	Equipo Bilingüismo Dirección de Formación Profesional
Asignación y envío de credenciales de acceso	1 al 10 de octubre	APVEA- Equipo Bilingüismo Dirección de Formación Profesional

www.sena.edu.co @SENACOMUNICO

IVE Project <iveprojectorg@gmail.com> dom, 29 ago 2021, 3:37

para [redacted] mi

Good evening Sandra and [redacted]
 Thank you for your interest in the IVE Sandra. You and your students will be welcome.
 [redacted] is the person in charge at the SENA regarding the IVE so I'm cc'ing him here.
 If you are keen on also doing research please let me know what field you are researching and I can help you with that.
 Looking forward to seeing you and your students online soon.
 Kind regards,

Eric Hagley
 Lead Coordinator
 The International Virtual Exchange Project
iveprojectorg@gmail.com

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM SENT TO THE PARTICIPANTS

UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA

Escuela de Idiomas

Maestría en Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras

Formato de consentimiento de los participantes y código de ética

Título del estudio: Promoción de la competencia comunicativa intercultural a través de la participación en intercambios interculturales en línea en un grupo de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en Antioquia.

Investigadora principal: Sandra Liliana González

Queremos invitarlo a participar en un estudio investigativo que se desarrollará como proyecto de investigación del programa de Maestría en Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras de la Universidad de Antioquia. El propósito de esta investigación es determinar cómo la participación en los intercambios interculturales en línea podrían promover el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa intercultural.

Los participantes en este estudio serán estudiantes del programa de Gestión Contable del municipio de La Ceja. Considero que usted, estudiante activo del curso en mención, podrá brindar información fundamental al respecto. Para la obtención de datos en este estudio se grabarán las sesiones en línea, se les pedirá diligenciar un formato después de cada participación en unos foros, los cuales tendrá retroalimentación y se les pide corregir dichos comentarios y participar en un grupo focal al final de la intervención. Ninguna de las actividades planteadas en este documento supone riesgo alguno para la integridad física o mental de los participantes. La información recolectada será de vital uso para uso de la investigadora y su asesor y sus hallazgos se publicarán en la tesis de grado, la cual queda almacenada en la base de datos de la biblioteca de la Universidad de Antioquia. Además, puede llegar a ser publicado como artículo de revista. Adicionalmente, garantizo completo anonimato para los participantes en todo momento. Si llegara a ser necesario, usaremos las iniciales de alguno de sus nombres y alguno de su apellido. La duración de dicho estudio será de tres meses aproximadamente. La participación voluntaria en este estudio investigativo se le tendrá en cuenta como uno de los cursos virtuales de inglés que debe homologar.

Si tiene algún comentario, pregunta o sugerencia a partir de hoy y durante el desarrollo de la investigación, puede contactar a la investigadora principal Sandra Liliana González al correo electrónico sandra.gonzalez2@udea.edu.co. También puede recurrir al asesor encargado de mi investigación programa Juan Rodrigo Bedoya González en la oficina 12-206, teléfono 219 9640 en la Escuela de Idiomas de la Universidad de Antioquia, para información adicional. Recuerde que su participación será voluntaria. Podrá retirarse de este estudio en cualquier momento sin ningún tipo de consecuencia. Al firmar este documento, usted indica que ha leído y se le ha aclarado cualquier tipo de duda sobre su participación y que voluntariamente acepta participar.

Una copia de este documento le será entregada para que pueda conservarla.

Nombre del participante (Letras) _____

Firma: _____ Fecha: _____

APPENDIX E

DATA COLLECTION ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

B	D	E	F	G	H
	Conocimiento tanto por los aprendices como por los pen-pals	Actitudes, sentimientos hacia los OIE	Estrategias de enseñanza del idioma implementadas	Habilidades en sus competencias del idioma inglés	El uso de la plataforma
Nickname	Excerpts about the exchanges				
AB	"...pues con una compañera de Japón en lo que yo puse de policarpa me dijo que que chévere que lo que había hecho esa mujer por Colombia que no sabía Pues como mucho de ella, pero que lo aprendió de mí que se iba a poner a investigar sobre ella ..."	Bueno yo en este en este Cambio o intercambio intercambio que se realizó me sentí muy bien emm me gustó mucho conocer las demás culturas de los compañeros aparte analizar con una profesora, eh?	los trabalenguas que nosotros hacíamos que uno creía que se decía así, pero no había que meterle nada en el medio una F en el medio Entonces como como por eso.	Porque uno no maneja la pronunciación adecuada hay muchas cosas que de igual no las dice y hay algo que uno tiene que ir como mejorando en el tema de pronunciación acento y como al inicio, por ejemplo, los trabalenguas	La explicación que nos dio la profe fue muy importante, porque con las instrucciones que nos había enviado inicialmente no era del todo claro, al menos para mí y otros compañeros no entendíamos como funcionaba porque era la primera vez que participábamos en algo así, por ejemplo profe en la encuesta decía que como algún punto o aspecto a mejorar en la plataforma, eh? Personalmente Sería bueno que puedan poner el tiempo de la edición un poco un poco más extendido. De la edición
	"me gustó mucho conocer las demás culturas de los compañeros aparte analizar con la profesora ... Las encuestas realizadas de donde tomaban más café de mas té de donde comía más frutas porque así pues nos da a entender un poco más las culturas de	Generando lo de la encuesta, no en una pregunta que usted me hizo que cómo me senti generando el audio, eh? Para o sea, como para presentársela a los demás compañeros entonces uno siente igual muchos nervios porque uno tiene	las revisiones de la teacher de los posts, lo de las mayúsculas iniciales y los puntos, para que el mensaje nos quedara bien		
	Festivals & celebrations	GIFTS	Sheet1	WHO WE ARE	AB
	MAG	CM	SVM	SO	ME
	AL	YM	Sheet1 (2)	Hoja1	+

APPENDIX F

RESEARCH DIARY WITH PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS

Fecha	Pantallazo de participación	Similitudes o diferencias de mi cultura con la de los pares.	Opiniones personales (inquietudes, sentimientos, apreciación)	Aprendizajes respecto a la otra cultura
Oct 24 – Nov 6		<p>Gran diferencia encontré en este foro, como un compañero de Japón expresaba que es su cultura es tradición quitarse los zapatos en el momento de ingresar al lugar de cenar y nadie puede empezar hasta que todos estén allí mucho menos los hijos de la casa.</p> <p>Me parece algo muy novedoso de esta cultura ya que es algo muy peculiar para Colombia porque en nuestro país es totalmente lo contrario.</p> <p>Además que también se expresa la tradición en China de reunirse en familia y con amigos en una gran mesa llena de platos.</p>	<p>Me gustó mucho conocer estas tradiciones porque me parecen muy bonitas, además que no tenía el conocimiento de aquello de quitarse los zapatos para ingresar al lugar donde cenar.</p> <p>Es algo nuevo y raro para mí pero tan común e importante para esta cultura.</p> <p>Me gustaría seguir conociendo tradiciones como esta y así adquirir cada días todo aquello de lo que aún no aprendemos de estas culturas.</p>	<p>Aprendí y me marco mucho de esta cultura la tradición de quitarse los zapatos me pareció algo muy cómodo y con un gran significado de respeto.</p> <p>Además aprendí el gran respeto e importancia que le prestan a la familia, a las reuniones con amigos.</p>

APPENDIX G

TEACHER'S COMMENTS ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS

Buscar en el menú (Alt+)

100% Texto norm... Calibri 11

02/11/2021

son muy diferentes, sus jardines son hermosos y aquí solo se ven floristerías.

es bueno ver por este medio los demás países y conocer de ellos.

sus jardines son llenos de piedras de varias formas.

09/11/2021

La similitud frente a mi país es que los dos cuentan con grupos étnicos de indígenas, su diferencia es la características que presenta cada uno.

no sabía que en otros países podían haber estos grupos me asombra y me motiva a conocer un poco más de todo lo que hay en el mundo que se identifica con mi país.

Aprendí que su idioma es muy diferente a los demás idiomas asiáticos adicionales que se pueden reconocer por su cabello castaño. conocí un poco sobre el ramen comida típica de Japón es una especie de sopa hecha de verduras espaguetts.

la comida de Japón se ve muy simple no tiene la variedad que tenemos en nuestro país.

Entregada el 7 dic 2021 a las 17:22
Ver historial

- Self-reflectio...

- Self-r...



Comentarios privados

Sandra Liliana González
30 nov 2021 a las 9:13

Hello [redacted] how are you doing?
Le agradezco el envío de sus reflexiones, en las últimas participaciones le escribí varios comentarios pero es con el fin de que me expanda su apreciación, que me aclare cuando dice los dos, ellos, su idioma, a ¿quienes hace referencia? porque yo no sé si la interacción es siempre con

APPENDIX H

EVIDENCE FROM YM'S PARTICIPATION IN THE IVEPROJECT

FECHA	PANTALLAZO DE LA PARTICIPACIÓN
12 NOV 2021	<p>Hello, ██████!</p> <p>I'm ██████, I am from Colombia</p> <p>Regarding your question, I have not seen or heard of the anime Neon Genesis Evangelion. But maybe these days I'll be encouraged to see it.</p> <p>I don't usually watch anime, but in my childhood I had the opportunity to see some episodes of Captain Tsubasa, better known in Latin America as Supercampeones. Which is a manga series written and illustrated by Yōichi Takahashi in 1981.</p> <p>I also saw some chapters of Dragon Ball, which is a manga written and illustrated by Akira Toriyama and originally published in Shōnen Jump magazine, from the Japanese publisher Shōeisha, between 1984 and 1995.</p>  



Re: What is your favorite anime?

de ██████ (Colombia) - Sunday, 24 de Octubre de 2021 11:58

Thanks for your reply, ██████!

It's amazing to see the wide variety of manga they have in Japan.

Thank you for recommending me the manga "Bluelock", I have never seen it, but it sounds quite interesting. I hope to be able to see some episodes soon and tell you how it seemed to me.

Shonen Jump magazine sounds very interesting. I would like to know a little more about it.

Regarding Dragon Ball, my favorite character is Kamisama and Puar.

80 palabras

[Enlace permanente](#) [Mostrar mensaje anterior](#) [Editar](#) [Dividir](#) [Responder](#)