

The Use of Social Networks to Train the Intercultural Dimension of Foreign Languages at Higher Educational Institutions

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The paper aims to identify how social networks contribute to training the intercultural dimension of foreign languages at higher educational institutions. We attempted to answer the questions of what effect the use of social networks has on foreign language training, fostering intercultural and occupational skills, and how both students and teachers perceive the intervention. To achieve research goals, we used quantitative tools, such as (1) checklists, (2) assessment records on English for Specific Purposes, (3) the cultural intelligence scale, (4) the multidimensional emotional empathy scale, and (5) the questionnaire for reflective thinking. Qualitative data were drawn from the observations and interviews. The research findings confirmed that the use of social networks provided students with a true-to-life (authentic) environment and context to gain cultural experience and train a foreign language. This strategy boosts English for Specific Purposes learning and teaching experiences using a distance-learning component. A longitudinal research design enhances transformations in students in terms of emotional empathy and reflective thinking.

Keywords: higher educational institutions, foreign languages, intercultural dimension of foreign languages, social network

INTRODUCTION

Awareness and skills in the appropriate use of foreign languages in an intercultural context are becoming an important attribute of high-quality vocational education and a key objective and outcome of teaching foreign languages in higher educational institutions (Amara, 2020; Coste & Cavalli, 2015; Little & Kirwan, 2019; Wu & Marek, 2018). The intercultural dimension of foreign languages is commonly associated with a certain type of experience which can be gained either *directly*, through living in the target language environment, or *indirectly*, by putting the students into simulation-based or virtual settings used as a pedagogical tool in the process of language training (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2014; European Language Portfolio, 2011; Navilochnaya, 2018). An increasing number of universities are opting for indirect cross-cultural communication training; they either launch English-taught intercultural study courses or incorporate the intercultural communication module in the syllabus of the English for Specific Purposes [ESP] course (Satin, 2019).

Both types of universities pursue the same goals and utilize similar pedagogic tools to engage students (Bai, Larimer & Riner, 2016). The use of social networks to understand the culture of other people seems to be a better alternative that combines opportunities of direct access to carriers of the target culture and an indirect way of acquiring interculturality. Additionally, social networks create an out-of-institution (non-regulated) environment involving modern information technologies.

Social Networks as a Pedagogic Tool to Train Interculturality

The review of the literature found that information technologies, such as social networks, are increasingly used to train foreign language skills (vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing [use of language]), instilling communication (interaction) and interculturality (Ilchinskaya, 2015; Stockwell, 2014; Toetenel, 2014; Wu & Marek, 2014, 2016). Some studies confirm that social networks are optimal for training interculturality since they create a “technically-mediated and culturally-oriented online language learning community” (Hung & Yuen, 2010; Wu & Marek, 2018), engaging students in verbal and non-verbal communication using such three steps for establishing trust, collaboration, reflection, and the OSEE tool (O – Observe; S – State objectively what is happening; E – Explore different explanations of what is happening; E – Evaluate which explanation is the most likely one) to analyze the interaction process (Hilligjevan't Land, 2010).

Thus, the teaching and learning potential of social networks as a pedagogic tool that can foster intercultural awareness and skills are either under-represented by scholars or underestimated by ESP teachers. Moreover, some relevant studies are of short-term design; they are based on ready-made content (e.g., video or texts) rather than aimed at making it, which created a gap for this research.

Therefore, the paper aims to identify how the use of social networks contributed to training the intercultural dimension of foreign languages in higher educational institutions.

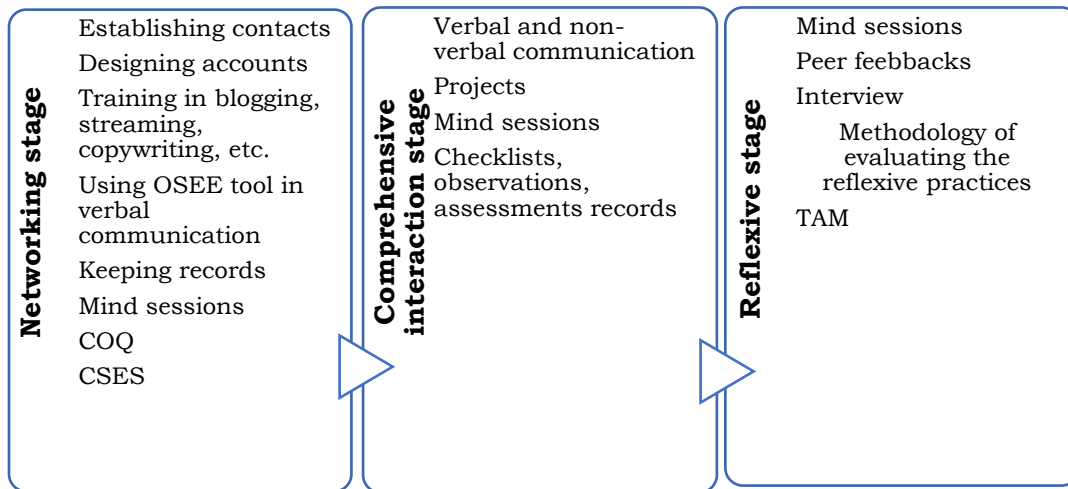
The research questions were as follows: (1) to investigate how the use of social networking media contributes to foreign language training, fostering intercultural and occupational skills, and (2) how both students and teachers perceived the intervention.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research involved a longitudinal design; it lasted from 2017 to 2019 (see the research flow in Fig. 1). We relied on quantitative and qualitative data drawn from checklists, observations, assessment records, and focus group interviews. Also, we applied (1) the Cultural Intelligence Scale [CIS] (Johnson & Buko, 2013), (2) the Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale [MDEES] (Caruso & Mayer, 1998), (3) the Questionnaire for Reflective Thinking [QRT] (Kember, Leung, Jones & Loke, 2000), and (4) the Triangle Assessment Method (TAM) (Pérez-Rodríguez & Rojo-Alboreca, 2017). To assess the effectiveness of the use of social networks in the development of the intercultural dimension of the foreign language, we used the following criteria: (1) students' language fluency, (2) interculturality, (3) occupational, educational, and institutional values, and (4) instructional effectiveness. Prior to the intervention, the sampled students

received training in blogging, streaming, copywriting, creating video content, using SMM and Google analytics.

FIGURE 1
SOCIAL NETWORKS SELECTION



User preferences in different countries and functionality were considered when selecting social networks for the experiment (Vincos, n.d), such as Facebook, Instagram, and QZone. The YouTube video-sharing platform was additionally incorporated into the learning environment to post long-form video content.

Description of the Activities Used in the ESP Course and Mediated by Social Networks

Activity 1. “Intercultural Window Online” Blog (Used Throughout the Experiment)

The sampled students, organized in several cross-functional task teams, were verbally or non-verbally involved in the web-based exchange with representatives of different cultures or ethnic groups. Students used the foreign language to communicate with visitors of their web pages, viewers of the videos, users who answered the questions, and participants in discussions. Furthermore, the sampled students promoted popularized Russian cultural norms and beliefs through several projects, such as flash mobs, promo videos, infographics, live streams, and posts. The topics for some of them were “My country in cultural artifacts,” “Humor in my culture,” “Let’s make big laugh,” “Proverbs: different words, same meaning,” “Cosmopolitan Russia,” “Russian national clothes – visualized music for the soul.”

This activity was accompanied by keeping students’ reflective journals to compare some aspects of their lives with the other culture representatives and assign them with essays aimed at revealing their insights into experiences of dealing with new cultures.

Assessment tools and resources:

- Checklists to evaluate the students’ projects or content by experts;
- Use of language (polite language, in particular), grammar (comparing, contrasting, cause-effect, conditionals);
- Students’ reflective journals;
- Students’ essays;
- Feedback from the respondents or followers;
- Click-through rate [CTR] per project;
- Engagement rate per post or project.

Activity 2. “Transformation Mind Sessions”

Sessions for students to share their cultural experiences with their peers. Students took time to speak about the citizens living in a particular cultural area and changed to have taken place in their attitudes and beliefs; they supported their talks with the information they had obtained through blogging. This activity helped the students establish connections between their own and target culture and articulate their “cultural” transformation. From the perspective of learning a foreign language, this activity developed the students’ fluency in comparing and contrasting aspects of cultures, reporting causes and effects of cultural norms, and speculating on possibilities and opportunities for countries.

Assessment tools and resources:

- Observation and evaluation forms;
- Surveys;
- Peer assessment;
- Voting.

Sampling

At the empirical stage, 286 undergraduates majoring in finance, marketing, international trade, international economics, and linguistics for Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (Moscow) were randomly surveyed to learn whether social networking was used to engage them in collaborative work, whether the ESP teachers of the Academic Department of Foreign Languages No. 3 had developed them interculturally and what pedagogic tools had been used.

A sample size calculator (Roasoft, n.d.) was used to identify representative samples. With the input figures of $n = 286$, $MOE = 10\%$, a confidence level of 95%, and a response distribution of 50%, the representative sample was found to be 73 people, which was used to form experimental groups [EG] and control groups [CG]. The EG comprised 37 students (21 females aged 18–19 and 16 males aged 18–19), and the CG comprised 36 students (22 males aged 18–19 and 14 males aged 18–19) ($M_{age} = 18.4$, $SD = 2.37$). Both groups were trained in intercultural communication as part of the ESP course. However, the EG students were trained in cross-cultural communication using social networks, while the CG students learned interculturality by reading texts, watching videos, and simulating a multicultural environment. The assessment tools were different. Moreover, both groups were considered homogeneous and relevant for the study, as the sampled students were of the same national origin, race, cultural, and religious background.

Major Ethical Considerations

It was a prerequisite for the research to provide induction and training for the sampled students to make them aware of potential communication ‘risks’ related to ethical issues, racism issues, taboo topics, confidentiality, and judgments of beliefs and values based on cultural stereotypes. Written informed consent was obtained from the students to ensure the principles of non-maleficence and the “*primum non nocere*” (Honan, Hamid, Alhamdan, Phommalangsy & Lingard, 2013; Melé & Sánchez-Runde, 2013).

Instruments

We used quantitative tools, such as checklists, assessment records in ESP, the cultural intelligence scale, the multidimensional emotional empathy scale, and the questionnaire for reflective thinking. Qualitative data were drawn from the observations and interviews.

Questionnaire for the Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview

A questionnaire was developed to address the criteria and increase the validity of the experimental results. The questionnaire consisted of six open-ended questions. Ten students (five males and five females) from the EG volunteered to participate in the focus group interview. The questions were intended to explore students’ perceptions of the use of technology for language training, fostering intercultural and occupational skills. The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. *Can you describe your experience of learning a foreign language through cross-cultural communication on social media?*
2. *What experience contributed to the transformation of your perception of different cultures? Give some examples.*
3. *What roles did you perform to get the projects delivered? Are those roles related to your future occupation?*
4. *What were, in your view, the benefits of the learning process organized in this way?*
5. *What problems occurred to you?*
6. *How would you resolve those problems now?*

The online text analysis tool was used to analyze the answers (Textalyser, n.d.). The data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics software (Darren & Mallery, 2003).

The Triangle Assessment Method [TAM] was used to assess the occupational and educational value, institutional value, and instructional effectiveness of using social networks to address interculturality within the ESP course. Four experts were involved in the criterion weighting procedure based on data obtained from the measurements and other sources. The students expressed their judgments as a degree of uncertainty for each criterion. The experts used a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 referred to “relative lack of uncertainty of judgment”; 2 = “low level of uncertainty of judgment”; 3 = “medium level of uncertainty of judgment”; 4 = “high level of uncertainty of judgment”; 5 = “level of absolute uncertainty of judgment”) to make the decision.

RESULTS

The assessment of language fluency, cultural awareness, cultural empathy, and reflexive skills was repeated several times during the experiment. The ESP test scores (modified ECTS-based assessment system) are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
ESP TEST SCORES BEFORE AND AFTER THE INTERVENTION
(ECTS-BASED ASSESSMENT SYSTEM, MODIFIED)

Group	Scores							
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
	70–74		75–79		80–89		90–100	
EG, <i>n</i> = 37	17	13	29	26	41	45	13	16
CG, <i>n</i> = 36	19	17	31	30	40	41	10	12

The ESP test scores for the EG were improved by approximately 9% more in sections “80–89” and “90–100,” while the grades for the CG increased by just 2%.

The results of statistical analyzes of the items of the Cultural Intelligence Scale [CIS], the item-total correlation coefficient increased from .648 to .808 before to .705 and .961 after the intervention, considering it was more significant than the minimal required of .600 (Hair, Black, Balin & Anderson, 2010). The standardized regression weights of CIS (the values for β) ranged from .724 to .860 before, and .848 to .963 after the experiment, which was significant and sufficient for good convergent validity considering the average variance extracted [AVE] for the values of all constructs were greater than the expected value of .500 (Hair et al., 2010).

The results of the assessments of emotional empathy before and after the experiment are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
EMPATHY SUB-SCALES-BASED RESULTS OF MEASUREMENTS IN THE EG AND CG
BEFORE AND AFTER THE EXPERIMENT

Subscale	Group	Mean		SD	Alpha	r	r ²
		Before	After				
ES	EG	3.24	4.11	0.71	.82	.72	.51
	CG	3.17	3.26				
PS	EG	3.34	4.17	0.82	.75	.71	.52
	CG	3.41	3.67				
RC	EG	2.94	3.13	1.15	.74	.69	.49
	CG	3.03	3.06				
EA	EG	2.29	3.78	0.89	.72	.56	.34
	CG	2.47	2.86				
FO	EG	3.07	4.12	0.81	.68	.64	.47
	CG	3.12	3.35				
EC	EG	3.42	4.22	0.92	.61	.34	.12
	CG	3.31	3.63				
GE	EG	3.53	3.95	0.63	.84	—	—
	CG	3.34	3.46				

Note: ES – empathic suffering; PS – positive sharing; RC – responsive crying; EA – emotional attention; FO – feeling for others; EC – emotional contagion; GE – general empathy. Source: Compiled by the authors.

Mean values for general empathy suggest an increase in emotional empathy in both groups. However, in the EG, the improvement was approximately 7% greater than that in the CG.

The measurements conducted in both groups using the questionnaire for reflective thinking [QRT] showed a positive change in the mean values for reflection and critical reflection, which was significant for the study (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
MEAN VALUES, CRONBACH'S ALPHA, T-VALUE, AND THE P-VALUE DRAWN FROM A
TWO-SIDED TEST (BEFORE AND AFTER THE EXPERIMENT)

Scale	Group	Mean		Alfa		SD		Test	
		Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	t	p
HA	EG	9.73	11.32	.47	.62	2.673	2.875	2.4281	0.0021
	CG	9.59	10.81	.43	.47				
U	EG	15.23	17.25	.46	.57	2.157	2.439	1.6834	0.0031
	CG	15.21	16.17	.47	.51				
R	EG	15.26	16.84	.51	.78	2.713	2.893	1.3145	0.0017
	CG	15.88	16.13	.51	.65				
CR	EG	13.25	15.31	.65	.75	3.117	3.579	3.4168	0.0043
	CG	12.98	13.65	.68	.71				

Note: HA – Habitual action; U – Understanding; R – Reflection; CR – Critical reflection. Results of the focus group interview.

Written records of the respondents' answers were kept by the interviewer, and, concurrently, the respondents' answers were recorded using a sound recording device. Then, the key positive words were identified in the answers; we used them to analyze the students' responses with the *Textalyser*. The revealed words were "communication," "good experience," "culture," "better understanding," "language fluency,"

“value,” “benefits,” and “future job.” The responses were distributed under broad categories according to the frequency of the key words previously outlined. Odd responses were manually analyzed.

Question 1. Seven people described their experience as “superior,” “motivating,” “beneficial,” “rewarding,” and “transformational.” Three people used words like “good” and “OK.”

Question 2. Five students reported that direct communication made the greatest contribution to their perceptions. Four students reported keeping their reflective journals as contributing factors. One student answered that it was the mind session that influenced them.

Question 3. Nine students responded that they performed different roles, such as bloggers, copywriters, project managers, video editors, presenters, and SMM marketers. One student reported that they were assistants.

Question 4. All interviewed students mentioned extensive and real-life foreign language practice in different cultural contexts as the greatest benefit of the intervention. Seven people admitted that the topics and teaching approach were the advantages of the intervention.

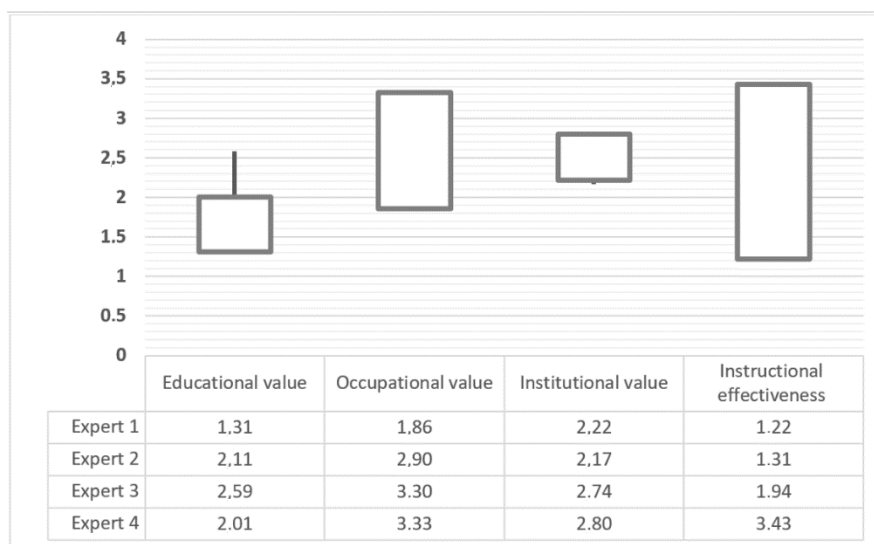
Question 5. At the beginning of the experiment, six students had difficulties in using the technology. Four students answered that they lacked confidence and fluency in verbal communication in foreign languages.

Question 6. Those who mentioned technology suggested doing some pilot projects before they could “go international” Those who mentioned language recommended repeating one and the same networking scheme with several followers.

In general, the students’ responses were positive concerning the format and content of the intervention, which proved that the use of social networks could have an impact on students’ language fluency, interculturality, and occupational sphere. Additionally, the EG students reported improvement in their skills of self-organization, problem-solving, and teamwork.

The results of the triangle assessment method presented below also proved that the intervention was effective (see Fig. 2).

FIGURE 2
ASSESSMENT OF THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS TO ADDRESS INTERCULTURALITY
WITHIN THE ESP COURSE BASED ON THE EVALUATION OF THE
CRITERIA BY EXPERTS



The diagram shows that the ranges of the uncertainty of expert judgments on the criteria varied considerably, both vertically and horizontally. While showing relative unanimity in evaluating the institutional value of the use of social networking sites to train students interculturality within the ESP course

(the average level of certainty), experts' decisions about the instructional effectiveness of this educational intervention were found to be widely dispersed, suggesting that more research could be necessary to convince them. The judgments about the educational value of the intervention were relatively positive (Bruno, Galuppo & Gilardi, 2011).

Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega were used to analyze each criterion separately (students' language fluency [SLF], interculturality [I], occupational [OV], educational value [EV], instructional effectiveness [IE], and institutional value [IV]). Confirmatory factor analysis [CFA] was used to identify the correlation among the criteria (see Table 4).

TABLE 4
RESULTS OF CFA USED TO IDENTIFY CORRELATION AMONG THE CRITERIA

Criteria	α	ω	1	2	3	4	5	6
SLF	.90	.82	.85*	.83*	.84*	.81*	.85*	.83*
I	.89	.85		.74*	.81*	.83*	.78*	.77*
OV	.86	.89			.89*	.83*	.87*	.78*
EV	.91	.85				.86*	.93*	.91*
IE	.87	.93					.88*	.92*
IV	.91	.92						.89*

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha; ω = McDonald's coefficient; * $p < .001$.

The correlation among the criteria was reliable and statistically significant, considering that according to George & Mallery (2003), the estimated satisfactory figures should be greater than 70, the good values should be higher than 80, and the excellent figures should be greater than 90.

Limitations of the Study

Some results of this study may seem tentative because only one higher education institution participated in it. The number of students involved in the experiment, the bias of the research team members, instrumentation, and pedagogical tools can also be argued and considered a limitation.

DISCUSSION

Due to its longitudinal design, the study made it possible for the sampled students to experience a greater cross-cultural transformation and obtain a better environment for foreign language practice.

Research results suggest that the use of social networks can be educationally and instructionally rewarding when applied to training the intercultural dimension of foreign languages in higher educational institutions. The study shows that the use of social networks contributes to foreign language training, fostering intercultural and occupational skills. Furthermore, the intervention was generally positively perceived by both students and teachers. We also found that the use of social networks provided teachers with a broader range of pedagogical tools, encouraging students' interest in exploring new language and social experiences as well as contributing to professional self-development. Intercultural engagement increased students' cultural empathy helped them overcome stereotyping and ethical dilemmas and improved their national (cultural) self-identity and self-esteem. This strategy enriches the classroom-based ESP learning experiences of the students using a distance-learning component.

The findings presented in this paper are consistent with other national and international studies that reveal the use of social networks for educational purposes (Abraham & Saini, 2015; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Kovaleva, Dymova & Kochneva, 2019; Zaidieh, 2012). This research is also in line with previous research by Hafner & Miller (2019) and Solomatina (Solomatina, 2018), which confirmed that ESP training involving intercultural components is more effective in fostering student professional and language competencies due to increased motivation for learning.

CONCLUSION

The research findings confirm that social networks provide students with a true-to-life (authentic) environment and context for gaining cultural experience and training a foreign language. Such an environment enhances ESP learning and teaching experiences using a distance-learning component. A longitudinal research design enhances the transformations that occur in students in terms of emotional empathy and reflective thinking. Teachers generally regard social media as a pedagogic tool with its educational and institutional value, although they are moderately hesitant about its occupational and instructional effectiveness.

Further research requires investigating whether the participation of international students in the intercultural training process of students could be effective.

The views of the research team members on social justice and racism issues created a background of pedagogical commitment. The reasons for the views were their experience of participating in academic mobility programs and the challenges they faced when living abroad. The institutional context was also essential because the university, used as an experimental base, offered several international and joint programs in business studies, tourism management, economic security, business analytics, international economics, and logistics. These programs were attracting an increasing number of students for Azerbaijan, Turkey, India, the Republic of Congo, Syria, and others, creating a multicultural environment and promoting intercultural communication. The internationalization of the internal job market was also a decisive factor for the study, as more and more companies gradually establish their subsidiaries in Russia and employ local personnel who are required to interact cross-culturally.

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