Turning the Tables: Using Non-English Conversation Tables to Create Connections for International Students, Campus, and Community. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

International students, especially those studying in English language institutes at universities in the United States, often struggle to create connections with local students and the host community. Learners of non-English languages also struggle to find opportunities to practice languages that are uncommon in the surrounding community. This Practice Report describes an innovation where, instead of using English Conversation Tables to help international students practice English, professors "turned the tables" and allowed international students to become the experts, teaching local students their languages and cultures at weekly Non-English Conversation Tables held at a mid-sized rural public university. Through the Conversation Tables, both international and domestic students developed meaningful connections, deepening their on-campus engagement. These connections fostered self-growth and intercultural competence in both groups of students, some of whom had very limited prior experiences with cultural diversity. The authors identify the characteristics of the language tables that led to their success, including the location, facilitation, and promotion, to provide a model for reproducing the intervention in other contexts.

Keywords: Conversation Tables; student engagement; intercultural competence; sense of belonging.

The Role of Social Connections in Promoting Engagement

When students enter tertiary or post-secondary education, they bring a range of academic and social experiences with them. To be successful in college and complete their degrees, they need to persist in their field of study, fulfill course requirements, graduate in a timely manner, and demonstrate competence in the knowledge and skills needed for employment in a professional workforce (Cui et al., 2019; Jones-White et al., 2010; Office for Fair Access, 2014). Although considerable attention has been given to providing academic supports to increase success, there is mounting evidence that psychosocial factors play an important role in student success as well. Psychological constructs such as self-esteem, positive emotions, and a sense of belonging have been shown to be critical in students' success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018) and promote student engagement. This Practice Report acknowledges the importance that connections, inclusion and belonging play in supporting student success.

Student engagement encompasses a range of psychological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses, which students bring to the learning process, that enable them to achieve successful learning outcomes (Gunuc & Kuzu, 2014; Vu et al., 2016). At the post-secondary education level, these include engagement in both classroom and campus environments. To engage, however, students need to feel connected. Social engagement that encourages students to connect emotionally and cognitively to their learning content and learning environment will promote their educational success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Strydom et al., 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Unfortunately, not all students find sufficient opportunities to engage on campus and feel that sense of belonging. The literature shows there is a strong association between students' campus engagement and their demographic characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, mother tongue and background; students who experience less connection and support for the demographic characteristics they identify with are less likely to engage and more likely to abandon their studies (Lawrence, 2005). The importance of students' positive connection with their peers, faculty and college environment is well-recognized in educational research (Gosnell, 2020; Libbey, 2004). Furthermore, the benefits of these connections are more pronounced among students of color (Eodice et al., 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to find effective ways to intentionally engage all students, especially diverse students, on campus and make every effort to ensure they feel connected (Quaye et al., 2019; Strum et al., 2011).

Diverse students who are also international and from a non-English speaking background can find building connections on a new college campus and developing a sense of belonging particularly challenging and, consequently, may struggle to engage. Language barriers (Akanwa, 2015; Mukminin et al., 2013) and lack of intercultural contact (Yu & Moskal, 2019) are among the top reasons why international students avoid engagement on campus or with local students. This lack of engagement impacts social life quality that can hinder quality of life factors as well as academic and social success. Social life quality, including the quality and quantity of students' social network and social interactions, is an important factor impacting well-being. Several studies have looked at aspects of social life in international students as to whether they engage: (1) with students from the same culture/nationality, other international students, or local students, and (2) in various campus activities (Glass, 2012; McFaul, 2016). Research shows that a culture of inclusivity, leadership opportunities and cross-cultural activities are known to be important factors in increasing campus engagement of international students (Glass et al., 2015), which in turn contribute to their academic and personal success (Glass, 2012; Glass et al., 2015; McFaul, 2016). Furthermore, meaningful cross-cultural activities, combined with the removal of language barriers, can benefit personal growth and intercultural competency in both international and local students (Hoekje & Stevens, 2017; Yu & Moskal, 2019).

The location of the host university for international students can also impact a sense of belonging and engagement, and the geographic location of the host university is one of the most important factors on their level of adjustment (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). International students in rural campuses often come from urban hometowns and, therefore, need to adapt not only to a new culture—a challenge those who attend universities in the metropolitan areas also face. Additionally, they are also required to adapt to a rural life environment and culture on a campus which typically lacks diversity, hosts fewer international and minority students, and is in a remote, culturally non-accommodating or even less than welcoming town. These dynamics negatively impact the frequency and type of activities and experiences international students can engage in (Edgeworth & Eisman, 2007; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002) and the lack of opportunity and engagement can cause attrition in international student enrollment (Mamiseishvili, 2012). Although rural universities may be challenged to provide sufficient opportunities, activities, and experiences that build cross-cultural connections and remove language barriers, it can be done. This article presents one promising, innovative practice implemented at a rurally located university campus that achieved this goal.

Method

In this practice report, we describe the genesis, organization, and reception of the Non-English Conversation Tables at the authors' institution —a campus activity designed to foster engagement, and linguistic and cultural exchange among international students, domestic students, faculty, staff, and community members—so that others may learn from it and adapt it to their contexts. Our data come from notes, memos, and records collected by one of the authors for the purpose of continuing and improving the Conversation Tables, as well as observations of attendee public behavior and feedback provided to the organizers for the purpose of operating the Conversation Tables. None of the data was originally collected for research purposes and has been anonymized. The University of Nebraska at Kearney Institutional Review Board (UNK IRB) approved this study, deeming it exempt from review.

The Non-English Language Conversation Tables Model

Building on the Success of English Conversation Tables

The University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) is a regional public university in Kearney, Nebraska, a community of 33,790 residents (U.S Census Bureau, 2022) located about three to five hours from the nearest major metropolitan areas with populations over 500,000. As of the first semester of 2021, the most recent semester for which complete data is available, UNK had 6,275 students. In 2021, approximately 90 % of the students came from Nebraska and neighboring states (of which around 84% came from Nebraska), but there were students from 47 U.S. states and 56 other countries (University of Nebraska

at Kearney Factbook, 2021a). In the first semester of 2021, UNK had 350 international students, constituting 5.58 % of its total enrollment. International students came from all parts of the world, but the highest numbers were from Japan, Mexico, Nepal, and China with 109, 48, 32, and 23 students, respectively (University of Nebraska at Kearney Factbook, 2021b).

Many international students come to UNK, at least in part, to improve their English, be it through a semester or year abroad, or even an entire degree program. Some come to UNK for the specific purpose of developing their English via the English Language Institute (ELI). As part of this intensive academic and social English program, which prepares international students for university studies at UNK and in other anglophone contexts, students are required to attend weekly English Conversation Tables. There, they practice speaking English with fluent speakers, all members of the campus or local communities, through a mix of discussion questions and open conversation.

Despite their genesis within the ELI, the English Conversation Tables are open to the campus; consequently, many other international students often attend. In doing so, ELI and other international student attendees meet friends who can help them improve their English and navigate the local cultures, while domestic attendees obtain insight into other cultures that they may not gain elsewhere in the community. Kearney, despite its growing Spanish-speaking population, remains largely white and anglophone: more than 85 % of the population is non-Hispanic white, and less than 10 % speak a language other than English at home. Of these, the vast majority speak Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). In other words, there are few opportunities to speak languages other than English and Spanish in Kearney, making language practice difficult for speakers of other languages.

For example, a graduate student whose first language is widely taught in the U.S., but not widely spoken in Nebraska communities, struggled to connect with people in the area due to her English language proficiency and life stage. She described not knowing any local speakers of her language outside her household. She and her family learned about the English Conversation Tables, and she began to bring her family every week. She and her family appreciated the social interaction and the opportunity to work on their English with sympathetic native speakers and international students who were interested in learning about her culture. There, she also connected with a native English speaking faculty member who was fluent in her language, helping her to feel more confident in her English and providing her with a local contact who spoke her language.

Although the English Conversation Tables proved successful in providing language practice opportunities, it became apparent through student stories that the positive connections and engagement opportunities were just as important to them as the academic goal of learning English and that these social connections could be more intentionally cultivated. The English Conversation Tables had also been operating from a deficit model, in which the native-English speakers were seen as the experts and native speakers of other languages were the learners. This put students, such as the one mentioned in the previous paragraph, in a position to see themselves as less competent. Eodice et al., (2019) indicated that students' feelings of connectedness are influenced by the way they see themselves in the world and that competency, as well as social connection, is a strong source of belonging. These situations prompted a language professor, who regularly attended the English Conversation Tables, to consider "turning the tables" to help language learners practice languages other than English (LOTEs) with the former novices now positioned as the new experts. The added advantage was it created a venue for all languages other than English to be valued and utilized and allowed native speakers to engage and connect from a strengths-based position. As a result, the non-English Conversation Tables were born in February 2022.

Implementing the Non-English Conversation Tables Model

Apart from the language learning goal, the non-English Conversation Tables sought to bring together people who may not have otherwise crossed paths while helping everyone learn more about their campus, local community, and the world. This expanded the reach of the Conversation Tables. There was just one rule: no English would be used except for teaching purposes. Rather than struggling to communicate, non-anglophone international students would now be the experts who would help learners of their languages develop their linguistic and cultural competence.

The International Student Services (ISS) Office was instrumental in organizing the tables. ISS helped the professor identify international students who spoke nearly all the languages for which the Modern Language Association collects enrollment data and aided in the weekly setup (Looney & Lusin, 2019). ISS found speakers of the following languages who were interested in leading Conversation Tables: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. Each language table was led by at least one international student, but ideally by two or three to account for the possibility of absences. The offer to lead language tables was, however, extended to the entire university community to maximize engagement opportunities. No international student speakers of other languages volunteered to lead tables, but a professor offered to host a Hindi table, and the organizers gladly accepted.

Everyone who wanted to practice or learn a LOTE was invited to the non-English Conversation Tables, including UNK students, faculty, staff, and other community members. No enrollment in a language class or UNK affiliation was required or expected, and no specific language level was needed. Conversation Tables were promoted through the Department of Modern Languages, the Office of International Education Instagram and Twitter accounts, and personal accounts by word of mouth. Additionally, a standard listserv email sent campus-wide offered a weekly reminder of the time and place for the tables.

Conversation Tables were held every Thursday afternoon from 4-5pm in the Student Union food court. Attendees first signed in at the registration table, which was staffed by ISS personnel and language professors. Then they made their nametags with three pieces of information: their name, their language/s, and their language level/s. Flag stickers were used to identify the languages, while colored dots were used to identify the levels. The dots helped both table leaders and other attendees engage with participants in ways that would be appropriate for their language level.

Event staff then directed attendees to their tables. Each table was identified with a flag from a country that spoke that language. Most languages had one table, but some languages with particularly strong demand had two or more. Some of this demand was the result of professors requiring or incentivizing their students to attend, but the required and incentivized attendees were frequently accompanied by others who were not even taking a class in the table's language. Up to 100 people attended the Conversation Tables each week. The number of people at each individual language table varied from two to 20 attendees.

Creating Meaningful Connections Through Non-English Conversations Tables

Although no formal data were collected, anecdotal information provided an opportunity for formative evaluation of the model. Regardless of the number of attendees at each table, table leaders and other attendees reported similarly positive experiences. One leader of a typically small table, an international degree-seeking student and speaker of a language rarely spoken in the local community, described the Conversation Tables as the highlight of her week. A middle-aged non-student community member, a speaker of a widely taught language rarely spoken in the local community, looked forward to the weekly tables as her only opportunity to speak her first language outside the home. In the words of the Spanish table leaders, the consistently large Spanish table was always a *fiesta* (party).

English-dominant local students, likewise, looked forward to the weekly language tables and reaped tangible benefits. One U.S.-born heritage speaker[1] of yet another language that was rarely spoken in the local community did not know any local speakers of her language from outside her household prior to the Conversation Tables. That changed, however, when she met an international degree-seeking student who spoke her language natively. She grew more confident in her LOTE, and by the end of the semester, she was able to pass an approved Seal of Biliteracy test, which is an official recognition of spoken and written proficiency (Global Seal of Biliteracy, 2022).

Second language learners also created connections through the Conversation Tables. Several learners of Italian, all of whom were enrolled in a basic Italian class that required them to attend the Conversation Tables, said that the Italian table had both helped them feel more secure in their spoken Italian and helped them to connect with Italians. Upper intermediate level non-heritage speakers of Spanish likewise eagerly awaited the weekly Spanish table, where they said they increased their overall confidence in speaking Spanish, particularly informal Spanish, and acclimated to a variety of Spanish accents, as speakers from Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela consistently attended the Conversation Tables. The same happened at the French table, where attendees consistently heard accents from distant regions of the Francophonie.

Some regular attendees even developed social relationships that they took beyond the Conversation Tables, both with other language learners and with their table leaders. Regular attendees at the consistently large Spanish and French tables, including those who did not have class together, became friends with each other and their table leaders, communicating on social media and spending time together outside of the Conversation Tables.

Overall, the first semester of non-English Conversation Tables was considered highly successful by the campus organizers. Second language learners of LOTEs gained real-world practice with fluent speakers. Heritage speakers became more connected to their cultures, and international students met local friends who were curious about their language and culture,

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[1] The term *heritage speaker* refers to an individual who is raised in a home where a language other than the dominant societal language is spoken and is to some degree bilingual in both the home and dominant language (Valdés, 2005).

thus facilitating exchange. All groups looked forward to the weekly Conversation Tables because of the linguistic, cultural, and social benefits they acquired there. Furthermore, some participants who would otherwise not have been likely to meet people different from them, due to a lack of opportunities or a tendency to gravitate toward those who were similar, came into contact and developed practical skills and meaningful relationships from the contact. Consequently, Non-English Conversation Tables returned in September 2022 on the same day and at the same time with the intent to increase the number of languages offered and attendees participating each week.

Discussion of the Non-English Conversation Tables Model's Success

The weekly non-English Conversation Tables presented a simple strategy that successfully created the conditions for "meaningful domestic-international interactions through relationship-building opportunities" (Deardoff, 2011, p. 72). These interactions and relationships are fundamental, not only to the development of intercultural competence (Deardoff, 2011), but also to fostering campus engagement, and student success (Glass et al., 2015; Quaye et al., 2019; Strum et al., 2011). In contrast to the English language Conversation Table model previously implemented, the non-English Conversation Tables positioned international and multilingual students, faculty, and community members as the expert facilitators for domestic students and English-dominant second language learners, roles that international students did not often get to play in classrooms or other campus events. This allowed these students to develop a sense of competence and strengthen a sense of belonging to the campus community. Unlike one-time cultural diversity events that are often resource intensive and require significant investment from organizers and little from attendees, the weekly non-English Conversation Tables sustained a context for meaningful connections throughout the semester without extraordinary efforts or resources from organizers, an important consideration for campuses that are less diverse or located in communities with limited diverse resources.

The physical location of the non-English Conversation Tables in large, open common meeting space the Student Union, also likely contributed significantly to their success. This communal area, located near the main dining hall, is one of the most heavily trafficked and visible locations on campus, which would be familiar and accessible to any potential attendee. The Conversation Tables transformed this common meeting space on Thursday afternoons, dotting it with international flags and the many sounds and faces of the participants and their languages. Distinct spaces such as the communal meeting space in the Student Union have been shown to contribute to the construction of narratives of place on campuses, and position individuals in relationships to one another and the institution (Temple, 2009). For that hour, speaking languages other than English became a visible part of the social life of the institution both tangibly and symbolically in the minds of participants. To see the common meeting space during the non-English Conversation Tables was to understand that multilingualism had a place at the center of campus life. In addition, locating the tables at the Student Union, a common place shared with all campus students, regardless of their department and college, fostered inclusion and the sense of belonging to the campus (Glass et al., 2005; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Lawrence, 2005).

Another key to the Conversation Tables' success was the partnership between the Department of Modern Languages and the Office of International Student Services. Most international students do not study modern languages on campus but connecting students in Modern Languages courses with native speakers of those languages for naturalistic conversation practice was an important benefit. The Conversation Tables created the context to bring together the two groups (domestic language learners and international multilinguals) who might not otherwise have encountered one another on campus, but had the potential to share interests, attitudes, or dispositions stemming from their shared interests in international education. It is important to note that the non-English Conversation Tables extended beyond the languages taught in the Department of Modern Languages to include many more languages spoken by international students on campus. This extended the opportunities for engagement and connections. The campus-wide promotion of the event, through weekly listserv emails and media promotions (e.g., Ellison, 2022), led to unanticipated connections with other campus multilinguals or community members who may not have otherwise found other speakers of their language on campus. It also helped language professors whose target languages are not spoken in the community.

Conclusion

In summary, the use of non-English Conversation Tables is a promising, innovative practice for engaging local and international students in psychosocially empowering ways that build meaningful connections and promote campus engagement which, in turn, can contribute to student success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Strydom et al., 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; Zepke & Leach, 2010). The non-English Conversation Tables put international students in roles that convey value for their native languages and areas of cultural expertise, and allow them to see themselves as competent and valuable participants in the campus community (Eodice, Geller & Lerner, 2019). At the same time, they met fluent English speakers

with whom to practice their English outside the event. Local students learning LOTEs also benefited because they were able to practice new language skills in a safe environment and develop cross-cultural connections they may not have otherwise encountered. Finally, non-English Conversation Tables can be an effective intervention to create a vibrant cross-cultural activity that can enrich the campus life for both international and local students, especially on a campus with few international students or where the surrounding community is less diverse. Multilingual members of the broader community can also build connections and enrich the campus experience through their participation. The characteristics of this model that contributed to its success could inform other efforts to create connections for international students, such as: empowering diverse students as leaders or facilitators, centering activities in spaces on campus that make them visible to the community, and collaboration with other institutional units, in this case Modern Languages, with shared interests in international education.

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