



RESEARCH PAPER

Social Justice Education as an Intercultural Experience for Foreign Students in the United States

Ellen Yeh *; Yonty Friesem 
Columbia College Chicago, USA

*eyeh@colum.edu | **yfriesem@colum.edu

How to cite this article:

Yeh, E., & Friesem, Y. (2023). Social Justice Education as an Intercultural Experience for Foreign Students in the United States. *The EuroCALL Review*, 30(2), 24-36. <https://doi.org/10.4995/eurocall.2023.15010>

Abstract

Many language learners struggle with unequal access and lack of opportunities for active participation in meaningful reflections both inside and outside of the classroom. In this study, 15 international college students engaged in critical media literacy discussions about a myriad of social justice topics through the lens of intercultural understanding and acceptance. Participants were English language learners who analysed content and recorded video reflections on an online video discussion platform, Flipgrid, as they answered five critical media literacy questions. These critical questions fostered discussions of intercultural interpretation and students expressed their perceptions of social justice issues. This project drew on the theory of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) integrating social justice into the language curriculum in two ways: by exposing students to important issues, and by helping them claim their voice in the discussion. The **results of students' video reflections and face-to-face** discussions show the trajectory and growth of their progress in intercultural awareness. The findings offer guidelines for language educators to incorporate issues of social justice by using engaging platforms and media literacy practices.

Keywords

Intercultural competence; media literacy education; online video discussion; social justice

1. Introduction

The issue of social justice has been a persistent focus in the fields of TESOL and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). **"Social Justice in English Language Teaching"** was a recent volume published by TESOL Press, **raising educators' awareness that language learners are often on the margins of society and highlighting how to advocate for learners' needs** (Hastings & Jacob, 2016). The EuroCALL Conference has previously reinforced the importance of incorporating social justice education into real-world settings by proposing **"engagement with issues of power and inequality and an understanding of how our classrooms and conversations are related to broader social, cultural and political relations"** (Helm et al., 2015, p. xiii). Language educators have been challenged to explore the relationships of power, equality, culture, and language in multicultural learning environments outside of the walls of the classroom more than ever before (Anwaruddin, 2019).

Despite the emphasis on social justice education in recent years, one of the factors of unequal participation is the lack of opportunities to explore and practice more in-depth themes of conflict, inequality, and injustice. Instead, many communicative language **teaching curricula maintain discussions that are superficial (O'Dowd, 2016)**. Previous literature also reveals that the communicative language teaching approach has been neglecting its original purposes, which were social justice and political education (Roberts et al., 2001). Topics only focusing on foods, festivals, sports, music, or travel may fail to address more fundamental discussions, such as gender, race, class, language, and culture (Nieto, 1995). Students may learn about cultural artifacts through more superficial topics; however, they should also acquire the knowledge and skills to collaborate and communicate with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kubota et al., 2000).

While avoiding discussion of difficult cultural themes and issues may be useful for initial ice-breaking activities or language practice, it fails to teach language learners about **critical reflection on their own culture and the target language culture (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009)**. **Kramsch (2014) adds that communicative activities often focus on "phatic exchanges that are no longer what communicative language pedagogy had in mind when it aimed at teaching learners how to interpret, express, and negotiate intended meaning"** (p. 98). Therefore, the present study aims to exploit the potential of applying critical questions in media literacy to encourage language learners to approach social justice and intercultural themes through a critical lens and to evoke the original transformative and critical inquiry of communicative language teaching. This study investigates the trajectory **and growth of language learners' progress in intercultural communicative competence (ICC) over time**. By capturing intercultural exchanges on social justice issues in both face-to-face discussion and online video-recorded reflections, the present study showcases how negotiation of cultural differences with social justice issues can support genuine interactions and deep learning, as opposed to **Kramsch's (2014) notion of "surfing on diversity."**

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. Intercultural communicative competence for teaching social justice

The field of ICC has been criticised for making little attempt to incorporate social and political issues into the research agenda and curricula (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020; Piller, 2011). Researchers who support integrating social justice and political dialogues into the ICC curriculum argue that to achieve the goal of involving more diverse and inclusive

perspectives on international communication and globalisation, it is essential to focus on sharpening the lens on the views and experiences of disempowered groups and creating opportunities for their voices to be heard (Ladegaard, 2018, 2019; Piller, 2011). With the significant increase in communication between individuals and groups from different countries caused by global trade, which has doubled from \$13 trillion in 2005 to \$24 trillion in 2014 (United Nations, 2015), this increasing contact neither results in enhanced intercultural communication and understanding, nor in fostering a sense of social justice (Barrett, 2016). Therefore, a call for educators and researchers to engage in language and ICC research studies is crucial. This present study contributes to the literature in demonstrating a critical and innovative approach to incorporating social justice education within intercultural methods.

Compelling arguments on the need for integrating and restructuring social justice education into the ESL curriculum have also been pressing (Anwaruddin, 2019; Gordon, 2012, Hastings & Jacob, 2016), but language educators have encountered difficulties in implementing social justice into the curriculum. One of the main challenges is to render sophisticated vocabulary, terms, and concepts associated with complex social justice issues accessible in the language classroom, such as issues around exploitation, legislature, and non-violent resistance (Gordon, 2012). Furthermore, while multicultural classrooms offer diverse perspectives, they also welcome conflicts and disagreements in **values, norms, and beliefs. Language learners' diverse linguistic and cultural** backgrounds, ideologies, and language learning experiences may impact the dynamic of the social justice conversation (Waller et al., 2017). Such discussions often involve **individuals' reflection on their roles in society and their identities and values in their** communities, which may expose unconscious power structures embedded in the conversation (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). How to break down these power relations during the discussion and offer a voice to the voiceless by creating a safe space to express their views on these controversial issues are important aspects in pedagogical practices (Menken & García, 2010).

To incorporate social justice education into the ESL curriculum, educators should **understand the importance of applying intercultural approaches in education (O'Dowd, 2016)** because enhancing ICC helps language learners acquire the knowledge and skills to relate and critically reflect on not only their own culture but other cultures. This leads to more opportunities to collaborate and communicate with empathy and an open mind (Garrett-Rucks, 2016). According to Garrett-Rucks, **"Given the enormous crisis affecting the world today, there can be no other response but a humanitarian one"** (2016, p. xi). To reflect on this statement, many researchers and educators in the field of intercultural communication relate their curricula to the important concept of empathy and how individuals interact with others regardless of their race, ethnicity, colour, religion, and culture. An ICC curriculum allows a small arena for language learners to comprehend and explore the common aspects of individuals from other cultures but also seek to expand **their understanding of the differences (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Flowers et al., 2019)**. The process of intercultural exploration and reflection offers learners opportunities to perceive **a view of the world through their interlocutors' perspectives.**

Based on the affordances offered by incorporating intercultural instruction into the curriculum found in previous literature (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Flowers et al., 2019), the present study applied the framework of Byram's (1997) five-factor ICC model to evaluate the intercultural dimensions of *knowledge, attitude, skills of relating and interpreting, skills of interaction and discovery, and critical awareness on learners' ICC development*. These five factors offered clear guidelines and a conceptual framework for applying ICC to various language learning contexts. The knowledge factor refers to rules such as social and cultural norms that individuals should understand in order to interact within the social

groups of their own culture or of another culture. The attitude factor is identified as an **individual's ability to "decentre" oneself and respect other cultures** by having an attitude of "curiosity and openness, [and] readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with **respect to other's meanings, beliefs and behaviors"** (Byram, 1997, p. 34). Skills of relating and interpreting refers to the ability to interpret, elaborate, and relate events and documents between **one's own** culture and other cultures. Skills of discovery and interaction, refers to the ability to acquire new knowledge of cultural practices and to use the knowledge, attitudes, and skills in authentic cross-cultural communication. The last factor, critical cultural awareness, describes the ability to use perspectives, practices, and products to critically **evaluate one's own culture** and the culture of others.

Based on this theoretical framework, the pedagogical design of this study offers opportunities for learners to encounter conflicting opinions and values, leading to further cultural exploration by learners from diverse backgrounds in order to address the following research question: How can international students enhance their ICC through face-to-face discussions and online video reflections after viewing a series of social justice speech videos?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study used a purposeful sample targeting specifically 15 freshmen international students from the same public speaking class. All participants were from an arts and media college in the Midwest of the United States of America and had language proficiency levels between 80-110 on the iBT TOEFL. The nine females and six males came from eight different countries, including: Brazil (3), China (5), Colombia (1), Ecuador (1), Netherlands (1), Russia (1), Taiwan (2), and Thailand (1). The study collected data over a fifteen-week semester. We used pseudonyms for participants mentioned in the study.

3.2. Variables of interests

The study applied the framework of ICC (Byram, 1997) to investigate language learners' growth in their ICC development while discussing social justice themes, as it contains the diverse skills of ICC and has been widely accepted in this field (Schenker, 2012). Table 1 presents five learning components in the ICC model.

Table 1

Coding for intercultural communicative competence.

ICC Components	Descriptions
Knowledge	Understanding of own social groups and how identities function.
Attitudes	Reflecting on own and others' values and bias & perspective taking.
Skills of interpreting and relating	Interpreting a document/event from another culture to explain and relate it to documents/events from one's own culture.

Skills of discovery and interaction	Critically evaluating one’s own and others’ culture, and their stereotypes.
Critical cultural awareness	Acquiring new knowledge of a culture.

Adapted from Byram (1997).

3.3. Data sources and collection procedures

This exploratory study collected four types of data: Flipgrid video reflections, focus group interviews, observations, and a post-task questionnaire. The main data source was the Flipgrid reflections. Over the course of a semester, each student posted seven 90-second videos on Flipgrid, answering five critical questions as a reflection having viewed videos about social justice issues (see Table 2). In order to have a deeper understanding of the **students’ experience and verify the accuracy of the textual analysis of the reflections, the** researchers triangulated the data with two focus group interviews, observations of the class, and a post-task questionnaire (Patton, 2015). All the verifying sources helped better demonstrate the semester-long process of using the five media literacy critical questions on Flipgrid along with class discussions and media production on issues of U.S. social justice. Observations were conducted by the researchers to understand in-depth **after participants’ video reflections, how they approach and engage in ICC discussions** during face-to-face contexts.

In addition to the regular assignments of a public speaking class, students analysed seven speeches from famous public speakers talking about social justice: Meryl Streep on immigration and diversity, Oprah Winfrey on sexual harassment and gender equality, Emma González on gun violence, J.K. Rowling on empathy, John Oliver on marijuana legalisation, and Emma Watson on gender equality. The speeches were selected based on the guidelines of the anti-bias teaching framework called Social Justice Standards produced by Teaching Tolerance (2016), a project from the Southern Poverty Law Center. Each selected speech was followed by students recording a video reflection on Flipgrid, as well as in-class intercultural discussions on the cultural differences of each social justice issue. In addition, students produced a video-based presentation on one social justice issue of their choice by the end of the course.

3.4. The five critical questions and media literacy education

The practice of media literacy education involves teaching how to access verified information using digital tools, analysing and evaluating media representations and their **constructs, creating individuals’ own media message, reflecting upon individuals’ own** media consumption, and applying ethics of social responsibility using media (Hobbs, 2010). In the last sixty years of implementing media literacy education, starting with **Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man***, various types of critical questions have emerged to help students analyse media messages (Hobbs, 2021; Thoman, 1999). The repetitive practice of answering these critical questions imprints the habit of questioning the agenda, hidden messages, and cultural constructs behind the media product. It allows students to enhance their critical thinking as they consume various media messages and be more civically engaged (Hobbs et al., 2013). As seen in Table 2, each critical question is associated with a media literacy concept. Altogether, the answers provide insightful analysis on the agenda of the creators, their hidden messages, and cultural constructs of biases and misrepresentations.

Table 2

Media literacy critical questions.

Media Literacy Concepts	Critical Questions	Learning Outcomes
Agency	Who created this message and what is the purpose?	Identify the purpose of the message.
Messages	What techniques are being used to attract my attention?	Understand the craft of producing the message.
Representations	What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in the message?	Critically analyse the accuracy and the stereotypes of the representation.
Meaning	How might different people understand this message differently?	Explore misinterpretation by the target audience.
Subtext/ Viewpoints	What is omitted from this message?	Use the concept of viewpoints and subtext to explain how producers frame the message.

Adapted from Hobbs, 2021.

3.5. Data analysis

After collecting the Flipgrid reflections, we narrowed down the data to only six reflections since the first assignment was designed to allow the students to familiarise themselves with the platform. Using the variables of interests above, the researchers coded each video using the ICC framework. The six videos were coded using a rating from 0-3: 0 = no discussion of the ICC issue; 1 = superficial discussion of the ICC issue (summarising the content, analysing the tone of the speaker, stating different sides of opinions); 2 = evidence demonstrating at least two items in the given framework; 3 = evidence demonstrating three or more items in the framework. The video reflections were rated across the four ICC categories: knowledge (0-3), attitudes (0-3), skills (0-3), and critical cultural awareness (0-3). The researchers also analysed the transcripts of the two focus group interviews to find similar themes and explanations of the **participants' experience**. The textual analysis of the videos was triangulated with the thematic coding of the focus group interviews and the feedback from the post-task questionnaire.

4. Results and discussion

This study investigated how international students can achieve increased awareness of ICC after engaging in discussion of U.S. social justice issues over a semester. The textual analysis of their video-recorded reflections revealed positive learning experiences of **media literacy education on language learners' growth of ICC and awareness of social justice issues**. In their focus group interviews and post-task questionnaire, participants overwhelmingly considered the use of an online discussion platform experience as positive, relevant, and meaningful. Students noted that this experience helped them

become more active in face-to-face interaction, develop learner autonomy as an active agent in learning, and enhance critical thinking skills.

4.1. Intercultural awareness and social justice learning

Integrating ICC into the curriculum leads to robust learning experiences in social justice issues. **As a result, this section presents how language learners' intercultural awareness** was developed throughout this project. Based on the ICC framework, results reveal the recurrent themes in relation to the impact of media literacy education on language learners' growth in ICC knowledge, attitudes, skills (of interpreting and relating, and of discovery and interaction), and critical cultural awareness. Participants' video reflections demonstrated that their intercultural awareness increased throughout the fifteen-week course. In their online responses and classroom discussions, participants showed a **"conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication"** (Baker, 2011, p. 66). This finding indicated that in order to increase intercultural awareness and develop ICC, individuals should go beyond the understanding of similarities and differences of diverse cultural norms and values in order to further explore more dynamic and complex relationships between languages and cultures (Cho & Gulley, 2017). The results also revealed that through online and face-to-face communication and reflection with their peers on social justice and ICC issues, this curriculum could potentially be a means for transforming language education from ethnocentrism toward promoting a deeper understanding of intercultural awareness.

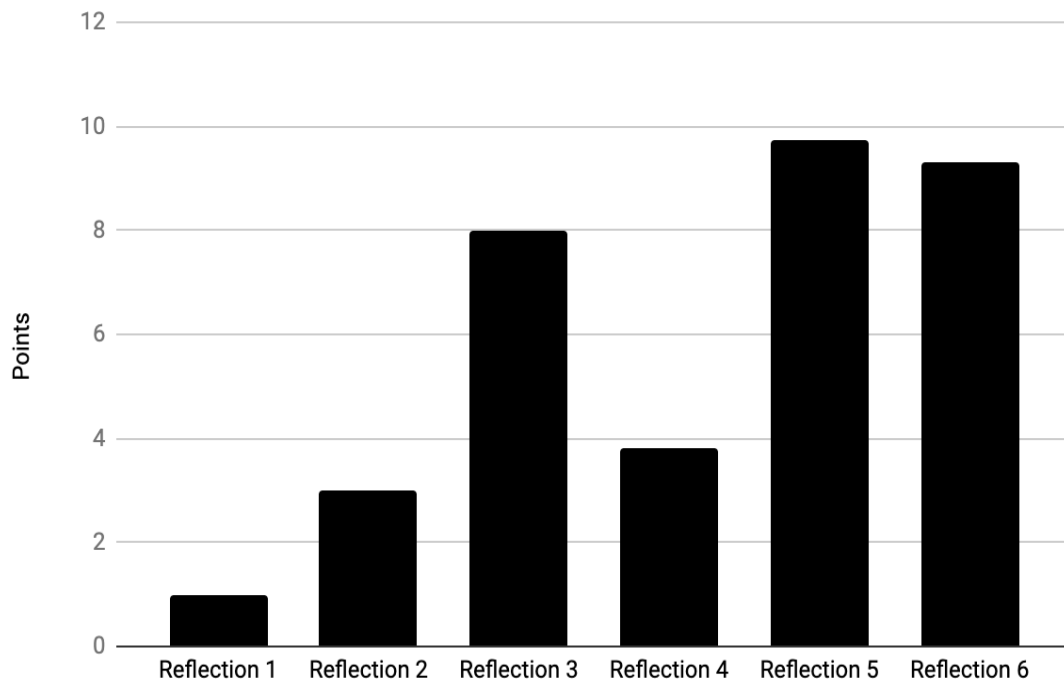
4.2. Overall intercultural awareness across ICC components

The findings showed no linear growth of intercultural awareness across all ICC components; however, a u-shaped development during later reflections was identified (see Figure 1). Figure 1 demonstrated the overall sum of rating across the four ICC categories. Reflection 1 was a warm-up stage where participants showed hesitation in sharing more personal information and perspectives related to their home cultural experiences. The u-shaped ICC development also occurred between Reflections 3 and 6. Reflections 2 and 3 revealed evidence that participants were starting to exchange perspectives of their home cultural experiences and compare and contrast their own culture with not only the target language culture **their peers'** cultures. Reflection 4 showed a decrease in ICC discussion, but evidence rose to its highest in the last two reflections. The video source in Reflection 4 was longer, containing more challenging content and requiring more references and background knowledge for learners to comprehend. The online reflection data showed participants spent more time trying to comprehend the content and chose to answer comprehension questions instead of answering questions that involved exploration of more in-depth layers of the content. The last two reflections (5 and 6) showed another increase in scores, meaning there was more evidence of participants discussing issues related to cultural exchange. Recognising students were struggling with the project in Reflection 4 and that the videos were becoming harder in terms of length and content, the instructor began to provide scaffolding before Reflections 5 and 6 and during the respective classroom discussions by providing additional readings and short videos to supply context and background information. With the additional support, participants were better **able to critically reflect on their culture and others' cultures based on themes such as gender, race, and language** (O'Dowd, 2016).

The following section discusses the development of participants' four ICC components and intercultural awareness.

Figure 1

Students' growth trajectory in ICC.



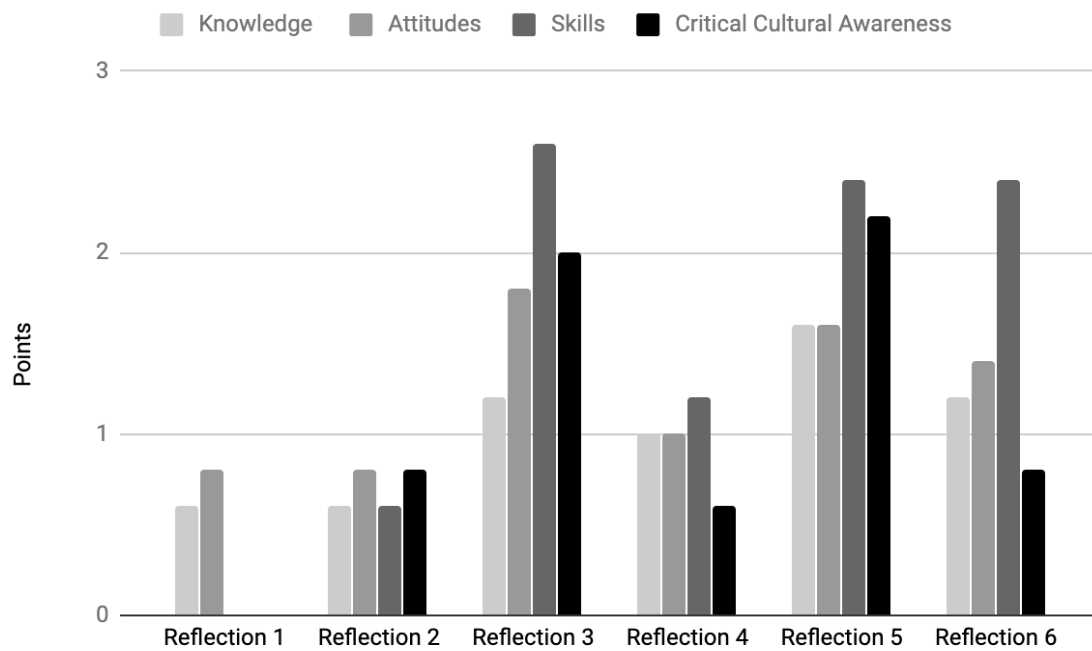
4.2.1. Knowledge and attitudes

Because the media frequently underlines stereotypes of particular cultures, language learners tended to oversimplify the concept of culture. These ICC discussions enabled participants to become more aware of how media could affect **individuals' preconceptions** and stereotypes. Among the four ICC components, knowledge and attitudes were found to be the least discussed throughout the reflections. None of the average point totals in the six reflections exceeded two points (see Figure 2). However, increasing discussion related to ICC knowledge and attitudes were found throughout the reflections.

These findings demonstrate that the development of ICC is an ongoing process that does not take place within a one-time conversation. Although exchanging ideas and reflections could involve conflicts of opinion and disagreements, the crucial aspect of this process is for students to understand various world views and respect perspectives that are different to their own. One participant, Cheng, who was discussed in the social justice awareness section above, showed in the marijuana legalisation video that his changing attitudes opened him up to new perspectives after gaining more knowledge of the role marijuana plays in the U.S. Cheng showed his curiosity, openness, and readiness to consider different cultural perspectives. He was willing to evaluate his own values, beliefs and behaviours, and he reflected on the issue in a different social and cultural context. Before the discussion, he assumed his own beliefs were the correct ones, but he was able to **"decentre"** and see how other people's values and beliefs might differ from his own.

Figure 2

Four components of intercultural awareness.



4.2.2. Skills

The results showed the average of scores for the skills component were higher than two points in Reflections 3, 5, and 6, which were higher than all other ICC components. This means more evidence was found in the online responses that participants were able to interpret issues from different cultures and further relate their own culture to the culture of others. The study combined the skills of interpreting and relating and skills of discovery and interaction into one component for analysis as participants tend to overlap these aspects during the discussion. One participant from China, Ping, showed in the online **response of former President Obama’s speech how he** had acquired new knowledge of cultural norms from other countries, tried to interpret the meaning of how people view their authoritative figures, and related his own belief to his peers from other countries. All students then discussed in the classroom how social groups and identities function in different cultures; for instance, students compared and contrasted the dynamics of political culture in their home countries and analysed **how it influenced people’s** perspectives on viewing authority figures. Students then expressed their understanding and acceptance of ways people made fun of or criticised their politicians in the U.S., but still felt uncomfortable if it was used in their home country contexts. This finding indicated that participants were willing to acknowledge that their own beliefs and values were not the only possible and accurate options.

4.2.3. Critical cultural awareness

The average for Reflections 3 and 5 was above two points; however, the other four reflections were all lower than two. These findings reveal that critical cultural awareness **was one of the aspects that was harder to comprehend and practice. Based on Byram’s** (1997) ICC framework, this aspect of learning involved higher-level critical thinking skills in order to evaluate explicit criteria and principles, as well as exchange perspectives,

practices, and products from their own culture and the cultures of diverse groups other than their own. In order to acquire critical cultural awareness, language learners need to engage in conversation that involves exchanging views of stereotyping and critical perceptions of their own culture. Adriana and Ana, both from Brazil, had a discussion based on **Oprah Winfrey's award acceptance speech video reflection**. They noted that many people have the impression that their country and culture is very open, especially with the stereotype of Brazilian carnivals. Adriana emphasised this point and stated, **"People still get into trouble by criticising the government, and the government has been pushing more conservative ideologies across the country; for instance, some politicians were openly criticising transgender celebrities and the LGBTQ community."** This participant was able to identify and clarify the stereotype people have of her country and she critically evaluated her own culture and the current political climate in her home country.

5. Implications, limitations, and future studies

To explore the implications of this study, follow-up focus group interviews were conducted **to further understand students' perspectives on the speech response assignments**. The emerging themes from the interviews were (1) increased motivation in searching for additional information and seeking knowledge related to social justice topics, and (2) developing learner autonomy by critically self-evaluating their critical thinking and public speaking skills.

Participants claimed in the interview that before they record their responses on Flipgrid, they went through a preparation process that helped them present better. In order to form and contribute insightful opinions, they did a lot of extra reading and watched videos related to the assigned social justice topics so they could better understand the political, social, cultural, and historical context. Therefore, the instructor and students can work collaboratively to come up with a short list of additional references before students record their responses, so that they develop the linguistic, historical, and cultural knowledge to express their views. Future studies are needed to investigate best practices for language instructors to bridge the gap between the **topic and students' background knowledge**, and to provide scaffolding to foster effective communication on these social justice issues.

The results of the focus group interview showed that the reflection assignments on Flipgrid before the face-to-face discussion in class helped participants become more comfortable in expressing their perspectives and sharing personal experiences related to ICC, highlighting how asynchronous reflection with a tool like Flipgrid can provide benefits for synchronous, face-to-face discussion. Due to the asynchronous aspect of this platform, participants reported that they had more time to comprehend the source video, work on the reflection assignments, and reflect on the cultural **content of their peers' posts** (Abrams, 2003; Kim, 2011). Participants also reported that in the process of recording online responses, they repeatedly reviewed their recordings and reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of their performance. During this process, participants were able to focus on not only enriching the content of their production, but also improving their speaking skills (pronunciation, intonation, articulation), body language (eye contact, gestures, posture, facial expression), and the structure, logic, and coherency of their reflection videos. By watching their own videos and practicing multiple times, they were able to identify what they need to improve and modify. By utilising these self-evaluation techniques, students also gain knowledge of how to approach and evaluate social justice issues critically. This study suggests instructors provide a clear self-evaluation rubric or guidelines for students to follow before they submit their recordings. Future studies should also investigate how **self-reflection and evaluation could improve students' public speaking skills**.

The current study focused on participants using Flipgrid as a reflection platform rather than a video discussion platform. The majority of the interaction and discussion occurred in the face-to-face classroom. Flipgrid served as a scaffolding tool for students to practice critical thinking skills on media content and prepare for face-to-face discussions. Future studies should examine how language learners engage in these in-depth discussions in a virtual learning community or in EFL contexts.

One limitation of the study was the small sample size. Future studies should expand the sample size to investigate to what extent this pedagogical approach can enhance **language learners' ICC through both face-to-face** discussion and online video reflections after viewing a series of social justice speech videos.

6. Conclusion

Based on the framework utilised in this study, the results reveal how reflection on and discussion of recurrent social justice themes can **impact language learners' growth in ICC**. These findings show how language educators can utilise asynchronous platforms like Flipgrid to help language learners reflect on cultural themes and express their intercultural perspectives so that they are better prepared to contribute to the conversation during face-to-face discussions. This type of online platform creates a more comfortable environment for reflection and more opportunities for learners to add their voices to the discussion of complex ICC and social justice issues.

Ethical statement

The data were completely confidential and kept in locked filing cabinet and private computer. Only the researchers have access to the files. Participants could choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They could also refuse to participate at any time without penalty. Participants were anonymous and their data results were disidentified. Instructors evaluated and graded the assignments as part of the coursework, but the grades were not influenced by whether the student choose to participate in the study or not.

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