

LEARNING LIFE SKILLS THROUGH MULTICULTURAL EXCHANGE: AN EXAMINATION OF PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The student exchange programs are venues for learning opportunities by offering multicultural contexts. This study reports on the experiences of ten prospective English language teachers in a virtual student exchange program to investigate likely skill development in a multicultural and open and distance learning setting. This descriptive study used the qualitative method. The textual data were elicited through eighty reflective essays written by the participants. Virtual classroom observations and WhatsApp chat data ensured data triangulation. The results revealed the themes as developed learning and life skills and enhanced internal gains. It was found that internal outcomes, such as self-confidence, empathy, and self-reliance, were enhanced rather than external gains. One of the limitations of this study was the brevity of the exchange program, which lasted only eight days. Additionally, the current study is a small-scale study, which limits the generalizability of the results. Last but not least, only two participants placed in the researcher's class were observed. The study poses a few implications for education policymakers, curriculum developers, and teachers. In light of the results, it is posed that adding a multicultural aspect to the teacher training curriculum is imperative for teacher empowerment. Though the literature on student exchange reports findings on the gains and challenges, there is a scarcity of studies delving into what skills students develop and how with vivid examples. In this respect, this study adds to the relevant literature.

Keywords: Life skills, student exchange, higher education, e-learning, multicultural education, 21st century life skills, virtual classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Due to globalization, education has undergone a substantial change. This change has brought many perspectives into educational contexts. One of these changes is that the classes are no longer mono-national and hence monocultural (Richter, 2022). In the present-day world, students with differing mother tongues and cultures receive education together in multicultural contexts. Consequently, the need for educating students to be global citizens has emerged. Higher education institutions have felt this need to integrate a global perspective into tertiary education long before other types of schools since most serve an international and multicultural community of university students (Oral & Lund, 2022; Ghani et al, 2022). Brodin (2010) argues that adopting a multicultural perspective is vital in teacher education programs. To prepare them for multicultural classrooms, they need to be provided with an international experience by linking them to other countries. Student exchange programs play a significant role in the development of multicultural awareness. As well as raising awareness, such programs are also effective in increasing knowledge about other cultures, cultivating empathy, and developing respect for others (Eren, 2023; Hossain et al, 2022).

The interplay between multicultural contexts and open and distance learning (ODL) is intricate and multifaceted (Kilavuz, 2023; Aphek, 2001). Open and distance education, characterized by its flexibility and lack of dependence on physical classroom settings, holds the potential to transcend geographical boundaries and accommodate a diverse array of learners from various cultural backgrounds. In multicultural settings, ODL becomes a potent avenue for addressing educational barriers tied to cultural disparities or geographic remoteness (Bakay, 2023). An essential facet of this relationship involves the incorporation of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity within ODL frameworks for skills and capacity development (Dlamini & Mulaudzi, 2016). Customizing learning materials to reflect diverse cultural perspectives, languages, and historical contexts is paramount. The design of ODL programs should prioritize fostering a sense of inclusivity and respect for diversity, ensuring that content, materials, and instructional methods resonate with learners from different cultural backgrounds (Miglani et al., 2018).

Eastmond (2004) acknowledges that working with international students poses opportunities and challenges for 21st-century academia for teachers (p. 1). Eastmond (2004) contends that students can benefit from experiences, shared knowledge, and personal relationships, which have the potential to transform their lifestyles. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct empirical studies on the issue. First, it must be noted that research in global education is underdeveloped (Lopez-Martin et al, 2023; Scheunpflug and Asbrand, 2006). Of course, contacting other cultures poses many challenges and opportunities, which calls for a need to

provide deeper insights into the issue. It is hypothesized that language barriers will be the main issue. Thus, to overcome this challenge, the study participants consisted of prospective English language teachers, which has helped to overcome or minimize such challenges. The study expected that students would develop skills to cope with the challenges imposed by the multicultural context, which was new to them, and more excellent cultural knowledge would be gained. Since there is only a handful of studies on the likely contributions of student exchange programs on skill development, this study fills a void in the relevant literature.

Virtual student exchange programs create learning opportunities by providing multicultural contexts. This study aims to examine the experiences of a prospective English language teacher in a virtual student exchange program in order to explore possible skill development in a multicultural environment. Studies in the literature reveal that students' perceptions of virtual student exchange programs and intercultural competencies contribute to the development of language skills, critical digital literacy, and interdisciplinary learning (EVOLVE, 2020; Doery et al., 2004; Sernbo et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REIVIEW

Global learning encompasses “responsibility, citizenship, good health, personal achievement, participation or making a living” (Majewska, 2023; Standish, 2014). Standish (2014) argues that the term ‘global’ is used in an inclusive sense, encompassing international education, sustainable development education, global citizenship education, twenty-first-century skills, development education, human rights education, and other such ‘big concepts.’ Inclusion has been an essential feature of education since most schools especially higher education institutions, serve a multinational and hence multicultural community. More recently, these institutions have focused on the importance of globalization and global education curriculum to develop “knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences necessary either to compete successfully in the global marketplace or to work toward finding and implementing solutions to problems of global significance” (Mutiani et al, 2022; Lewin, 2009). Globalization in education entails developing globally minded attitudes, such as adopting a world perspective beneficial for every party (Holmarsdottir et al., 2023; Che et al., 2009, p. 101).

Multiculturalism entails accepting differences based on tolerance, regardless of the cultural and belonging claims of foreigners and differences of a state or country (Doytcheva, 2016). Awareness of and respect for people from different cultures, ethnic origins, identities, and minorities (Yanik, 2012) ensure people live together in equality and peace (Parekh, 2002). Multicultural education is the adaptation of equal and fair multiculturalism to education, which emerges as the opposite of monocultural education (Mareye, 2023). Today, it is seen that the number of multicultural education studies is increasing day by day in educational research. Research shows that one of the significant challenges of multicultural education is that some societies do not exhibit positive behaviors towards different cultural communities (Cirik, 2008). The reasons for this negative attitude are identified as the increasing racism in developed continents, such as Europe and America, in recent years, migration, and the decline in the welfare level of societies. In this respect, multicultural education has emerged to find solutions for these challenges (Bell, 2023; Matafora et al., 2023).

Multicultural education reveals the similarities between cultures and examines the differences between cultures. The primary purpose of multicultural education is to show tolerance to other cultures, prevent racism, increase awareness of different cultures, and get to know the universe in terms of various cultures (Islam, 2023; Noddings, 2016). Banks (2013) emphasizes that the purpose of multicultural education is to support people to see themselves from the perspective of other cultures to get to know themselves better, respect different cultures learn about various ethnic groups and have knowledge and skills.

Communication and interaction are pivotal components in ODL, gaining even greater significance in multicultural environments. Platforms supporting ODL need to facilitate diverse forms of communication, considering linguistic diversity and cultural nuances (Ugurhan et al., 2020). Encouraging interaction and collaboration among students from varied backgrounds enhances the overall learning experience. Cultural competence in educators is imperative, necessitating an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of learners and the ability to navigate cultural differences effectively (Karacabey et al., 2019). Professional development programs for educators should incorporate training on multicultural competence (Kok, 2010).

Student exchange projects and programs benefit participants in terms of personal growth. Gray et al. (2002) assert that an international educational experience in a multicultural context provided gains in self-confidence, maturity, and empathy. Being a part of a student exchange led to enhanced intercultural learning, global awareness, self-development, language acquisition, and many other positive long-term impacts (Giedt et al., 2015). Similarly, Sindt (2007) found that American college students reported significant internal gains. They admitted to being more mature, autonomous, and independent. Research delving into educational experiences in international contexts shows beneficial results in terms of language proficiency (Miranda & Wahyudin, 2023; DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Engle & Engle, 2004), intercultural understanding (Engle & Engle, 2004; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Zielinski, 2007; Lou & Bosley, 2023), cultural exchange (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Hiebert, 2005) and disciplinary knowledge (Sutton and Rubin, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2004). The aim of these educational experiences in international contexts was ‘opening minds to the world and facilitating mutual understanding and global connection’ (Kim, 2015; Suryanto et al, 2022).

The assessment strategies employed in ODL within multicultural contexts must be culturally fair and devoid of bias (Tuc & Karadag, 2023). This ensures equitable evaluation for students with diverse cultural backgrounds. Institutional policies and support structures play a crucial role, addressing the unique needs of a diverse student body in ODL programs (Acar Ciftci, 2019). This encompasses provisions for language support, cultural integration, and assistance with technology access. In essence, the dynamic relationship between multicultural contexts and ODL is grounded in issues of access, inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication (Bayyurt et al., 2019). Through thoughtful approaches, ODL emerges as a powerful means to deliver quality education globally while fostering a truly inclusive and globalized learning environment.

Brodin (2010) conducted a study to evaluate an exchange project to elicit undergraduate students’ views from the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Finland. The participants worked with children, parents, and communities in a multicultural context. The results revealed the positive aspects to be ‘strong teacher support, opportunities to make new friends for life, to experience a new culture, and to learn about a new country’ (p. 9) as well as ‘increased personal benefits like gaining independence and opportunities to increase self-esteem’. On the other hand, the challenges were identified as having mixed classes, ‘quicker installation of network access in the student rooms, longer periods of exchange and lack of coordination between their home schools and the other schools in Europe’(p. 9). Brodin (2010) also found that the exchange project contributed to academic development by providing ‘an understanding of new perspectives on teaching methods and ways of learning, awareness of the sociocultural differences, getting an opportunity to reflect and discuss with classmates’.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In the 1990s when the higher education institutions were first founded in north Cyprus, the classes were mostly mononational. A great majority of the students were either Turkish or Turkish Cypriot. Now the higher education institutions on the island boast attracting international students from 118 countries worldwide, which illustrates the rapid globalization on the island in general and tertiary education in north Cyprus in particular. Owing to globalization in tertiary education, a multicultural perspective should be brought into teacher education. Except for some elective courses like Culture and Language and World English and Culture, the English language teaching curriculum fails to have courses on multicultural education. In his respect, ways need to be searched to prepare prospective English language teachers for multicultural classrooms. Their future classrooms will definitely be multicultural because most of them will be teaching either in Turkiye or in north Cyprus and both countries attract immigrants. One strategy to prepare them for the multicultural classroom is to provide them with international experience through exchange programs. They are expected to broaden their perceptions of the world (Nada & Legutko, 2022; David, 2007; Silberfeld, 2006) and to develop essential skills to contribute to the activities during these programs.

The global exchange program organized by St. Aloysius College in Jabalpur took place between 4-11 March 2023. The goal of the program was to engage participants in both personal and global experiences that will enable them to get to know other cultures and acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to

thrive in a universal multiethnic civilization. The main theme was identified as Language and Culture by the Global Understanding Program. The aim of the Global Understanding Program initiative is to “encourage the formation of new interdisciplinary partnerships, with a particular focus on exploration that spans both disciplinary and geographical boundaries”. In order to realize this aim students were provided with the sub-themes of Family and Tradition, Cultural Influence on Language and Dialects, Meaning of Life and Religion, Cultural Stereotypes and Prejudices and Collaborative Projects. Each participant was paired with other participants having a culture other than his/her own to make sure each participant gets to know a different culture. Participants had discussions, chats, and collaborative student projects on the sub-themes in nine different virtual classrooms during Zoom meetings which lasted about 4-5 hours each day. All participants received a certificate of participation at the end of the program.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 10 prospective English language teachers participated in the current study. Five of them were female and five were male adults from 21 to 23 years of age. They were all from Turkiye and they were not familiar with cultures other than their own. They were very curious about the exchange programs because none of them had ever been to a European country or the U.S.A. When the opportunity arose their instructor who is also one of the researchers of this study contacted the junior and senior students and informed them about the program. Six senior and five junior students volunteered. However, one senior student from Hatay could not attend because during the earthquake they lost their home in Hatay and had to move to their home in a village where they did not have a stable internet connection. All participants took place in this study with their pseudonyms. An ethical consent for the current study was granted by a higher education institution.

The aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of prospective English language teachers of a virtual student exchange program of their perceived skill development in open and distance learning settings. In order to fulfill the purposes of the current research study, qualitative methods were employed. Being a qualitative research model, case studies evaluate an issue specific to a particular situation holistically (Yin, 2009). In this case study, the prospective English language teachers' likely skill development practices were determined qualitatively.

The data were collected through reflective essays written by each participant each day at the end of the exchange sessions. Each participant wrote eight essays so in total eighty essays were collected. One of the researchers of the study participated in the program as an assessor and moderator and hence had a chance to observe the participants who were located in her class in the exchange setting. They also had a WhatsApp group where they communicated about what to do and how because at times the participants were not clear about what was expected from them. All in all, the main data originated from the reflective essays and the data were triangulated with observations and WhatsApp chat texts.

The textual data elicited through reflective essays were coded first and classified later to reveal the themes. Once the codes were determined by the two researchers separately, cross-checking for the codes was conducted for reliability reasons. Next, the codes were grouped under certain categories to reveal the themes. Each researcher coded the data separately in order to ensure reliability. In order to ensure the validity and the reliability of the data analysis, the participants' opinions were directly included.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are listed below and discussed under the three themes of developed learning, life skills, and enhanced internal gains.

Developed Learning and Life Skills

Regarding learning and life skill development, all participants reported great efficacy. Learning skills encompass critical thinking skills, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Amongst these four skills, collaboration was the most referred learning skill (n = 21) and all participants mentioned this skill. As Aisha noted:

With the help of the GAP exchange program, I developed myself in various ways. For example, my intercultural team working skills are developed. Because I participated in group projects. All the projects were group activities and all members were of differing nationalities. I think they did this on purpose because they wanted to see how we will find a common ground. One of these group projects was a role-play activity. That is why, it required lots of communication, discussion, balance, and harmony among the members. While preparing our group project, we discussed and shared our ideas. We also, listen to each other but there were quiet types and talkative ones. I am a talkative type but seeing that some people did not speak, I willingly gave the floor to them. I can say, it is good for me.

Ali believed collaboration with foreign team members was both beneficial and difficult. He stated:

Thanks to the exchange program, I had the opportunity to work with foreigners. My group members were from the Philippines, Nigeria, Cyprus and India. At first, I guess it was difficult for everyone to understand what the activities required. We had to do something to overcome this difficulty and then the guy from the Philippines offered a solution. He suggested brainstorming about what needed to be done. Then each of us spoke about our ideas. For example, the first activity was festivals. It was too general. There are national ones and local ones, food festivals, beer festivals, religious festivals. The Indian member asked if carnivals are festivals or not. There were lots of questions and I was a little overwhelmed because we were in short of time. I suggested voting and we said yes carnivals count, too. Then the question of which festivals from which countries was posed. Then, the Cypriot guy suggested that each member should choose two festivals or carnivals either local or national from his\her own country and prepare a PowerPoint presentation on them, like a 12minute presentation. It was fair enough and we all agreed. Then the issue of who would compile the slides so that we will come up with one. One member volunteered for this. And we needed someone to give the speech. All of us volunteered because we all wanted to represent the group. Not to offend anyone and include everyone we decided that each member presents the slides that she\he has prepared. Fair enough.

The above quotations vividly depict strategies for fostering collaboration among individuals of diverse nationalities, emphasizing shared goals and problem-solving approaches. Transposing this insight into the context of open and distance learning (ODL), it is apparent that these collaborative dynamics are equally relevant in virtual spaces. The examples provided underscore the importance of cultivating a willingness among participants in Ali's group to actively engage and contribute to the collective improvement of the group's endeavors, a principle that holds true in the ODL environment. In the realm of ODL, where physical presence is not a prerequisite, the ability to work collaboratively for a common purpose becomes even more critical. Reading between the lines of the narrative, it becomes evident that each member of Ali's group, while aspiring to distinguish themselves, demonstrated a commendable capacity for compromise. This quality is foundational in ODL, where individuals from diverse backgrounds converge in virtual spaces, necessitating a harmonious balance between individual aspirations and collective objectives. The observations made in traditional classroom settings, as mentioned in the text, find resonance in the ODL landscape. The emphasis on respect, careful consideration to avoid interruptions, and an open and welcoming attitude toward diverse ideas align with the collaborative ethos essential in virtual learning environments. Importantly, the endorsement of these findings through WhatsApp text messages highlights the ongoing commitment to reconciliation and problem-solving – a testament to the enduring relevance of collaborative skills in both physical and virtual learning spaces. Furthermore, the reference to Hadianto's (2019) study underscores the enduring nature of these collaborative principles, emphasizing that collaborative skills are not only applicable in face-to-face classroom activities but are also enhanced through various modes of learning, including e-learning within the ODL framework. Thus, the collaborative dynamics illustrated in the original text find resonance in the context of open and distance learning, emphasizing the enduring importance of fostering collaborative skills across diverse educational settings.

Communication is the second most mentioned learning skill (n=19). Nine participants highlighted the importance of communication and how they benefitted in terms of communication skills. Kerem commented:

Also, my international communication skills are developed. Because I had the opportunity to communicate with people from different cultures. At some points, it was challenging to understand their accents but I figured it out.

It was crucial for the participants to learn how to effectively convey ideas among people of different nationalities and cultures. Misunderstandings could occur due to cultural differences, differing accents, and English varieties. Effective communication could at times be one of the most underrated skills but like any other skill it needs to be taught and learned. All the participants took a course called Effective Communication during their first semester at the Department of English Language Teaching. Thus, they were all aware of the importance of effective communication and the role culture plays in effective communication. In this exchange program they had the opportunity to put what they learned into practice. Class observations and WhatsApp chat data also supported this finding. Two students highlighted the need of being respectful when discussing activities with the members and the importance of using appropriate language. On communication, Melisa had this to say:

As it was an international program, we were working with people who had different cultures. I knew that a normal word in my culture could be offensive in another culture. I was very careful to avoid such offensive words because they did not know Turkish culture and this could create problems.

Cansu raised her worries:

The first shock came to me on the first day. During the opening ceremony a pastor gave one of the speeches and it was about the meaning of life. That the meaning of life was handled from the religious viewpoint was awkward to me but I did not ask the reason for it in case they are offended.

All participants mentioned problems resulting from different accents. In order to overcome this problem, they had the interlocutors repeat what they said politely. The finding that the participants developed effective communication skills verified Hadianto (2019) that student exchange programs led to gains in effective communication.

Developed critical skills were the third most mentioned learning skill (n=3). Critical thinking entails finding meaningful solutions to problems and is conducive to improvement in general and professional development in particular. Hossein noted:

Once the duties were shared among the members of my group for the first activity on the first day we did not communicate further until we meet the next day. But I felt the need for their ideas on whether or not I was on the right track. So, I suggested forming a group of our own on Google Space. The other members also found this useful. By this way we had timely discussions.

The current study found that student exchange program resulted in fostered critical thinking skills, which supported Hadianto (2019) that the participants' critical thinking skills were boosted through an exchange program.

Creativity was the least frequently mentioned learning skill. Creativity empowers individuals to see concepts from a different perspective, which leads to innovation. Tom commented on how his creativity was triggered:

As we reflected every day at the end of the sessions, I found myself reporting on what went well and what did not go so well. I thought it would be beneficial for the host college to know the aspects of the exchange we liked most as well as the aspects to be improved. For this reason, at the end of the exchange I wrote a thank you letter to the head of the college and kindly added my views on the things to be improved because I know that they will keep organizing such programs in the future and if they take my criticism seriously, they can improve themselves better.

Despite the fact that creativity was the least frequently mentioned skill, it is valuable that a student benefitted in terms of creativity. This result went in line with that of Hadianto (2019) that a student exchange programme led to fostered creativity among the participants.

Developed Life Skills

In the context of open and distance learning (ODL), the delineation of 21st-century life skills, encompassing social skills, flexibility, leadership, initiative, and productivity, gains significant relevance. These skills are integral to navigating the complexities of virtual and technology-driven educational landscapes. Within the spectrum of ODL, social skills emerge as particularly crucial, mirroring the emphasis placed on this skill in the original text. In the ODL environment, where physical interactions are often limited, the cultivation of social skills takes on added importance. The acknowledgment that social skills were predominantly highlighted among the enumerated life skills resonates with the collaborative nature of ODL. Participants in

ODL programs frequently emphasize the significance of establishing connections, making new friends, and valuing the relationships forged in virtual spaces.

Aisha's commentary, expressing a desire for more time to spend with newfound friends, aligns with the social dynamics inherent in ODL. In virtual learning environments, fostering a sense of community and camaraderie is essential for student engagement and satisfaction. Aisha's sentiment reflects the interpersonal connections formed in the digital realm, illustrating how virtual interactions can be as impactful as face-to-face encounters. Importantly, the emphasis on social skills in the ODL context extends beyond casual interactions. Effective collaboration, communication, and teamwork are integral components of successful online learning experiences. Participants in ODL programs often highlight the collaborative and supportive nature of virtual communities, emphasizing the role of social skills in creating a conducive learning environment.

Hossein added socializing was one of the advantages of the exchange program. Tom commented:

I was pleased with getting to know many university students coming together and also making connections with the teachers from other countries. I was so curious about them that I made use of every learned some words in their native language to get closer. I believe they really liked hearing me say those words albeit sometimes they did not understand the words I said.

Having effective social skills is crucial to long-lasting relationships and building a rapport. A teacher needs to develop effective social skills to make connections with his/her students and colleagues.

Eight participants mentioned flexibility (n=10). Flexibility refers to the ability to make changes and deviate from something planned so as to adapt to the changing circumstances. Miriam reported:

All my group members got along well. We were all open to new ideas and respected each other's suggestions. At one time we were preparing a presentation on world heritage. Once we picked the sites to be included, the Indian guy suggested adding an authentic perspective by including some words in the native language of the site where it was located. For example, if the site was in Turkiye, we would add a sentence like 'Sizi seviyoruz' which means 'we love you' in Turkish. I argued that this was pointless as most people would not be able to understand because only eleven participants including our professor knew Turkish. Some other members supported me, some others the Hindu guy but I did not want to create confusion so I said let's give it a try and that it could work. We did not receive negative feedback at the end of the presentation and this made me happy.

Flexibility entails acknowledging others' ideas and accepting them in order for the good of the team and hence it is essential for prospective English language teachers to be successful in their careers. This is also a skill that will help them in life. In this case, Mirim did not insist on her ideas to be accepted. Instead, she showed that she was welcoming towards change for the good of the team.

Leadership requires the skills to be able to set goals, monitor the team members in accomplishing these goals and motivate them to work collaboratively for the benefit of the team. Only two participants wrote that they improved their leadership qualities through this exchange program. Cansu commented:

In my group everyone was quiet at first. We did not know each other and not everyone was willing to speak. When we were given the activities, there were lots of things to be done. I am sure everyone would prefer to do individual work but we needed to work in groups. Some people are born as leaders-natural leaders. I cannot describe myself as a leader. But there were lots of things to be done and we needed to start at once. The title of the activity was Wedding Ceremonies. Thus, I decided to handle the planning stage. First, I asked every member to brief us about the wedding ceremonies in their homeland and asked them to prepare some visuals. I did so too. I formed a WhatsApp group with them immediately and asked them to share their visuals there. I also shared my visuals. Then we decided which visuals to include in our presentation. I think they like me because in the next activity they also let me plan everything.

As this quotation illustrated, Cansu worked with her group members, united everyone under a common goal, and had everyone work for the collective benefit of all. She must have inspired and ensured a positive work culture since she was also accepted as the group leader for the upcoming activities. Classroom observation data also verified this finding.

The data did not reveal any information about initiative and productivity.

Enhanced Internal Gains

In terms of gains, most participants reported internal outcomes, such as self-confidence, empathy, and self-reliance. The reason for the lack of external outcomes can be due to the brevity of the exchange programme. All participants reported developed self-confidence. As the participants had the opportunity to work with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures, they gained a deeper understanding of cultures other than their own as well as themselves, leading to various forms of personal growth. Rachel enclosed:

This exchange program is my first international experience. Initially I was willing but nervous at the same time. Turkish students wonder about foreigners a lot. I really want to get to know other cultures. There were also many worries and questions in my mind. Is my English good enough? What if others do not like me? Who will help me when I have a problem? During the first day they explained everything in like two hours but still I had many questions. Our instructor did the follow up very well. For example, they placed us in classrooms by the usernames in our PCs. Mine is different from my name. So, I could not find my name in any class list. I stressed out and panicked. My instructor helped me write to the organizing committee. My problem was solved immediately. My team members were also very helpful and understanding. Starting from the second day I felt more at ease and knew that the people I around me were supportive and friendly. They respected my ideas and valued my opinions. They made me feel valuable for them. They liked my accent and I felt powerful.

As illustrated in the above quotation, Rachel developed self-confidence through this international experience. In this respect, this result went in line with the result of Gray, Murdock, and Stebbins (2002) and Giedt et al. (2015) that a study abroad experience led to gains in confidence and maturity among the student participants. This result also verified Brodin (2010) that exchange programs provided opportunities for increased self-esteem.

Emphatic individuals are expected to develop an increased understanding, sensitivity, and connection to another culture in multicultural open and distance learning settings. Only four participants referred to empathy as an internal gain. Chris argued:

From the very beginning, I was ready to mix with people with different cultures and traditions. This is a sensitive and delicate issue. From the course called pragmatics I have taken in the department I knew that people get different messages from verbal and nonverbal clues and messages. The thing was that although we studied British and American culture, I was not familiar with Hindu, African and Filipino culture. Not to offend anyone I approached people with respect, tried to understand their feelings and values imposed by their traditions and cultures. Although some of them were really strange like the seat system. Whether or not a student would have a seat in the class depended on his\her grades. I think the purpose was to encourage students for academic success.

This study found that the exchange program helped some participants develop empathy. In this respect, our results echoed that of Gray, Murdock, and Stebbins (2002) that the student participants who had a study abroad experience acquired emphatic gains.

Self-reliance refers to relying on oneself rather than others and functioning independently. It was found that two participants developed self-reliance. Chris commented:

I learnt from this international experience that I can do many things on my own. I felt free because I can manage on my own. If I like I can enroll in an MA program abroad because I now know that I can communicate with them and make friends with them and that I know English opens many doors to me. I feel like a global citizen who no longer dependent on my homeland. I realized this through this exchange program.

This result went in line with Sindt's (2007) result that the participants benefitted internal gains, such as autonomy and independence. Similarly, this result echoed Edmond (2010) that student exchange led to positive gains in terms of personal growth, awareness and self-efficacy. This result also went in line with Brodin (2010) that exchange program contributed to gaining independence.

CONCLUSION

Globalization has exerted a profound impact, particularly on tertiary education. As we consider the implications within the context of open and distance learning (ODL), it becomes evident that students, teachers, and aspiring educators participating in this expanding globalized landscape must not only acknowledge but actively engage with the diverse perspectives inherent in globalization. This engagement is vital for the enrichment of learning practices, effective functioning in the contemporary world, and navigating careers successfully within present-day schools.

Within the realm of ODL, the integration of videoconferencing technologies plays a pivotal role in fostering interaction among international students. This technological avenue not only facilitates communication but also serves as a conduit for the expansion of worldviews. Through virtual engagement, students can build new social relationships, transcending geographic boundaries, and gain insights into different cultures. In the context of ODL, videoconferencing becomes a valuable tool for creating a globalized and interconnected learning environment.

Moreover, student exchange projects, while traditionally associated with physical mobility, can also find resonance in the realm of ODL. These projects serve as invaluable platforms for embracing cultural diversity, a concept that is equally applicable in the virtual space of open and distance learning. Participating in such initiatives, whether physically or virtually, becomes a means of developing skills to function adeptly in a multicultural academic environment and broadening one's horizon.

In alignment with these principles, a study conducted within the framework of open and distance learning discovered that prospective English language teachers, when immersed in a student exchange program – which could extend into the virtual sphere in ODL – had the opportunity not only to appreciate cultural diversity but also to develop specific skills crucial for their roles. This underscores the relevance of incorporating global perspectives within the context of open and distance learning, emphasizing the transformative potential of virtual interactions and collaborative endeavors in enhancing the educational experience. More specifically, the exchange program led to developed critical thinking skills, creativity, collaboration and communication which were all learning skills. It was found that the most frequently mentioned skill was collaboration and the least creativity amongst these learning skills. It shows that the virtual student exchange program contributes to the development of some skills, raises awareness on multiculturalism and improves language skills through practice. Additionally, the results revealed that some life skills, such as social skills, flexibility and leadership were fostered but initiative and productivity were not. Regarding gains, rather than external gains, internal outcomes, such as self-confidence, empathy and self-reliance were reported to be enhanced. For future studies, we suggest that studies employing ethnographic research designs can provide deeper insights as to skill development.

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