Utilizing Digitally Mediated Warm-Up Activities for Developing Intercultural Literacy in Young EFL Students: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

According to recent research, incorporating intercultural elements into digital learning resources used in English-language activities is considered one of the most efficacious approaches for improving intercultural literacy among young learners. However, there is limited knowledge available regarding the utilization of digital materials in developing intercultural literacy during lead-in phrases for young learners. The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating how technology can be used to create intercultural literacy among young EFL students in typical Vietnamese international elementary schools during EFL warm-up activities. This study was carried out in three stages: (1) an informal interview conducted by the researcher with two EFL teachers from two different internal schools about their teaching contexts and knowledge of intercultural literacy; (2) sixteen observations of English lessons over a semester using warm-up activities to enhance young learners' intercultural literacy (n=65), and (3) in-depth interviews with the same two teachers. The teachers' interactionally oriented narratives derived from the interviews and the intervened-lesson observations in their classrooms were thematized to specify the types of warm-up activities using digital resources and their functions on activating young learners' prior knowledge of intercultural features. Meanwhile, the observation checklist was employed to determine whether these embedded features had made changes to the teachers' teaching methodology. The paper also discussed the implications for enhancing EFL young learners' intercultural literacy via digital learning paths informed by the teacher's intercultural language communicative teaching approach.

Keywords: intercultural literacy, digital learning resources, young EFL students, EFL teachers, digitally mediated warm-up activities, intercultural features

Introduction

In the era of globalization, intercultural literacy is an integral part of effective foreign language teaching and learning in a cross-cultural setting where international students of all ages have to be literate and apply it in their communications. However, Schenker (2012) claims that being competent in a second language cannot be deduced that one is likely to communicate with people from diverse

cultures successfully. Thus, successful interactions with speakers from different cultural backgrounds depend both on the linguistic ability and the intercultural competence of the students. Similarly, according to Roekel (2010), 21st-century students need language competence in reading, writing, and other global competencies. For example, they need critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity to communicate proficiently in an intercultural environment. And to be globally competent, a solid grounding in intercultural competence is likely to be crucial for individuals since it enables them to effectively communicate, collaborate, and foster mutual understanding when working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds in various countries and regions. As an important component of empirical models of intercultural competence, intercultural features or traits pertain to the personal attributes of individuals engaged in intercultural interactions, and they can either facilitate or impede the effectiveness of these interactions (Khukhlaev et al., 2020). These features encompass a broad range of characteristics, including cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs, behaviors, and communication styles, which individuals bring to multicultural environments. Those requirements have impacted the whole education system and implied that the concept of inter-culture and intercultural features should be added to English-language learning as a major part of almost every English language teaching (ELT) curriculum from the earliest educational stage, like primary education.

Furthermore, the main aim of second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners is likely to be intercultural speakers mastering both their own and other cultures since English has become a global language (Jenkins, 2014, Fang & Baker, 2018). However, to deal with the complexity of the concept of culture itself, interacting with people of the target culture is seemingly not enough for EFL students to become intercultural speakers (Baker, 2015; Kramsch, 2019). FL teachers should also facilitate various instructional and digital tools conveying intercultural knowledge and distinct cultural aspects to their students. Unfortunately, very few empirical studies have been undertaken to investigate how FL teachers can embed intercultural literacy elements into digital learning resources used in English-language programs, particularly at elementary schools.

Considering those salient factors associated with intercultural literacy embedment, the purpose of this small-scale exploratory study was to explore how two English teachers at two different international schools utilized available technology to grow their students' intercultural literacy competence. It also aims to identify how they could use digitally mediated warm-up activities for the grade-5 learners at two international elementary schools.

Literature Review

Intercultural literacy and foreign language learning

The concept of intercultural literacy has been developed since the 1990s. According to the Council of Europe, an interculturally literate person possesses the cultural background to adequately read another culture by utilizing all his understandings, identities, attitudes, and skills required in order to successfully live and work in a cross-cultural or practical day-to-day context. To establish effective and open intercultural communication, communicators must anticipate how their speaking partners tend to behave and respond appropriately via verbal and nonverbal language. In other words, successful contact with people from different cultural groups demands a certain level of communicative competence accumulated by a proper intercultural learning process (Byram *et al*., 2001). However, Bennett (2009) states that intercultural learning is not a simple and easy process because it acquires "increased awareness of subjective cultural context (worldview), including one's own, and developing a greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of change." (p. 3). Thus, intercultural learning is not solely reliant on cultivating empathy toward embracing diversity in various cultures through intercultural sensitivity. It also involves acquiring knowledge, language, and attitudes necessary for effective interactions between individuals from different cultures.

Over the past two decades, various researchers have predicted an "intercultural" shift of focus in language learning (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat & Crozet, 1999; Corbett, 2003; Ho, 2009). In general, two key strategies for intercultural language learning were proposed. The first strategy was initiated by

Moloney and Harbon (2010), who suggested that an intercultural language learning program needs to create an independent environment where students can think, act and experience cultural differences themselves. Meanwhile, language teachers offer them an opportunity to reflect, ask questions, and move back and forth between several languages. The second strategy followed Tomlinson and Masuhara's beliefs (2004) mainly refers to the rise of cultural awareness among foreign language learners based on their native culture. Consequently, instructors should provide foreign language learners with authentic materials to foster intercultural understanding by translating a foreign culture into their own context in an intercultural language learning program (Guilherme, 2022). In short, opportunities to think critically about the relationship between one's own culture and the target culture are a prerequisite in any intercultural language learning program.

Intercultural literacy and characteristics of young EFL students

From a socio-cultural perspective, language and culture are inseparably interrelated in such circumstances for young EFL learners, where social interaction is the foundation for constructing language, thinking, and culture (Hall, 2013). Hirsch (1983) also defines all language as a cultural act since cultural literacy is the background knowledge required for meaning comprehension. This definition seems to align with the fundamental theories of intercultural language learning, highlighting the intimate interconnection between culture and language learning. Particularly, in language learning, students actually foster critical and reflective intercultural understandings via their language usage, resulting in their own intercultural identity (Yeh & Heng, 2022). Accordingly, intercultural identity should be formed as early as possible, and educators should incorporate intercultural literacy in all EFL programs' learning outcomes at any level. Then, young EFL students can start learning it in their early childhood.

Young learners are potentially intercultural literate people whose understanding is built on their prior knowledge and experience. In psychology, aged 7-12 years old kids are defined as being more open to cultural experiences than adults (Slatterly & Willis, 2001). Savić (2013) claims that young students are also interested in learning about their own culture or other people's culture to make a meaningful conversation. In addition, they can understand influential texts but cannot explain language structures or forms explicitly (Lennox, 2013). In other words, contextualizing language messages is crucial for young learners to understand how language is used. Hence, an English-language learner at the primary education level can acquire the language in communicative contexts when they have background knowledge and a general understanding of the contexts facilitated by intercultural literacy. Correspondingly, young learners can acquire the language implicitly in meaningfully communicative situations.

Furthermore, young students tend to have a more positive outlook toward foreign cultures, beliefs, and lifestyles than adult learners (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2010). Likewise, Sercu (2005) proposes that children tend to notice every individual minor difference, spending time to discover the most important factors in each target culture. These behavior sets can help them foster cultural tolerance and acceptance when being introduced to a new culture in class (Yakup, Madina, & Brent, 2013). Accordingly, it is advisable to introduce cross-cultural content to young EFL students' classrooms, leading the students to gain intercultural understanding and identity while becoming more sympathetic and tolerant of the novelty of foreign language culture.

Regarding young learners' cognitive growth, a profound connection between their language learning and their intercultural knowledge and experiences (Cameron, 2001); hence English teachers should design lesson plans to stimulate the students' prior knowledge before beginning a new lesson. In addition, centered on Bruner's language scaffolding theories and Vygotsky's social interaction, Cameron (2001) emphasizes instructors' mentorship and scaffolding are a stimulant to children's learning beyond their limited social experiences. He offers further clarification that socialization via active observations helps the learners actively and quickly receive new information and convert it to their background knowledge when encountering related issues. Consequently, children can enhance their cognitive levels through interactive tasks generated from the two theories above. Clearly, classroom activities should be constructive, purposeful, and full of practice while social, supported, and enjoyable (Shin, 2000). Moreover, children are characterized by a short concentration span, and they

are prone to lose motivation in unpredictable ways (Crandall & Shin, 2014). To deal with these issues, Alloway (2010) suggests that little and regular learning with periodic revisions seems effective for children. In short, young learners with short-term memory and limited concentration learn the language and foster their cultural literacy using their prior knowledge and experience built on purposeful communicative situations. Hence, teachers need to scaffold learners through tasks full of contextualized interactive practice, enabling them to socialize and internalize new information together with transforming it into background knowledge of related concepts. Learners then can flourish their cognition and worldview.

Intercultural literacy and digitally mediated warm-up activities

Regularly positioned as the initial orientation to language learning lessons, Lassche (2005) defines warm-up activities as the most dominant stage that helps catch learners' attention and prepare for their engagement in the next learning stages in language classes. In the same manner, Seçer, Sahin, and Alci (2015) also consider warm-up activities as a useful method to reduce learners' distractions. The authors point out their main function of reviewing previous lessons, revising vocabulary, and arousing interest from students by giving some hints related to a new learning concept in a short period of time. Besides this, Garcia and Martín (2004) specify five key roles of using warm-up activities: activating students' background knowledge, making them familiar with given topics, presenting language terms, organizing their lexical resources, and increasing engagement. Thanks to these characteristics, doing warm-up activities has the full potential to utilize and promote learners' prior knowledge (e.g., intercultural traits) obtained from preceding learning sessions when being done briefly with clear goal orientation.

Taking into account Byram's model for intercultural competence (Byram *et al*., 2001), Lassche (2005) proposed four critical warming-up designs for young learners: visual scaffolding, topic familiarity, schema development, and small talk or rapport. With the aim of integrating intercultural elements into the English-language digital resources, four main types of warm-up activities are selected under Lassche's critical designs in the research context. The first activity concerns authentic audio-visual or visual printed materials like television shows, pod cards, or online newspapers (Seçer et al., 2015). The second activity is to ask a set of questions familiar to students' daily life through a guessing game to simulate a cultural immersion experience and build up a communicative and friendly environment. The third one is a role-playing activity evolved by schema development, providing intercultural conversation and multicultural dialogue to young learners (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). In this digital role-play activity, teachers set up classroom computers in any kind of given context, which create a powerful context for students' imaginative role-playing. The last type is small talk or interpersonal communication with the aid of technology-based devices to create a virtual cross-cultural setting.

The four mentioned kinds of digitally mediated warm-up activities share three common features: first, giving students time to reflect on the intercultural traits in their accustomed topics, then leading them to a multicultural environment where intercultural identities of people from all over the world are clearly illustrated by the most noticeable distinctness such as landscape, lifestyle, cuisine, daily habits or currency (Bland, 2022). Finally, these tasks can be quickly done and amusing enough to motivate young students (Yin, 2009). Therefore, English language teachers are likely to employ these digitally mediated designs at the warm-up stage to raise their learners' intercultural awareness in a motivating, convenient, and time-saving manner.

The first objective of the present study is to explore the main types of digitally mediated warm-up activities that the teacher proposed and trialed to facilitate intercultural literacy and how these activities affect in-service teachers' actual practice. The second goal is to examine participants' attitudes toward the effects of the recommended designs on their students' intercultural literacy. Therefore, two research questions were posed after the preliminary interviews with two English language teachers as follows:

1) What were the digitally mediated warm-up activities the teachers used to develop their young EFL students' intercultural literacy and their impact on the teachers' teaching methodology?

2) How did the teachers believe these activities enhance the learners' intercultural literacy?

Methodology

Background and research setting

The research took place in two fifth-grade classes at two international schools in a large city in Vietnam. Each school has more than 1,000 students from first grade to fifth grade. With the international standard, their classrooms are equipped with TVs connected to the internet, projectors, and various digital supporting devices in specialized English-language rooms. These international schools value their students' English proficiency as a major criterion for selecting students for specialized foreign language classes. The classes strongly emphasize enhancing gifted students' linguistic and intercultural literacy competence. Therefore, one of the prerequisite requirements for language teachers is to integrate intercultural elements into English lessons for grade-5 learners in the form of supplementary assignments.

Regarding the official ELT curriculum, the textbook "Tieng Anh 5" with a set of two books written by approved experts working for the Ministry of Education and Training, is used as the main syllabus for all fifth-grade classes. This syllabus is mandatory for all teachers and students because the English subject's assessment is oriented toward written information with a focus on vocabulary and grammar (Canh & Barnard, 2009). Thus, based on the textbook map, the two English teachers allocated their class hours to advance four basic language skills, including reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Twenty topic-based units are related to different intercultural topics (e.g., *Me and My Friend*, *Me and My City*, and *Me and the World Around*). In each case, intercultural elements are skillfully constructed by a wide range of colorful pictures illustrating world customs and characteristics of many countries and cultures via conversations or reading texts about lifestyle, cuisine, landscape, or foreigners. These intercultural features are partially enclosed in all the units of the textbooks, aiming to progress learners' 21st-century skills through numerous child-friendly learning projects, namely Total Physical Response (TPR) with projects and games (Vu & Pham, 2014).

Participants

This study aimed to explore how EFL teachers incorporate intercultural elements into English warm-up activities to enhance young learners' intercultural literacy. The researcher described the main purpose of the research to a group of EFL teachers and asked them to be involved in it. Fortunately, two EFL teachers agreed to be participants and let the researcher observe their lessons. The male participant of the study, a 35-year-old English teacher, was given the pseudonym of Ada. He had six years of teaching experience at different international elementary schools and an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from a foreign university. He was teaching English for a language-specialized class with 32 gifted students in the fifth grade, typically between the ages of 10 and 12 years old, attending an international elementary school in Vietnam. Another female participant, a 28-year-old English teacher, was written under the pseudonym of Eva. She had three years of teaching experience at primary levels and a Bachelor of Arts qualification. She was in charge of teaching English to 33 fifth-graders, aged between ten to twelve years, in a lower-level English class, at another Vietnamese international elementary school. Both showed strong motivation towards English teaching professional development and taught at two international schools during the time the research was taking place. Like other EFL teachers in developing urban areas, they often tried to dedicate their time and effort to improve their teaching capability and meet their international schools' high standards of teaching and learning. Each year, they actively participated in many TESOL training workshops certified by the Department of Education and Training and various available teaching courses held by the US embassy in Vietnam.

When conducting research with young learners, it is crucial to recognize and address the ethical implications of involving minors. To ensure that the study was conducted ethically, the researcher notified the participants about the research essence of this exploratory study when performing one of the data collection methods in their actual class (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, the researcher explained the main objectives of the research in age-appropriate language to both teachers and stu-

dents at the beginning of the semester. Informed consent was obtained from the children's parents or guardians after having ensured that the participants' privacy and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. The top priority was the safety and well-being of the children throughout the research process, which complied with their school regulations and policies. Besides this, following the research procedure written by Van Manen (2016), the researcher intentionally guided the participants to illustrate their real experiences in their narratives during interviews. Another explanation for this is the need to employ the participants' checks and feedback to solve the interpretive and referential adequacy of qualitative findings, demanding the full awareness of the purpose of the study from all the stakeholders (Ary et al., 2014).

Data collection

The research used multiple methods of data collection, including non-participant observations, a pre-informal interview or preliminary casual conversation, a post-semi-structured interview, and an observation checklist. Data was collected from both subjective narratives from two English teachers and objective classroom observations taken by the researcher, providing a comprehensive picture of the impact of embedded intercultural elements included in the warm-up stage on the teachers' teaching methodology from multiple perspectives.

The exploratory case study conducted in this research followed a data collection process consisting of eight fundamental steps. First, the schedule was examined to select classes taught by English teachers who met the selection criteria. Next, a classroom observation scheme was piloted, and an interview protocol was standardized for the chosen teachers. Following this, the teachers were contacted to obtain their consent to participate in the study and to clarify the purpose of the research. A pre-interview was conducted with the teachers, lasting 30 minutes, to identify the research problem and finalize the observation checklist. The Communicative Orientation to Language Teaching Observation Scheme (COLT) was then studied, and the observation checklist was completed, with the time spent on each activity, concept, content, skill, or material presented in percentage terms. A comparison table was created for each of the major categories observed between the two classes. The observation notes were reviewed again to compare the two classes and explain the differences. Finally, a post-observation in-depth interview was arranged with the teachers to clarify certain points. A detailed rationale for each data collection method is provided in the description of the methods below.

Non-participant observation

As stated by Creswell (2009), non-participation observations allow researchers to collect direct information about teachers' behaviors and their interactions with students in the classroom. Moreover, by making non-participant observations, the researcher can ascertain information regarding the participants' selection of teaching methods and available digital learning materials without asking each individual directly because the data obtained in this way is not always reliable. The main purpose of the classroom observation method in this study was to find out specific kinds of warm-up activities that could promote learners' intercultural literacy and changes (if any) in teachers' teaching methods when embedding intercultural elements in their English classes. Within the scope of this research, eight warm-up activities in the eight lessons were observed biweekly (two classes of the two teachers per week) for eight consecutive weeks. In total, the researcher completed sixteen forms for both classes.

Observation checklist

The observation scheme aimed to record activities that teachers and students did in class, helping to form the observation checklist. The researcher used and modified the COLT, built by a group of authors (Fröhlich, Spada, & Allen, 1985), as a foundation for the scheme. The time spent for each activity was recorded and used to calculate the percentage of time spent on each activity, each topic, and each language skill out of the total class time of 45 minutes.
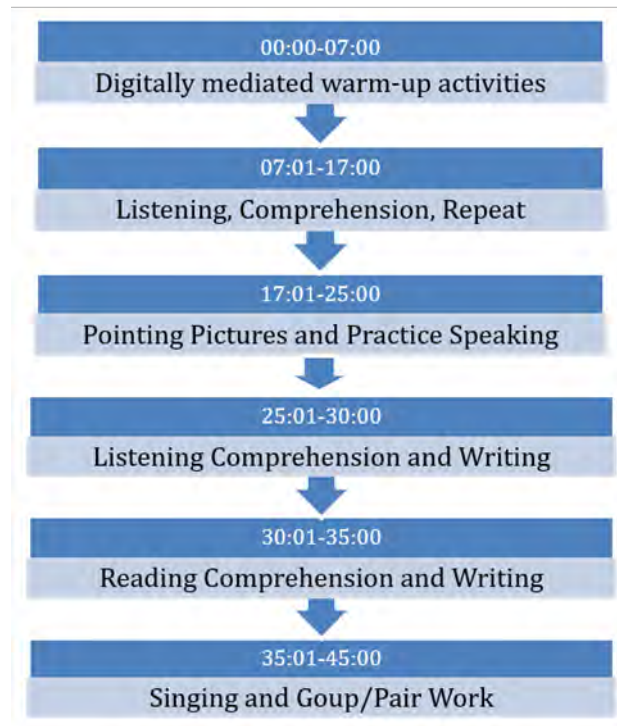
Figure 1 *Teaching-learning process*

Semi-structured interview

The teachers were interviewed to clarify the unclear information collected from class observation. In-depth interviews are also among the most popular qualitative data collection methods (Yin, 2015). The concept of the qualitative interview is often considered a bridge facilitating constructive dialogue between the researcher and participants (Brown & Danaher, 2019). In the present study, two teachers' classes were observed for sixteen lessons over the course of a semester. Following this, the teachers were recorded while they shared their experiences and insights in one-hour interviews. Specifically, they discussed how they incorporated intercultural features and warm-up activities into their teaching practices and provided suggestions for implementing these activities to enhance students' intercultural literacy in the future. Finally, the recording was transcribed for further analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic and structural analysis was adopted for qualitative data analysis in this study, defined as "one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research" (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 1). As stated by Dussi (2022), this type of analysis has full potential for investigating the deeper meanings of collected data from both the interviews and observations and adding interpretive depth to the investigation. Besides, theme-based coding is a suitable tool in this study to generate a small number of themes, enabling the author to categorize data, pattern relevant ideas, and assign labels (Stufflebeam & Zhang, 2017). While data were analyzed, three basic techniques were utilized to decode the themes: analyzing words, carefully reading each large block of texts, and analyzing deliberate linguistic features. The transcriptions of the interview responses were peer-checked by the participants when the initial transcription was completed, ensuring the accuracy of the transcripts and translation processes. Teachers' names were also changed on the transcripts, observation forms, or the checklist to protect the respondents from being identified.

As mentioned previously, the study examined the utilization of the COLT as the observation scheme (Fröhlich, Spada & Allen, 1985). The researcher then completed an observation checklist, recording the duration of each activity, topic concept, content, skill, or material presented as a percentage

relative to the total class time of 45 minutes. A comparative table was created to analyze the major categories observed in both classes, taking into account the percentage of time spent on each activity, topic, and language skill.

Findings

This section presents the raw research data along with brief commentaries. Further findings can be found in the subsequent discussion section, wherein the obtained results are connected to the research questions and supported by relevant literature, elucidating the underlying factors contributing to the findings.

Interconnection between intercultural literacy and digitally mediated warm-up activities in participation organization

The first finding depicts that intercultural features were embedded in both eight designed warm-up activities. As a result, young students could apply their prior knowledge and experience about intercultural traits to finish these warm-up activities. The intercultural embedding also created a stepping stone for the teachers to introduce a new grammatical structure or four basic English skills in a meaningful context (Seçer, Sahin, & Alci, 2015). The teachers properly contextualized these tasks in accordance with the students' levels of understanding of language usage (Lennox, 2013), as listed in Table 1.

Table 1 *Digitally mediated warm-up activities*

Warm-up activity number	Activity content	Digital learning resources
1	Listening and discussing a small talk/ conversation about phone numbers of family members living abroad	Technology-based learning materials (i.e., CD-ROMs)
2	Listening and discussing a small talk/ conversation about summer leisure activities in different countries in the world	Technology-based learning materials (i.e., podcasts, songs)
3	Role-playing to distinguish between Vietnamese and English stress	Classroom computers
4	Audio learning through animals' songs, guessing the topic of the lesson, and identifying the name of the country that has each kind of famous animal.	Authentic audio-visual, visual materials
5	Guessing game to learn about the origins of animals around the world	e-Books/ e-readers
6	Role-playing to ask and answer in pairs on how to pronounce 2-syllable word's stress correctly	Classroom computers
7	Guessing game to learn about different landscapes and clothes in several countries	e-Books/ e-readers
8	Video learning about distinctive and unique customs and habits in the world, then describe who, where, and what they can see in the videos	Authentic audio-visual, visual materials

As discussed in the literature review, Lassche (2005) introduced four essential warming-up designs for young learners, drawing upon Byram's model of intercultural competence (Byram et al., 2001). The current research examines how English teachers incorporate intercultural aspects into English-language digital resources. Consequently, eight digitally mediated warm-

up activities have been proposed by the researcher and chosen to implement by the teachers, categorized into the four main types derived from Lassche's critical designs. These activities include the use of authentic audio-visual or visual printed materials, posing questions related to students' daily life through a guessing game, engaging in role-playing exercises that foster intercultural communication and multicultural dialogue, and facilitating small talk or interpersonal communication with the aid of technology-based devices to create a virtual cross-cultural setting. These digitally mediated warm-up activities have three standard features: providing time for students to reflect on intercultural traits, immersing them in a multicultural environment where intercultural identities are vividly portrayed, and offering tasks that are quick to complete and engaging for young learners. English language teachers could utilize these digitally mediated designs during the warm-up stage to enhance their students' intercultural awareness in a motivating, convenient, and time-saving manner.

In the post-semi-structured interview, Ada shared his intention to continue implementing the warm-up activities discussed. According to Ada, these activities enhance learner engagement in collaborative tasks, such as pair and group work. He also emphasized that these activities create a supportive and encouraging classroom environment during instructional hours. Ada expressed his plans to extend these warm-up activities to his future classes or courses, recognizing their positive impact on student participation and overall learning experience.

> "My students were excited and interested in my lesson. Thus, I will definitely continue using similar digitally mediated warm-up activities to increase the student's engagement in class discussions and keep integrating interculturally relevant elements. Besides this, intercultural knowledge enhanced the ability to perceive foreign language information when my students worked in groups or talked in pairs, so they could speak and share more things about what they had just read or watched."

In a similar vein, Eva expanded on the time-saving benefits of digitally mediated activities compared to traditional paper-based methods. She explained how her teaching methods improved to facilitate more in-depth work, stating:

> "Due to my limited teaching experience, my focus was primarily on explaining textbook content to ensure that my lesson plan stayed on schedule. However, I often struggled to complete all the tasks because I had to translate new words and abstract concepts from the textbook for my students, which took more time than anticipated. After incorporating digital learning materials into the introduction part of my lessons, my students quickly grasped the vocabulary's meaning and actively participated in explaining abstract concepts to their peers. As a result, I enhanced students' comprehension and successfully concluded my lessons on time."

Furthermore, the results of classroom checklist forms from the two classes are shown in Figure 2. The observation checklist indicated that the teacher still remained at the center of the class in Eva's classroom. She used 57% of the total class time to introduce the lesson and the main topic, to describe the learning goal and vocabulary and to explain the usefulness of each exercise. The amount of time for group work was relatively low (11%). A different pattern could be observed in Ada's class when most of the time was dedicated to both teacher talk (30%) and group work (29%). Approximately 24% of the time was used for pair work when two students sat side by side to exchange answers and discuss the correct answers. The individual work conducted was when students worked individually to review the vocabulary and structures learned from the learning assignments. It accounted for only 17% of the lesson in total.

Impact of intercultural features in digitally mediated warm-up activities on the content control of English teachers

Another finding highlights the relevance of selected warm-up activities to the teachers' control of content in their English programs. The teachers chose audio-visual aids to facilitate the learners' conceptualization of what they saw and heard. For instance, during warm-up activities 4 and 8, conversations and songs were accompanied by photos or videos. Meaningful contexts in lead-in
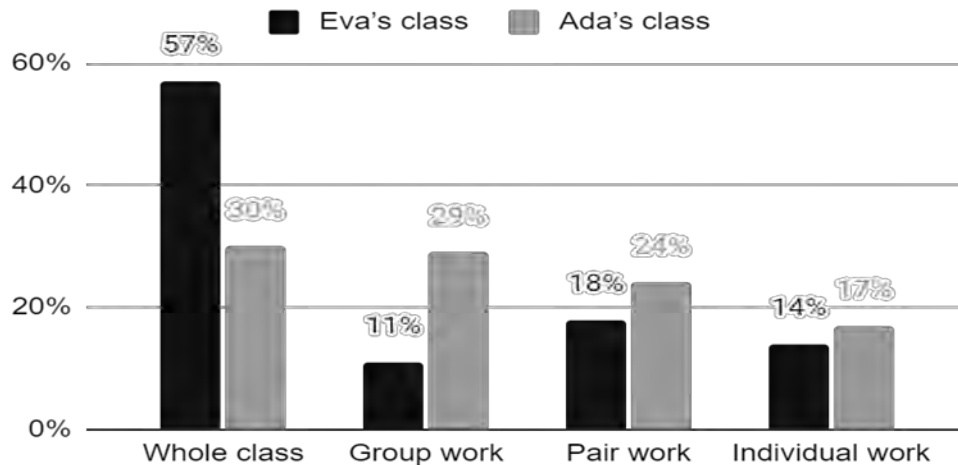
Figure 2 *Participation organization (n=65)*

activities gradually took the young learners to new lessons about animals, customs, and habits (Seçer et al., 2015). In Observation 4, the majority of learners knew the name of the country where each kind of famous animal came from when looking at the pictures in the textbook. In addition, during the eighth warm-up activity, the students watched the Hawaiian festivals in the video, allowing them to relate the cultural traits of local people in the video to their cultural experiences in their real lives. Consequently, they could clarify the specific time, place, and community events during the festival.

Considering the connection of audio-visual warm-up activities with the improvement of her learners' active role in engaged dialogues, Eva proposed in her oral narratives that her students were impressed by these tasks. They eagerly spoke out and raised their viewpoints after watching the videos that broadened their understanding of the target culture as below:

> "My students paid attention to both warm-up activities and to extra follow-up exercises. As a teacher, could see that they were happy and focused on the lessons, then volunteered to constantly answer my questions without hesitation. Even some shy students did boldly express their opinions after watching the chosen videos."

Meanwhile, Ada highlighted the advantages of incorporating audio-visual design into intercultural teaching for student group work. He mentioned:

> "In the past, I would solely rely on explaining intercultural characteristics through textbooks, but I noticed that my students were hesitant to engage in group discussions. However, when I started using audio-visual resources as supplementary teaching materials, they became more confident in expressing their ideas and discussing new cultural perspectives depicted in the videos. They even suggested that I include more music videos for them to practice singing along and simulate a genuine cross-cultural environment."

In order to assess the level of students' involvement in the control of the lesson, the present researcher attempted to find out who chose the content. The variables were teachers, students, or both (students and teachers). The percentage of class time controlled by students, teachers, or both in the two observed classes is shown in Figure 3.

In comparison to Ada's class, Eva's class demonstrated a higher level of content control by the teacher, with a difference of 12%. This difference can be attributed to Eva's teaching approach, where she allocated time after students practiced their listening skills to engage in discussions about the topics they had recently encountered. Furthermore, Eva took the opportunity to explain the intercultural aspects associated with each specific case. This emphasis on discussing intercultural traits contributed to a higher level of teacher-led content delivery in Eva's instructional strategy. Students were then
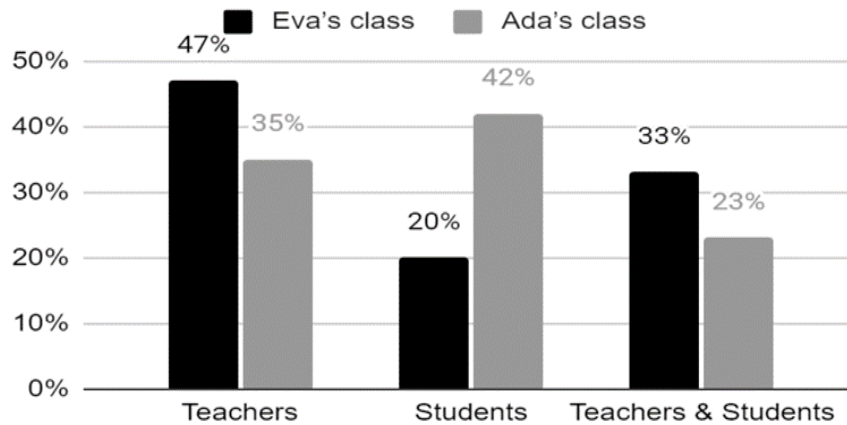
Figure 3 *Content control*

assigned to work in pairs and groups to elaborate and practice conversational situations. The students' contribution to the lesson was primarily their answers to the teacher's questions.

A more student-dominant pattern was found in Ada's class (47%) when the teacher focused mainly on introducing intercultural elements and skill-building techniques rather than focusing solely on grammar and language skills. The students' contribution to the lesson mostly was their practiced conversations with their partners or within a group discussion.

Integration between intercultural literacy and practiced skills in digitally mediated warm-up activities

The third finding is presented by the teachers' scaffolding during the warm-up stage to link the students' prior knowledge to the new one. In   Observation 3 and Observation 6, the teachers gave imaginary situations using classroom computers to set up virtual reality contexts via pictures or videos for the students to look at. To reinforce the reality of the situation, the teachers gave a model conversation and then asked the students to fill a social role of a foreigner in a new country. Notably, these lessons required each individual student to pronounce English-stressed words correctly. First, the teachers let each student identify the mono-syllabic features of almost all Vietnamese Words, then provide a contrast to a multi-syllabic language like English. The teachers also asked the learners to discuss with their partners in pairs/groups in order to distinguish the differences between the strength levels of stressed and unstressed multi-syllable English words. Having mentioned in Vygotsky's social interaction theory, problem-solving discussions made by students as social interactions enable them to internalize the linguistic identity of a country through the main features of the target language's words.

During the lessons, both teachers adopted an integrated approach to their teaching. The four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) were not taught separately, as is more traditional. but rather introduced the intercultural elements to the learners in an integrated manner. The allocated time that the teachers and students gave to each language skill when using the integrated approach was measured using the COLT checklist, and the results are presented in Figure 4.

In both classes, the emphasis on speaking was quite high because the teachers created multiple opportunities for the students to speak in pairs and groups and speak to the teachers (27.4 % of the total learning time in Eva's class and 30.3% in Ada's class). Reading was the most prioritized skill (34.1%), and listening skills were in second place (30.8%) in Eva's class. On the other hand, listening skills were the third-highest valued ability in Ada's class, with 24.5% of the class time.
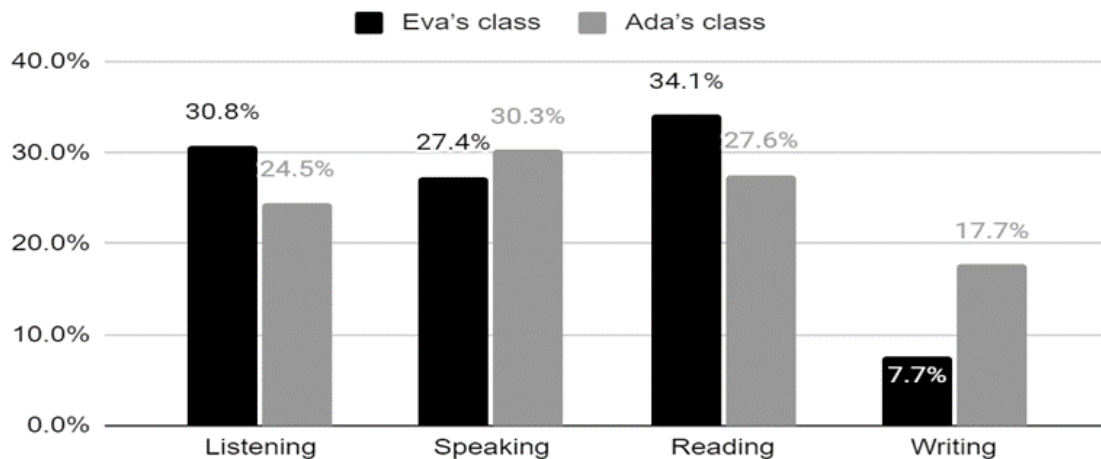
Figure 4 *Practiced skills*

Effect of digital learning materials used in warm-up activities on teaching English to young EFL students

The participants also expressed that warm-up activities aligned with the lesson goals, available digital learning materials, lead-in function to the main part of almost lesson, and young students' short concentration span. In Observation 1 and Observation 2, for example, the learners were described as paying great attention to what the foreigners said in the small talk or conversations. Then, they commented on their sayings in the audio about the difference in the prefix phone number or summer events in many countries. In one of Eva's reflections, she shared that after getting the introduction to the intercultural language communicative teaching model, she was oriented towards using technology -based learning materials available at her international school or online to produce short and fun exercises. She pointed out as below:

> "When I started applying the warm-up activities following the model you suggested, I adapted my lesson plan to the additional content. To make sure that I used appropriate digital resources for the given objectives stated in the textbooks, I examined the content of CD-ROMs available at my school, then went online to seek more short, entertaining, and authentic materials, such as songs, audio, podcasts, and so on. That was absolutely a time-consuming process, but I believe it's worth my efforts."

In subsequent observation sessions, Observation 5 and Observation 7 show that the teachers used formal English textbooks and authentic electronic materials (e.g., pictures on e-books and e-readers). In the in-depth interview, after the observations finished, the teachers clarified that some difficult words and complex structures in the textbooks were replaced by authentic electronic materials to simplify the story, making it suitable for low-level students. Additionally, e-books or e-readers (including sounds and pictures) also created a greater impact on the students' engagement rather than conventional flashcards/pictures. In particular, Ada acknowledged the advantage of teaching at an international school, which allocated a significant annual budget for upgrading learning resources. This budget made his transition to modern electronic devices more feasible. He expressed:

> "Alongside the standard learning equipment found in specialized foreign language rooms, teachers at my school can request additional support for updated materials from the institution. This led me to consider more engaging learning tools for my students, such as e-books or e-readers. While it took time for me to become proficient in using and teaching with these devices, the effort I invested was justified by the opportunity to provide my students with the best intercultural learning experiences."

From the observation checklist, a minor difference can be identified between Ava's and Ada's classes in the use of the textbook. Ada used the coursebook less than Eva (70% and 80%, respectively). This subtle textbook usage difference is understandable because, with lower-level students, the curriculum

and coursebook remain the most important resource for teachers to teach basic language knowledge. When students attain a higher level, the use of more authentic material will be more appropriate.

Discussion

This paper has reported on an exploratory study identifying the main types of digitally mediated warm-up activities that enhance young EFL students' intercultural competence. It also shows how the embedment of intercultural features in designing digitally mediated warm-up exercises affected the in-service English language teachers' actual practice. The study also examines the in-service teachers' attitudes toward the effects of the recommended designs on their students' intercultural literacy.

In terms of the first research question, the four main types of digitally mediated warm-up activities in eight sessions with various themes in Table 1 were successfully trialed and conducted in two different international schools. The eight activities in the study can be categorized into four main types, each serving a distinct purpose. The first type involves visual scaffolding, utilizing authentic audio-visual or visual printed materials (Observation 4 and Observation 8). The second type comprises a set of questions designed to be familiar to students' daily lives, presented as a guessing game on e-books or e-readers (Observation 5 and Observation 7). The third type entails digital role-playing activities facilitated by classroom computers, creating imaginative contexts (Observation 3 and Observation 6). Finally, the fourth type focuses on small talk or interpersonal communication, employing technology-based learning materials to establish a virtual cross-cultural environment (Observation 1 and Observation 2). These distinct types of activities offer a comprehensive range of strategies to integrate intercultural elements into the English-language learning process. Consistent with the previous studies on the three features of four critical warming-up designs for young learners (Bland, 2022; Lassche, 2005; Yin, 2009), the four types of digitally mediated warm-up activities not only give students time to reflect on the intercultural traits in their accustomed concepts but also quickly lead them to a virtual cross-cultural setting where intercultural identities of people from all over the world are clearly illustrated. Therefore, the English teachers in this current study were able to see the suitability of utilizing digitally mediated warm-up activities and the characteristics of their young EFL learners.

Besides, regarding the impact of the warm-up activities on the teachers' teaching methodology, both the first and the second findings demonstrated that the utilization of the exercises facilitated an encouraging environment for learners' engagement in collaborative works (i.e., pair/group work) and a stimulus for the improvement of her learners' active role in collaborative discourse (either with teachers or with peers). Although the teachers shared the same goal for enhancing their students' intercultural literacy, their students' levels of proficiency affected the degrees of the participating organization and the content control of the English teachers. In the participation organization category, the teacher-centered approach was still dominant, with the teacher's whole-group directions accounting for 57% in Eva's class, whereas the time for pair work (11%) and group work (18%) was limited. In the latter category, higher content controlled by the teacher was found, and her learners' main contribution to the lesson was solely their answers to her questions. The learners' limited contribution could be explained by the fact that in Eva's class, learners' English proficiency is relatively low (elementary level), so Eva often spent more time providing basic language knowledge to his young learners. The students did not have enough vocabulary and grammatical structures to be able to participate in group exercises that addressed complex intercultural tasks.

In contrast, with the increasing requirement of embedding intercultural literacy into the syllabus for English specialized curricula, Ada and his students spent most of the instructional time scaffolding and doing intercultural-featured activities via pair work (24%) and group work (29%). In the latter one, since his students were attaining pre-intermediate levels of language proficiency (A2 - CEFR), a more student-dominant pattern was found in his course (47%). As a result, he could ask students to participate in more communicative and productive tasks.

Moreover, the third finding emphasizes the prerequisite for language teachers to contextualize their teaching plans and ensure that warm-up activity learning outcomes are appropriate to learners' prior

knowledge. Without establishing a close link between known and unknown information, the gap in the language ability between students was likely to be widened. Thus, the teachers employed the integrated approach (i.e., integrating intercultural elements into practiced skills) in their teaching process (Figure 1), providing multiple opportunities for the students to work in pairs or groups and ask for teachers' assistance directly. Take both Ada's and Eva's curricula as an example. These prioritize the integration of intercultural features into the listening and speaking activities rather than into reading and writing. The combination of listening and intercultural features, speaking and intercultural elements got high priority. The explanation is that the students practiced both listening and speaking when they had to listen to the teacher's follow-up intercultural questions from the prior digitally mediated warm-up activities, then exchanged ideas with their partners or groupmates, and finally presented their opinions themselves.

Regarding the second research question, this is addressed by the second of fourth findings of how the digitally mediated warm-up activities affected the degree of teacher content control and the engagement of the young EFL learners. These findings highlight the way that the teachers provided various opportunities for their learners to be exposed to different information-processing channels (i.e., audio-visual). They believed their learners were able to enhance their active engagement in intercultural exercises in an entertaining and more informative way than conventional paper-based materials, even though it took time to seek the technology-based learning materials. The teachers' strategy aligned with the socio-cultural methods utilizing modern technology to facilitate a process of intercultural identity formation.

Besides, data generated from the interviews and checklist forms also confirm the positive attitudes toward the introduction of intercultural elements in the content control of the teachers. In particular, Ada's students took full autonomy when they practiced the conversation with the given format. Therefore, the teacher's intercultural language communicative teaching approach is likely to make students active and directly involved in the lesson to advance their own communicative competence. The final finding discovers that the student's cognitive development was taken into consideration when the teachers designed the digitally mediated warm-up activities on topics familiar to them. The teachers also modified the original materials and adapted authentic electronic materials since they realized the great potential of the materials in increasing language learners' motivation and simplifying the lessons' content. Thus, intercultural literacy should be embedded in technology-based materials in accordance with young learners' psychological enhancement levels and learning styles.

Implications and Conclusion

This paper showcases how two EFL teachers designed the digitally mediated warm-up activities to enhance their young learners' intercultural literacy in the context of Vietnamese international schools. Following clear steps, this exploratory study has advanced our understanding of the application of intercultural literacy in terms of both digital warm-up activities and in-service teachers' teaching methodology.

First, the practice of warm-up activities using technology in the given context redefines the teachers' roles in scaffolding language learning and building students' intercultural identity through using the intercultural language communicative teaching model. This model seems promising in arousing familiar experiences to young EFL learners, facilitating the process to improve intercultural knowledge of the target language, and reflecting their growing understanding of their physical community and the world. In this research, the dual identity of the teachers emerges as moral educators and English language instructors, with Ada and Eva demonstrating a deep understanding of "the role of morality persists" in their lesson plans (Le Ha & Van Que, 2006, p. 1). Having recognized that language teaching focuses not only on linguistics knowledge delivery but also on intercultural features of target languages nations, they devoted their time and efforts to improving their teaching quality and methodology to raise their students' intercultural awareness. To be more specific, the teachers adapted new authentic digital materials and altered their lesson content, organization, content control, and time allocation for integrating intercultural elements into each language skill as well. Hence, proper digitally mediated warm-up activities were embedded with intercultural understanding. In the second role of EFL instructors, they always kept in mind the characteristics of young EFL

students to create a favorable participation organization where the learners appeared to form their responses to cross-cultural phenomena mainly via their interaction with peers, speaking partners, and teachers themselves.

In addition, this research contributes to the empirical studies on the integration of intercultural features into the initial phrase of any language lessons, leading to the activation of young learners' prior knowledge. It also sheds light on specific kinds of digitally mediated warm-up activities serving the research goals. As it stands, the data collected from two classes is a limited sample and may not fully represent all classes within the same module. Despite this limitation, the findings are still likely to hold relevance and resonance within other international schools in Vietnam or similar international school-based contexts. A promising area for further research is the development of a larger sample population and the implementation of more sophisticated research methods. This research would specifically aim to assess the impact of intercultural literacy training on students' intercultural literacy competence in various cultural environments.

Throughout this study, the participants were truly dedicated to instructing and motivating their learners to engage more in every activity, resulting from a generally positive attitude toward peer observations. As a result, the participants skillfully managed their teaching practice and established appropriate individual teaching strategies to fit the distinct language proficiency levels in specialized and non-specialized courses. This observation prompts us to propose that EFL teachers and educators should carefully consider the necessity of incorporating technology at the outset of language lessons as a means to augment the cultivation of intercultural literacy among young EFL students.

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