



Co-creating EAP through a Third Space: A Collaborative Virtual Exchange Project for Intercultural and Digital Learning between China and South Africa

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Introduction

Institution: Sino-Foreign Joint University in Mainland China

Students: Primarily Chinese students from public high school backgrounds

Key Challenges:

Transition from Chinese-Medium Instruction to English-Medium Instruction

Limited exposure to different cultures

Lack of authentic opportunities for cross-cultural interaction



Share your thoughts

How can we create meaningful opportunities to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC)?

Literature Review: Culture Element in EAP Teaching

Culture as a Key Element in Language Learning and EAP Settings

- **Language and culture** are inseparable (Avgousti, 2018).
- **Integrating cultural knowledge** enhances learners' ability to communicate meaningfully (Kramsch, 2013).
- In **EAP settings**, students acquire both: academic English + learning to navigate academic culture, norms, and expectations that are often unfamiliar.
- **Academic discourse is deeply embedded in cultural conventions that may not be transparent** to international students (Hyland, 2009).

Literature Review: Culture Element in EAP Teaching

Importance of Intercultural Communicative Competency (ICC)

- **Integrating ICC** into **EAP** instruction enhances students' linguistic proficiency while simultaneously equipping them with skills necessary for successful intercultural communication in global academic and professional settings (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018).
- **Essential for Globalized Education** (global citizenship), as it empowers learners to actively participate in culturally diverse communities, promote social justice, and contribute positively to global society (Byram, 2020)

Literature Review: Culture Element in EAP Teaching

- **Limitations of traditional EAP teaching:**
 1. Typically focus on discrete skills, often neglecting the dynamic intercultural exchanges inherent in global academic environments (Hyland, 2009).
 2. Narrow emphasis on linguistic competence, inadequately prepares students for complex intercultural and digital communication demands within modern professional fields (Hamp-Lyons, 2011)
- **Challenges in Homogeneous Populations** (some regions like mainland China often have limited opportunities for diverse cultural engagement).

Literature Review: Culture Element in EAP Teaching

- **Limitations with some of the current teaching materials:**

1. Teaching materials lacking real-life cultural examples can impede effective cultural education and diminish student engagement and sense of belonging (Durden et al., 2015).
2. Current materials frequently fall short in providing authentic contexts, limiting students' meaningful understanding of the content (Opfer et al., 2020).

As a result, **a need for explicit instruction on cultural elements:**

- Explicit guidance on the norms, expectations, and rhetorical conventions of academic discourse (Wood, Flowerdew, & Peacock, 2001).

Literature Review: Correlation between ICC & Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Positive Correlation between ICC and WTC:

- According to Peng (2014), learners with higher ICC show greater WTC in multicultural environments (Peng, 2014).

However, other studies suggest the opposite:

High intercultural sensitivity or competence does **NOT** automatically lead to **higher willingness to communicate**.

- Anxiety or reluctance due to factors like perceived language inadequacy, **face-saving concerns**, or **power distance** in multicultural interactions (Yashima et al., 2004)
- **Face-negotiation theory**: In collectivistic cultures such as East Asia regions, preserving face for both self and others is paramount and communication strategies often aim to **maintain harmony** and **avoid confrontation** (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Chua, 1988).

Literature Review: Virtual Platforms as a 'Third Space'

- Urgent need to develop students' **digital literacy** in EAP classrooms, driven by globalization and digital advancements
- “**Third Space**”, a concept to reconstruct EAP in **hybrid spaces** (Bhabha, 1994) for different cultural identities to meet and transform each other
- Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as **Global Virtual Exchanges (GVE)**– innovative pedagogies, offer **authentic intercultural experiences** not available in traditional classrooms and foster digital literacy
- Extends opportunities for intercultural language use beyond **geographical boundaries, time zone constraints** (O'Dowd, 2007) and **financial limitations (Higgins, 2023)**, without the substantial costs of physical mobility.
- AFS Intercultural Programs (2021) highlight that virtual exchanges break down financial barriers, expanding access to global competence education for students from **underrepresented** communities.

Literature Review: Virtual Platforms as a 'Third Space'

Multimodality of virtual platforms provides more possibilities for virtual exchange

- Multimodal interaction on platforms like MS Teams or Zoom supports language development and cultural empathy (Guth & Helm, 2010).
- Allow learners to engage through **multiple communication channels**—such as text, voice, and video—enhancing their linguistic interaction and intercultural sensitivity (Hampel & Stickler, 2012).

Research Aims

Research Aims

- Evaluate the impact of the GVE as a “Third Space” on students’ Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and digital literacy in an EAP environment.
- Find the correlation between GVE, ICC and WTC

Research Questions

1. How does participation in a global virtual exchange (GVE) influence students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and digital literacy skills in transnational EAP contexts?
2. What are the experiences and perceptions of students from China and South Africa regarding the co-creation process within a third-space virtual learning environment in EAP?
3. What is the relationship between students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and their willingness to communicate (WTC) during global virtual exchange interactions in EAP settings?

Hypotheses

1. Will enhance the overall ICC but with limitations
2. Mostly positive, especially for Chinese students
3. Will increase students’ WTC



Brief Overview of the Study

This research is based on a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program between:

- Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), **China**
- Durban University of Technology (DUT), **South Africa**
- Conducted during Semester 1 of the 2024/25 academic year

Duration	Four weeks in AY24/25 Semester 1 Sep 16 th – Oct 11 th 2024
Student Cohort	DUT (4 th year) n=38 XJTLU- (1 st year– Post graduate) n=50
Disciplines	DUT- Radiography students XJTLU- Students come from multiple departments
Number of Students	DUT- 48 XJTLU- 50
Methods of Connection	Synchronous - Microsoft Teams Asynchronous – WeChat
Project Focus Area	Intercultural communication Competence (ICC) Willingness to communicate in English (WTC)
Project outcome	Group PowerPoint presentation - Critical cultural incident analysis

Curriculum Design - Theoretical Framework

Gibbs Reflective Cycle

1. **Description** – *What happened?*
2. **Feelings** – *What were you thinking and feeling?*
3. **Evaluation** – *What was good and bad about the experience?*
4. **Analysis** – *Why did things go well or poorly?*
5. **Conclusion** – *What have you learned?*
6. **Action Plan** – *What would you do differently next time?*

← **Byram's**

Attitudes & Critical Cultural Awareness

Critical cultural incident analysis

- ✦ **Unexpected or challenging**
- 🎭 **Cross-cultural**
- 🧠 **Reflective learning opportunity**

Attitudes 👤

Openness
Curiosity

Skills of Discovery and Interaction 🗣️

Flexibility
Empathy

- 1 Engaging students in interactive and communicative activities.
- 2 Applying theories to enhance in-depth understanding of intercultural communication.

Communicative Tasks

Theoretical Frameworks

- 3 Facilitating real-time, interactive online learning sessions.
- 4 To strengthen students' understanding and proficiency in ICC.




Synchronous Lessons

Literature Reading

Enhanced ICC

Knowledge & Skills

Learning Outcomes & Weekly Overview

  		
XJTLU & DUT COIL Synchronous Lesson Schedule		
	2024.09.16 17:30-19:30 Online	2024.09.19 17:30-19:30 Online
Week 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meeting our South African Partners 2. Engaging in cross-cultural communication online 3. Introducing your culture and beliefs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cross-cultural communication gallery walk 2. Intercultural communication case study 3. Post your ideas on cross-cultural communication on social platforms
	2024.09.23 17:30-19:30 Online	2024.09.26 17:30-19:30 Online
Week 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Non-verbal communication in intercultural communication 2. Individualism or Collectivism? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural clashes case discussion 2. Share your experience of cross-cultural communication online
	2024.10.07 17:30-19:30 Online	2024.10.10 17:30-19:30 Online
Week 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural misunderstanding resolutions 2. Communication style adaptation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tailor your message workshop 2. Share your group presentation ideas online
	2024.10.14 17:30-19:30 Online	2024.10.17 Onsite* 17:30-19:30
Week 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Online Group Presentation 2. Reflecting on the COIL Project 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Closing Ceremony and Celebration 2. Awarding Research Participation Certificates

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LO3: Critic

LO4: AI an

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Virtual Platform as a 'Third Space'

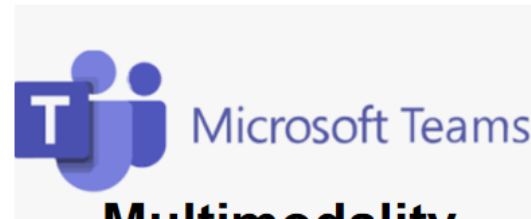
In this research study, we used the MS Teams as our multimodal learning management system.

Linguistic Mode (Text and speech)

- Reflective writing
- Synchronous lectures
- Online discussion
- Asynchronous reading

Gesture Mode

- Facial expressions and body language in video calls
- Emoticons and GIFs in online discussions
- Non-verbal communication posts



Multimodality

The use of multiple sign systems in creating a product or event, along with how these elements are combined — whether they reinforce, complement, or follow a hierarchical structure. (Leeuwen, 2001)

Visual & Auditory Mode

- Images, videos, slide presentations
- Speech feedback

Spatial Mode

- Layout of digital learning platforms
- Organic grouping and platform layout

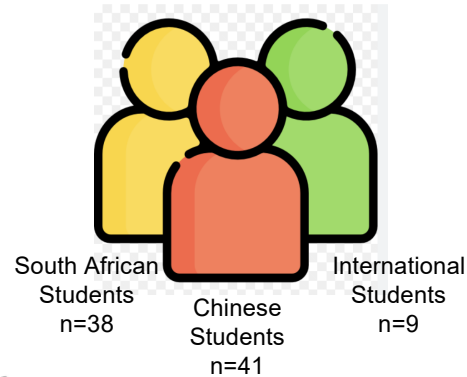
This study adopted a **sequential explanatory mixed method**:

- Quantitative data collected first (pre- and post-)
- Followed by qualitative data for deeper insight

Quantitative Phase

- **Instrument:** Online questionnaire
- **Sample size:** $n = 88$
- **Analysis tool:** SPSS
- **Statistical Tests:**

- One-sample t-test
- Paired-samples t-test



Qualitative Phase

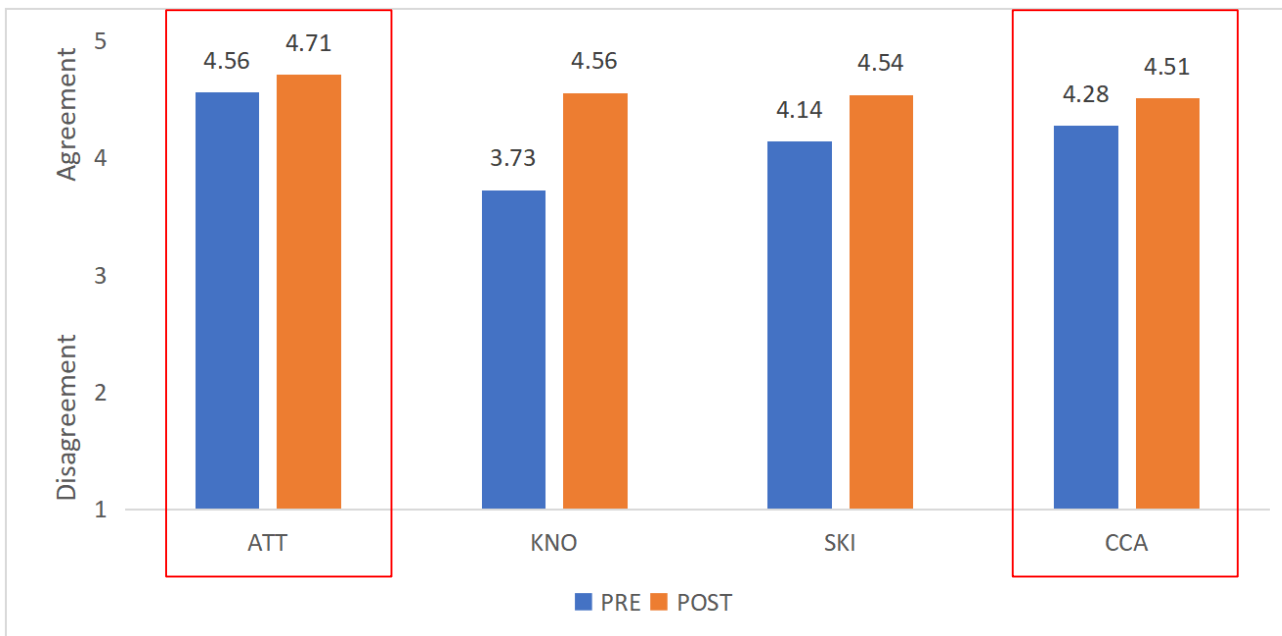
- **Methods:**
 - Focus group discussions
 - Reflective essays
- **Sample size:** $n = 16$
- **Analysis method:** Thematic Analysis

Key Findings - Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Overall, a significant increase in ICC (n = 88) for Chinese, international, and South African students.

Statistical improvements observed across all ICC dimensions (p < .05)

ICC Dimensions	Items included in questionnaire	Cronbach's alpha
Attitude (PRE_ATT)	1.2 – 1.5	0.801
Knowledge (PRE_KNO)	2.2 – 2.4	0.834
Skills (PRE_SKI)	3.1 – 3.5	0.837
Critical cultural awareness (PRE_CCA)	4.1 – 4.4	0.824



Attitudes (ATT) and Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA) showed *less significant improvement* compared to the other 2 ICC dimensions.



Key Findings - Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Qualitative findings suggest that this GVE project supported students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Table 1: Perceived Benefits of the COIL Project

Perceived Impact	Chinese Students (XJTLU, n=5)	International Students (XJTLU, n=3)	DUT Students (n=8)
Enhanced Intercultural Communication	5	2	4
Improved Collaboration & Teamwork	2	2	2
Digital Literacy Enhancement	3	3	4
Increased Cultural Awareness	5	2	2

Key Findings - Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Challenging on **Cultural Stereotypes**



Chinese Student
Focus Group

"Initially, I thought Chinese food was the best, as many international students claim. But after researching, I discovered South Africa's rich variety of spices and meats, which seemed quite appealing."



International Student
Focus Group

"Before the project started, I had a certain opinion about Chinese food. It was widespread stereotype in Russia that Chinese people eat inside a lot of things, usually eat insects and different parts of chicken. When I came here and joined this project, I have I had 2-3 Chinese students in the group. They explained that Chinese cuisine is more than insects and different parts of chicken."



South African Student
Reflective Essay

"I would like to say that it was very exciting to participate in this study which allowed me to understand both stereotypes of our country in the other country and the surprise of our friends in the other country when we spoke about the stereotypes about them."

Key Findings - Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Critically reflected on **cultural identities**



International Student
Focus Group

“Growing up in Bali, a renowned tourist destination, exposed me to various cultures, making me more open-minded—I see myself as a global citizen rather than strictly Indonesian.”

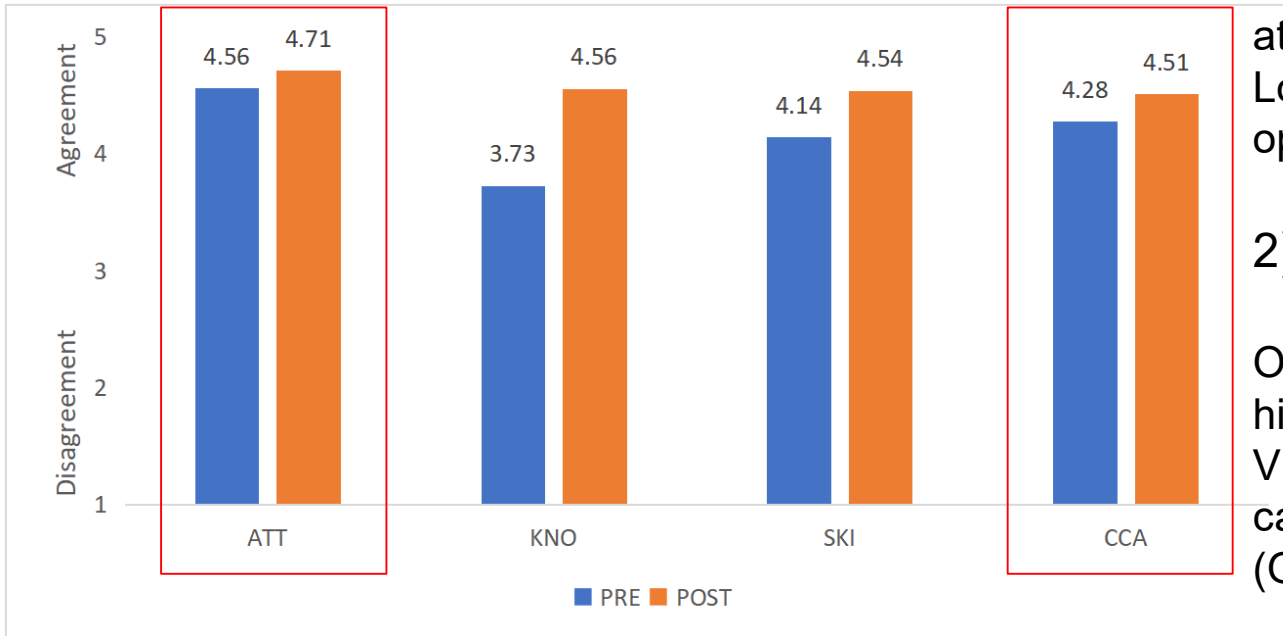


Chinese Student
Focus Group

“When we were doing the group presentation, once the camera was on, I saw that the girls were all dressed in a way that covered themselves, wearing headscarves (hijab). I felt like it was quite different (from our culture), and I used to had a stereotype about it (hijab).”

Discussion - Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Attitudes (ATT) and **Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA)** showed less significant improvement compared to the other two ICC dimensions.



1) Short Program Duration (4 weeks)

Limited exposure may not be sufficient for deeper shifts in personal attitudes or values.

Longer-term engagement >> significant shifts in attitudes and openness (O'Dowd, 2018)

2) Disembedding Effect of Virtual Platforms

Online interactions often lack rich contextual cues, which can hinder authentic cultural engagement and reflection.

Virtual exchanges may "lift" interactions out of local settings, which can hinder the development of culturally grounded understanding (Giddens, 1990).

3) Curriculum & Task Design

A stronger focus on socio-contextual, real-world tasks may better support the development of CCA by encouraging critical reflection and intercultural perspective-taking.

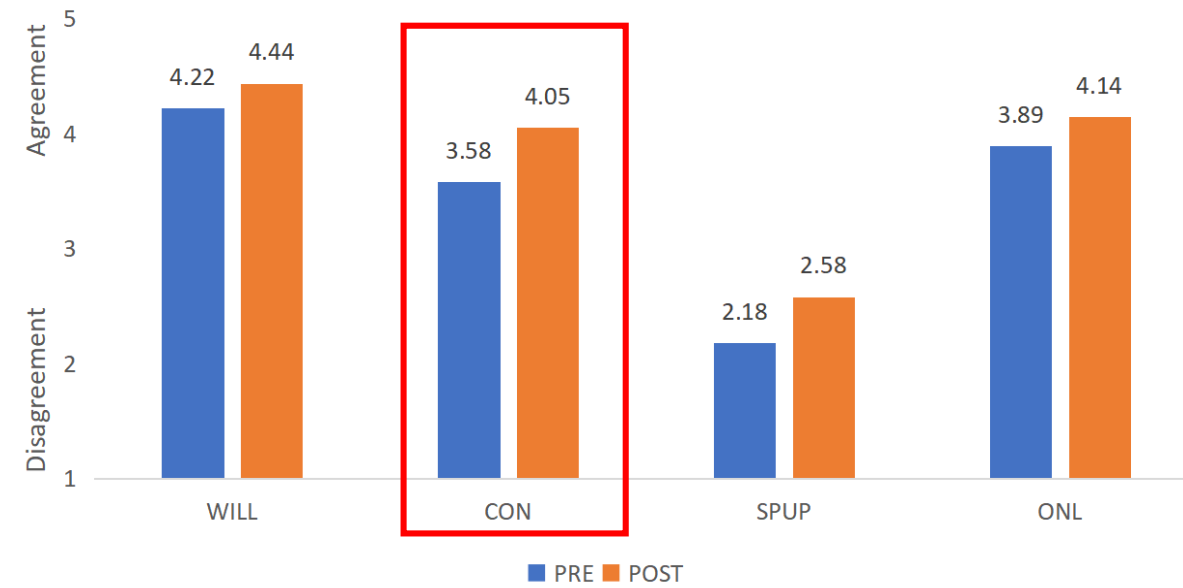
Key Findings - Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Significant improvements were observed across **all four WTC Dimensions** after the virtual exchange program.

WTC Dimensions	Items included	Cronbach's alpha
Willingness (PRE_WILL)	A1 – A4	0.764
Confidence (PRE_CON)	B1 – B5	0.952
Speaking up (PRE_SPUP)	C1 – C3	0.769
Online Learning (PRE_ONL)	D1 – D5	0.749

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PRE_WILL - POST_WILL	-.21500	.70532	.09975	-.41545	-.01455	-2.155	49	.036
Pair 2	PRE_CON - POST_CON	-.47200	.83862	.11860	-.71033	-.23367	-3.980	49	.000
Pair 3	PRE_SPUP - POST_SPUP	-.40000	1.17417	.16605	-.73370	-.06630	-2.409	49	.020
Pair 4	PRE_ONL - POST_ONL	-.25200	.60449	.08549	-.42379	-.08021	-2.948	49	.005



Confidence in Communication showed the most significant increase ($p = .000$)

Key Findings - Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

Overall, Chinese students felt pressured by expectations for active, responsive communication, contrasting their preferred indirect, high-context style



Chinese Student

“Communicating in Chinese feels effortless, but speaking English feels like taking an IELTS exam. There's greater pressure, and we're cautious about expressing ourselves incorrectly.” (Chinese student, focus group interview)



South African Student

“At the start, I felt excited and curious about collaborating with students from another culture, but with the delayed and sometimes no responses at all, I started feeling frustrated, anxious and concerned about our ability to complete the project effectively.” (South African Student, focus group interview)



International Student

“South African students are more expressive than Chinese students.” (International student, focus group interview)

Discussion - Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

While South African and international students often perceived Chinese students' willingness to communicate (WTC) as relatively low, Chinese students self-reported a notable increase in their WTC—particularly in speaking confidence (3.58 → 4.05).

Face Negotiation Theory (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988): The public self-image that a person wants to claim for themselves in a particular interaction.

1. **Face maintenance:** maintain 'ideal self' and deference negative feedback
2. **Conflict styles:** one's culture influences their preferred style of conflict resolution

Cultural Dimensions

- Individualistic cultures (e.g., U.S., Germany, UK) tend to value self-face (asserting one's needs and opinions).
- Collectivistic cultures (e.g., China, Japan, Korea) emphasize other-face and mutual-face (preserving harmony and respecting the group).

Discussion - Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

While South African and international students often perceived Chinese students' willingness to communicate (WTC) as relatively low, Chinese students **self-reported a notable increase** in their WTC—particularly in speaking confidence (3.58 → 4.05).

Kramsch's "Third Place" (1993, 2009):

Virtual platforms offer a hybrid space where learners operate outside traditional cultural and institutional norms.

Giddens' "Disembedding" Environment(1990):

Online spaces detach communication from local authority and power structures.

The absence of immediate social surveillance reduces the face-threatening risks (Ting-Toomey, 1988), allowing students to experiment with language and interaction without fear of losing face.

A gap between **internal psychological readiness** and **external verbal output**.

Language Learning in a 'Third Place'

Virtual platforms: **democratize access to language classes** by eliminating traditional barriers such as geographical constraints and financial limitations, thereby expanding opportunities for intercultural and international learning.

The multimodal nature of virtual platforms enables participants to engage in both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, fostering a more **authentic** and **immersive** learning environment.

However, the **disembedding effect** of the virtual platform is considered as one of the significant challenge.

Students often engaged with cultural symbols as simplified representations of their own or globalized cultural norms, detached from specific local or contextual meanings. This can result in a **superficial** or **curated** understanding of cultural diversity (Campo-Ruiz, 2025).

Challenges - The Disembedding Effect of the 'Third Place'



Chinese
Student

*"I remember that I posted a video about the Chinese dragon in the WeChat group and shared a link from Bilibili for them to watch. Then, I also sent a more comprehensive video that showcased various aspects of China. But they just said, "Oh, that's interesting," and replied briefly. They **didn't elaborate** much on their own culture either. It felt more like **just a task to be completed** rather than a **deep exchange (understanding)**." (Chinese student, focus group interview)*



South African
Student

"It's really nice exposure to things that we're not exposed to. It just means (requires) more in-depth interactions." (DUT student, focus group interview)



Challenges - The Disembedding Effect of the 'Third Place'

The "disembedding effect" is a concept introduced by sociologist Anthony Giddens in his book *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990).

1. **Removal from Local Contexts:**

Interactions that used to be grounded in specific cultural, geographic, or social settings are now detached from those settings.

2. **Mediated by Abstract Systems:**

Instead of face-to-face, embodied experiences, people often engage through **technological platforms** or **bureaucratic systems** (e.g., online learning, virtual meetings, banking, etc.).

3. **Crossing Time and Space:**

Disembedding allows communication or activities to occur **asynchronously** or **across vast distances**, breaking the link between physical presence and social connection.

√ Can **increase access** and **connect distant groups** → **democratize access**

× May also lead to **loss of cultural nuance**, **superficial engagement**, or **misinterpretation of meaning**.

× Raises questions about **authenticity**, **identity**, and **power dynamics** in digital spaces.

Conclusion

- 1. Breaking Barriers:** The GVE program demonstrated strong potential for interdisciplinary teaching, transcending geographical, financial, and time constraints.
- 2. Authentic Intercultural Communication:** It created opportunities for students to engage in cross-cultural dialogue, encouraging self-identity exploration, promoting inclusivity and appreciation of cultural diversity.
- 3. Empowering Voices from Diverse Cultural Background:** For Chinese students, the virtual setting **reduced hierarchical pressures** commonly found in high power-distance cultures, helping them build confidence in communication.

Future Implications

- **Task Design:** Future programs should incorporate more **socio-culturally** situated tasks to foster genuine and less utilitarian cultural exchanges.
- **Curriculum Duration:** Extending the program timeline would allow students more time to build trust with intercultural peers, encouraging deeper reflection and more sustained cultural engagement.
- **Move Beyond Static Cultural Frameworks:** Avoid rigid cultural typologies (e.g., Hofstede) and instead adopt fluid frameworks such as Dervin's (2016) critical interculturality to better represent the complexity of identities.
- **Include Multilingual Practices and Translanguaging in EAP:** Encourage code-switching and the use of students' full linguistic repertoires to express culturally embedded meanings that may not translate well into English.

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