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The Impact of Intercultural Online Exchange on the Development of Sociolinguistic Competence among English Majors in Vietnam: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract
This study investigates students' perceived development of sociolinguistic competence following their participation in an extracurricular intercultural online exchange. The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach with 198 first-year English majors at the A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) who were enrolled in Essential Listening and Speaking and Introduction to the English Language courses at a university in Vietnam. The 12-week exchange program was conducted in parallel to formal coursework. The researchers collected quantitative data through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire measuring pragmatic awareness, communicative appropriateness, politeness strategies, and cultural sensitivity. The researchers conducted descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, a one-sample t-test, and Pearson correlations using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Results indicated that the overall post-exchange perception score was significantly higher than the neutral midpoint ($p < .001$), with cultural sensitivity receiving the highest rating. Correlation analysis revealed moderate positive relationships among the four dimensions. To elaborate on these findings, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 participants. Thematic analysis indicated increased awareness of sociocultural norms, perceived improvement in pragmatic adjustment, and enhanced communicative confidence. Overall, the findings suggest that scaffolded extracurricular virtual exchange may support early-stage sociolinguistic development among lower-proficiency English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. By focusing on lower-proficiency English majors in the Vietnamese higher education context, this study addresses the limited empirical evidence on how scaffolded intercultural online exchange supports sociolinguistic development and offers pedagogical implications for integrating virtual exchange into EFL speaking instruction.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural online telecollaboration, sociolinguistic competence, Vietnamese university students
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Introduction

In the context of globalization and rapid digital transformation, English has increasingly served as a key medium for international communication, academic collaboration, and professional mobility (Rose & McKinley, 2018). Recent scholarship has emphasized that English language education should move beyond structural accuracy and place greater emphasis on communicative and intercultural competence in globalized contexts (Galloway & Rose, 2020). Within this paradigm, sociolinguistic competence remains a central component of communicative competence, referring to learners' ability to use language appropriately in relation to sociocultural norms, interlocutor relationships, and communicative contexts (Canale, 1983). This study operationalizes sociolinguistic competence through four dimensions: pragmatic awareness, communicative appropriateness, politeness strategies, and cultural sensitivity.

For English majors in EFL contexts such as Vietnam, sociolinguistic competence has become increasingly important as higher education becomes more internationalized.. However, previous studies have shown that intercultural and pragmatic dimensions are not yet fully integrated into Vietnamese English language teaching, as classroom practices often remain constrained by prescribed textbooks, limited intercultural tasks, and traditional pedagogical orientations (Nguyen et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023). As a result, learners may demonstrate formal accuracy yet encounter difficulties in real-life intercultural communication, particularly in performing contextually appropriate speech acts. This mismatch is especially salient for first-year English majors who often have limited opportunities for authentic interaction beyond the classroom.

Advancements in digital technology have created new possibilities for intercultural engagement through virtual exchange and telecollaboration. In the present study, the term intercultural online exchange refers to structured virtual exchange/telecollaboration activities involving guided interaction with international partners. Scholars increasingly recognize virtual exchange as an effective pedagogical approach that promotes intercultural communicative competence, reflective learning, and pragmatic development (O'Dowd, 2021). Structured synchronous and asynchronous interaction exposes learners to authentic communication, diverse sociocultural perspectives, and opportunities to negotiate meaning in digitally mediated environments.

Recent empirical studies highlight that online intercultural exchange can foster pragmatic awareness and adaptive communicative strategies, particularly when tasks are carefully scaffolded (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021, pp.392-406). Despite the growing global interest in virtual exchange, limited research has examined its measurable impact on sociolinguistic competence, particularly among lower-proficiency learners in Vietnamese higher education. Moreover, many studies still rely primarily on single-method designs, which highlights the need for mixed-methods research that combines statistical evidence with in-depth experiential descriptions. Previous studies have focused mainly on intermediate or advanced learners, overlooking early-stage (e.g., A2) cohorts.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the impact of intercultural online exchange on the development of sociolinguistic competence among 198 first-year English majors (A2 level) at a university in Vietnam. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative interview findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' perceived development and lived experiences during the intercultural online exchange program. By focusing on an A2 cohort in a Vietnamese university

speaking course, the study contributes empirical evidence to discussions of how scaffolded virtual exchange can support early sociolinguistic development in EFL contexts.

Based on the identified research gap, this study addresses the following research questions:

(1) To what extent does participation in intercultural online exchange influence the development of sociolinguistic competence among first-year English majors?

(2) How do first-year English majors perceive the role of intercultural online exchange in enhancing their sociolinguistic competence?

Literature Review

Scholars widely recognize sociolinguistic competence as a fundamental component of communicative competence. Within Canale and Swain's (1980) influential framework, later refined by Canale (1983), communicative competence comprises grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences. Sociolinguistic competence specifically refers to the ability to use language appropriately in relation to sociocultural norms and contextual variables. It requires learners to understand how factors such as social distance, power relations, degree of imposition, and cultural expectations shape language choices. The present study operationalizes this construct through four interrelated dimensions: pragmatic awareness, communicative appropriateness, politeness strategies, and cultural sensitivity, which together reflect both sociopragmatic understanding and interactional performance.

Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence challenged purely structural views of language by arguing that effective communication requires not only grammatical accuracy but also sociocultural appropriateness. Effective communication is the ability to select linguistic forms that are appropriate to the requirements of the context, including variation in register, politeness strategies, and culturally acceptable speech patterns (Hymes, 1972, pp. 296-293). This view is consistent with later work in pragmatics, which distinguishes between pragmalinguistic resources, or linguistic forms, and sociopragmatic knowledge, or contextual norms, that shape learners' interactional choices (Kasper & Rose, 2003).

In EFL contexts, the development of sociolinguistic competence encounters particular challenges. Learners may demonstrate a high level of grammatical accuracy but still fail to perform speech acts such as requests, refusals, apologies, or compliments appropriately in cultural contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2003). Such difficulties often result from a lack of exposure to authentic interaction and a limited awareness of sociopragmatic norms. Taguchi (2022) argues that meaningful communicative experience closely supports pragmatic development, as learners gradually refine their sociopragmatic judgments through interaction and feedback. For lower-proficiency learners, limited opportunities to interact with diverse interlocutors often constrain this experience, slowing the development of pragmatic routines and politeness conventions in real-time communication.

Furthermore, sociolinguistic competence is not only a linguistic ability but also involves cultural awareness and interpretive ability. In communication, learners need to be able to identify implicit meanings, indirectness, and culturally embedded references. However, the ability to navigate sociocultural differences is increasingly important in an increasingly globalized and digitally mediated environment. Hence, pedagogical approaches that offer authentic, intercultural and context-rich communication opportunities are key for developing sociolinguistic competence in higher education settings. However, authentic interaction in many EFL classrooms remains

limited because students often communicate mainly with peers who share similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, highlighting the need for structured intercultural contact.

Intercultural Online Exchange (Telecollaboration)

Intercultural online exchange, commonly referred to as telecollaboration, involves the structured use of online communication technologies to connect language learners from different cultural and geographical contexts for collaborative learning purposes (O'Dowd, 2018). Unlike traditional classroom interaction, telecollaboration provides authentic, dialogic engagement with real interlocutors, enabling learners to negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Recent literature also uses the umbrella term virtual exchange to describe similar pedagogical practices; this study treats these terms as conceptually aligned and uses intercultural online exchange for consistency.

Telecollaboration is grounded in sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning as a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978). Through interaction, learners co-construct knowledge, receive feedback, and develop higher-order communicative abilities. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), including video conferencing, discussion forums, and instant messaging, creates opportunities for both synchronous and asynchronous engagement (Warschauer, 1997, pp.470-481). These environments allow learners time to reflect, revise, and respond, which may support pragmatic and sociolinguistic development. Importantly, asynchronous modes can reduce time pressure and enable learners to monitor tone and politeness more carefully. At the same time, synchronous interaction provides immediacy and richer pragmatic cues (e.g., prosody and turn-taking), jointly supporting sociolinguistic learning.

Empirical studies highlight the potential of telecollaboration to enhance intercultural communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and pragmatic sensitivity (Belz, 2003, p.83). By encountering differing communication styles, politeness norms, and cultural perspectives, learners become more aware of sociolinguistic variation and appropriateness. O'Dowd (2018) further notes that successful online exchanges encourage critical reflection on cultural assumptions, thereby deepening learners' intercultural understanding. Such reflection is particularly relevant to the development of pragmatic awareness, as learners compare their habitual speech-act realizations with those observed in intercultural interaction (p.18). Recent studies published in the Arab World English Journal also support the pedagogical value of digitally mediated intercultural learning. Stambouli and Sarnou (2023) found that virtual intercultural exchanges can contribute to university students' intercultural competence by creating opportunities for cross-cultural interaction, reflection, and awareness-raising. In relation to pragmatic and sociolinguistic development, Barzani (2023) showed that EFL learners may experience difficulties in selecting appropriate pragmatic expressions when performing speech acts, particularly when social distance and power relations are involved. These findings suggest that structured online interaction can help learners notice sociocultural norms, adjust language use, and develop pragmatic appropriateness in communication.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of intercultural online exchange depends on careful task design, clear pedagogical goals, and sustained interaction. Without structured guidance, learners may focus primarily on content exchange rather than sociolinguistic negotiation. Furthermore, contextual factors such as technological access, learner motivation, and institutional support influence outcomes. Prior research also reports potential challenges, including unequal participation, pragmatic misunderstanding, and "culture-as-facts" discussions, especially when

tasks do not explicitly prompt perspective-taking and language-focused noticing. More recent studies have continued to confirm the pedagogical relevance of digital and virtual exchange environments for intercultural and communicative development. Chu et al. (2024) found that asynchronous virtual exchange could enhance undergraduate students' intercultural competence, suggesting that non-synchronous online interaction may still provide meaningful opportunities for cross-cultural engagement. Zuo (2025) further showed that online intercultural learning in higher education is more effective when digital interaction is pedagogically structured and supported through purposeful learning activities, guided engagement, and reflective processes.

Although existing research supports the pedagogical value of telecollaboration for intercultural development, fewer studies have specifically examined its measurable impact on sociolinguistic competence, particularly within Vietnamese higher education contexts. This gap underscores the need for empirical investigation employing comprehensive research designs. More specifically, studies rarely examine which dimensions of sociolinguistic competence (e.g., politeness strategies vs. pragmatic awareness) show stronger perceived gains among low-proficiency cohorts.

Intercultural Communicative Competence in Digital Contexts

Scholars regard Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as a major construct in foreign language education, particularly in contexts where students are expected to engage in global communication. Byram (1997) states that ICC consists of five interrelated components: attitudes (savoir être), knowledge (savoirs), skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre), skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire), and critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager). This model emphasizes that effective intercultural communication requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural knowledge, interpretive skills, and reflective awareness.

Within this framework, this study views sociolinguistic competence as an essential operational dimension of ICC. The ability to select appropriate linguistic forms in line with cultural expectations reflects both sociopragmatic knowledge and intercultural sensitivity. In digitally mediated environments, authentic intercultural interaction may foster the development of these competencies through negotiation of meaning, perspective-taking, and adaptive communication strategies. Digital exchange contexts may additionally support "guided noticing" when teachers embed reflection prompts and feedback, helping learners connect interactional experiences with pragmatic norms.

This study integrates Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence with Byram's (1997) ICC framework as its theoretical foundation. Canale and Swain focus on the structural and sociolinguistic aspects of communicative competence, but Byram expands the concept to include intercultural attitudes and critical awareness. Intercultural online exchange thus works as a pedagogical space where linguistic, sociolinguistic, and intercultural dimensions converge. Conceptually, this intersection supports the investigation of sociolinguistic competence as (a) context-appropriate language use and (b) interculturally sensitive meaning-making in interaction.

This study operationalizes sociolinguistic competence as learners' ability to demonstrate pragmatic appropriateness, sensitivity to social variables, and awareness of cultural norms during communication. The integration of these theoretical perspectives supports the examination of how structured intercultural online interaction may contribute to the development of sociolinguistic competence among English-majored first-year students. To strengthen construct clarity, the four

measured dimensions can be mapped to the frameworks as follows: pragmatic awareness (noticing/interpretation), communicative appropriateness (contextual fit of language choices), politeness strategies (mitigation and face management), and cultural sensitivity (attitudes and interpretive openness).

Research Gaps

Although previous research supports the pedagogical value of telecollaboration for intercultural learning, limited empirical evidence exists regarding its specific impact on sociolinguistic competence among English-majored first-year students in Vietnam. Moreover, many studies rely solely on self-reported surveys or qualitative reflections, lacking integrated quantitative and qualitative analysis. In addition, the Vietnamese EFL higher education context remains underrepresented in telecollaboration research compared with European or East Asian settings, and low-proficiency cohorts (e.g., A2) are rarely examined using dimension-based measures of sociolinguistic competence.

Therefore, adopting a mixed-methods approach enables a more comprehensive examination of both measurable impact and learners' experiential perceptions, addressing an important gap in the literature. Accordingly, the present study uses an explanatory sequential design to quantify perceived development across four dimensions and then explain these patterns through interview-based accounts of interactional experiences during intercultural online exchange.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine the impact of intercultural online exchange on the development of sociolinguistic competence. The researchers selected this design because it allows quantitative results to be further explained and contextualized through qualitative inquiry.

First, the researchers collected quantitative data to determine the extent of students' perceived development across four dimensions of sociolinguistic competence. The researchers conducted statistical analyses to identify overall trends and relationships among the measured constructs.

Second, the researchers gathered qualitative data through semi-structured interviews to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings. The selection of interview participants and the formulation of interview questions were informed by the survey results, enabling focused exploration of patterns observed in the statistical analysis.

Participants

The study involved 198 first-year English majors enrolled in two courses, Essential Listening and Speaking and Introduction to the English Language, at a university in Vietnam. Their voluntary participation in the intercultural online exchange was implemented as an extracurricular enrichment activity, conducted in parallel with these courses but not formally embedded in their official syllabus or assessment.

The participants were 18–19 years old ($M \approx 18.5$). Their high school academic records showed that they generally had A2-level English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which indicates an upper-elementary level. At

this stage, students were capable of handling simple communicative tasks in familiar contexts but demonstrated limited pragmatic flexibility and minimal exposure to authentic intercultural interaction.

For the qualitative phase, the researcher used purposive sampling to select 15 students from the 198 participants. The selection criteria aimed to ensure variation in gender and levels of perceived improvement, as indicated by the questionnaire responses. These students then participated in semi-structured interviews, which provided in-depth insights into their experiences during the intercultural online exchange.

As first-year students, the participants had not had opportunities to engage in structured telecollaborative learning activities. These characteristics made them an appropriate cohort for examining the impact of intercultural online exchange on the development of sociolinguistic competence at an early stage of language development.

Research Instruments

The researchers developed a structured questionnaire to measure students' perceived development of sociolinguistic competence after their participation in the intercultural online exchange.. The instrument was adapted from established frameworks of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) and pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2003), and was modified to suit A2-level learners.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections, the first section collected demographic information (age, gender, English proficiency level). The second section included 24 Likert-scale items (five-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) grouped into four dimensions: (1) pragmatic awareness, (2) communicative appropriateness, (3) politeness strategies, and (4) cultural sensitivity. Sample items included statements such as "I can adjust my language depending on whom I talk to" and "I am more aware of cultural differences in communication."

To establish content validity, two lecturers in applied linguistics reviewed the questionnaire items for relevance, clarity, and alignment with the four dimensions of sociolinguistic competence examined in this study. A pilot test was conducted with a small group of students to ensure clarity and suitability for A2 learners. The researchers examined internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's Alpha.

Additionally, to complement the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sub-sample of participants (n =15). The interviews aimed to gain deeper insight into students' experiences during the exchange and to explain the survey results further.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions focusing on: (1) communication challenges encountered during interaction, (2) strategies used to adjust language use, (3) awareness of cultural differences, and (4) perceived changes in confidence and appropriateness. Interviews were conducted in either English or Vietnamese to ensure participants could express their thoughts clearly.

The combination of survey and interview instruments enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the validity of the study's findings.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher implemented the intercultural online exchange over 12 weeks, parallel to the participants' enrollment in two foundational courses, namely Essential Listening and Speaking and Introduction to the English Language, at the university.

Importantly, the exchange activities were designed as extracurricular enrichment activities rather than official components of the course syllab. They were conducted outside regular classroom hours and did not contribute to course grading. The researcher intentionally aligned the timing with the semester to support and reinforce sociolinguistic and intercultural elements related to the students' ongoing coursework.

This parallel implementation allowed students to apply linguistic knowledge from their formal courses to authentic intercultural communication contexts while maintaining a clear distinction between curricular instruction and research intervention.

The extracurricular intercultural online exchange was organized into four scaffolded phases over 12 weeks. The phased design aimed to gradually increase interactional complexity while supporting A2-level learners with structured guidance, language frames, and reflective prompts. Each phase targeted specific dimensions of sociolinguistic competence, progressing from awareness-based noticing to adaptive performance and metapragmatic reflection.

Phase 1: Guided self-introduction (Weeks 1-2)

The initial phase focused on low-risk interpersonal exchange to build rapport and reduce communication anxiety. Students exchanged basic personal information (e.g., family background, hobbies, academic major) and compared greeting conventions and forms of address in their respective cultures.

The researcher provided sentence models and sample dialogue frames, such as polite greetings and simple follow-up questions, to ensure linguistic accessibility. This phase primarily targeted pragmatic awareness and cultural sensitivity, encouraging students to notice how even routine expressions such as greetings vary across sociocultural contexts.

Phase 2: Thematic everyday discussions (Weeks 3-7)

During this phase, interaction expanded to familiar but culturally meaningful topics such as daily routines, university life, festivals, and food culture. The researcher structured the tasks around guided prompts that required explanation, clarification, and comparison.

Students were encouraged to practice polite expressions, manage turn-taking, and respond appropriately to agreement or disagreement. The researcher used both synchronous video sessions and asynchronous text/audio exchanges. This phase strengthened students' communicative appropriateness and pragmatic adjustment by requiring them to compare cultural practices, negotiate meaning, and respond appropriately during interaction.

Phase 3: Mini collaborative project (Weeks 8-10)

In pairs or small groups, students completed a short collaborative task, such as producing a recorded dialogue or brief presentation comparing one cultural practice (e.g., a traditional celebration or academic custom).

Role cards and structured language frames (e.g., making suggestions, giving feedback, mitigating disagreement) were provided to scaffold interaction. The collaborative nature of the task required negotiation, co-ordination, and mutual adjustment of language use. This phase

promoted learners' use of politeness strategies and interactional appropriateness, moving beyond awareness toward more active sociolinguistic performance.

Phase 4: Guided reflection (Weeks 11-12)

The final phase emphasized metapragmatic awareness. Students completed structured reflection prompts addressing communication challenges, instances of misunderstanding, cultural differences noticed, and strategies used to adapt their language.

Reflection questions encouraged learners to identify moments where they adjusted tone, softened requests, or clarified meaning. This phase aimed to consolidate learning by fostering conscious awareness of sociolinguistic development across the program.

Technological Platforms Used

The researchers conducted the intercultural online exchange through commonly accessible digital platforms to ensure ease of participation and technological reliability

Synchronous interactions were carried out via video-conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom or Google Meet), allowing real-time communication, turn-taking practice, and exposure to paralinguistic cues such as tone and facial expressions.

The researchers used messaging applications such as Facebook Messenger, Zalo, and email to facilitate asynchronous communication, allowing students to compose, revise, and reflect on their language use before sending messages.

The researchers selected all platforms based on accessibility, students' familiarity with them, and institutional feasibility. The exchange did not require specialized telecollaboration software.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis

The researchers entered quantitative data from 198 completed questionnaires into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26.0) for analysis. Prior to statistical testing, the researchers screened the dataset for completeness and normality. Skewness and kurtosis values indicated no substantial violations of normality.

Descriptive statistics, including means (M) and standard deviations (SD), were computed to examine students' post-exchange perceived development across the four dimensions of sociolinguistic competence: pragmatic awareness, communicative appropriateness, politeness strategies, and cultural sensitivity.

The researchers assessed internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for both the overall scale and each sub-dimension. They considered a reliability threshold of $\alpha \geq .70$ acceptable.

To determine whether students' overall perceived development was statistically higher than a neutral evaluation, the researchers conducted a one-sample t-test comparing the overall mean score with the midpoint value of 3.0 on the five-point Likert scale. This analysis examined whether participants' post-exchange perceptions significantly exceeded neutrality.

Additionally, the researchers performed Pearson product-moment correlation analysis to examine relationships among the four dimensions of sociolinguistic competence. This analysis explored whether the sub-components were statistically associated, supporting the theoretical

assumption that sociolinguistic competence functions as an integrated construct. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected participants were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2008) six-phase procedure.

The researchers generated initial codes inductively to identify recurring patterns related to pragmatic awareness, communicative appropriateness, politeness strategies, cultural sensitivity, and communicative confidence. The researchers subsequently organized these codes into broader themes that reflected students' perceived development during the exchange. In line with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the researchers used qualitative findings to elaborate on and interpret the quantitative results. The integration of both strands strengthened interpretive validity by linking statistical trends with participants' experiential accounts.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntariness of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without academic consequences. The researchers obtained informed consent from all participants. They strictly maintained confidentiality and anonymity; they collected no personal identifiers and reported all data in aggregated form. To further protect institutional and participant privacy, the researchers do not explicitly disclose the university's name in the main body of the article. The researchers took this measure to ensure anonymity and prevent any potential identification of individual participants or institutional characteristics, in accordance with ethical standards for educational research.

Results

Results Related to Extracurricular Enrichment Activities

Results in this section summarize students' post-exchange survey responses to activity-specific items and are supported by interview excerpts.

Guided Self-Introduction Phase

Survey results indicated that 81% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the self-introduction phase helped them become more aware of differences in greeting styles and forms of address. This percentage represents the combined proportion of "agree" and "strongly agree" responses to the corresponding item(s) on the post-exchange questionnaire. Interview data supported this finding. Several students reported that comparing simple greetings and self-presentations with their interntional peers helped them recognize variations in politeness and conversational norm.

Thematic Intercultural Discussions

This phase yielded the strongest perceived impact. Approximately 84% of participants reported increased awareness of cultural differences during discussions on education, daily life, and social norms. The phase recorded the highest agreement rate among the four phases. Students noted that these discussions required them to clarify meanings, explain cultural concepts, and

adjust their expressions when misunderstandings occurred. Interviewees emphasized that repeated interaction helped them notice pragmatic differences in expressing opinions and responding to disagreement.

Collaborative Speaking Project

The collaborative mini-project was particularly effective in developing communicative appropriateness. Approximately 76% of the participants agreed that working on a joint presentation helped them to negotiate meaning and adapt their language use. Pairs created a short recorded dialogue or mini-presentation that involved coordination, turn allocation, and feedback exchange. Interview responses revealed that careful language selection was necessary to manage role distribution and task coordination, especially when making suggestions or providing feedback.

Reflection Phase

The phase of structured reflection assisted in developing metapragmatic awareness. Nearly 79% of students said that reflective tasks helped them to perceive their strengths and weaknesses in communication. Reflection, according to the interviewees, made them consciously aware of changes in their use of politeness expressions and interactional strategies. Students also identified recurring breakdowns (e.g., direct translation and few mitigation devices) through reflection.

Overall, the results suggest that all phases contributed to development, and that the thematic discussions and collaborative project phases most strongly impacted students' sociolinguistic awareness and pragmatic adjustment. The students reported positive perceived contributions in the phases. The highest agreement rates were for the thematic discussions and the collaborative project. The findings suggest that exchange activities supported by well-designed scaffolding can promote sociolinguistic development, even among learners at the A2 proficiency level.

Quantitative Results

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients indicated satisfactory internal consistency for the overall questionnaire (α = .89). The reliability coefficients for each dimension were as follows: pragmatic awareness (α = .84), communicative appropriateness (α = .81), politeness strategies (α = .78), and

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics revealed a generally positive perception of sociolinguistic development following participation in the intercultural online exchange.

Table 1. *Students' perceived development of sociolinguistic competence*

Dimension	Mean (M)	SD
Pragmatic Awareness	3.87	0.62
Communicative Appropriateness	3.79	0.65
Politeness Strategies	3.72	0.68
Cultural Sensitivity	3.94	0.59
Overall Mean	3.83	0.57

Descriptive statistics indicate that participants generally perceived noticeable improvement in their sociolinguistic competence after the intercultural online exchange. As shown in Table 1, the overall mean score was M = 3.83 (SD = 0.57) on a five-point scale, suggesting an overall positive evaluation of the exchange experience. Importantly, this mean is higher than the neutral

midpoint of 3.0, implying that students tended to agree that the exchange contributed to their sociolinguistic development rather than perceiving no change.

Across the four measured dimensions, Cultural sensitivity obtained the highest mean score (M = 3.94, SD = 0.59). This finding suggests that students became more aware of cultural differences in communication styles, including how people from different backgrounds greet one another, respond to others, express politeness, and manage turn-taking.. The relatively low standard deviation also indicates that perceptions in this area were fairly consistent across students, implying a shared experience of increased intercultural awareness.

Pragmatic awareness received the second-highest rating (M = 3.87, SD = 0.62), suggesting that students became more aware of how meaning varies according to context and interlocutor. For A2-level first-year students, this may reflect greater recognition of when to use simple but appropriate expressions (e.g., "Could you…?" vs. "Give me…") and awareness that direct translation from Vietnamese does not always sound natural in English.

Communicative appropriateness also received a positive rating (M = 3.79, SD = 0.65). This indicates that students believed they had improved their ability to choose language that fits specific situations, including appropriate tone, formality, and interactional norms. However, the slightly lower mean (compared with cultural sensitivity and pragmatic awareness) suggests that while students became more aware of appropriateness, applying this knowledge consistently in real-time interaction may remain challenging.

Finally, politeness strategies recorded the lowest mean score (M = 3.72, SD = 0.68), though still above the neutral midpoint. The participants' A2 proficiency level may explain this pattern, as politeness requires nuanced pragmatic choices, including hedging, indirectness, and softening devices, which often depend on broader linguistic resources. The comparatively higher SD suggests greater variability, indicating that some students perceived substantial improvement, whereas others may have struggled to adopt politeness strategies because of limited vocabulary and sentence patterns.

Overall, these descriptive results suggest that intercultural online exchange most strongly supported awareness-based outcomes (especially cultural sensitivity and pragmatic noticing). In contrast, more performance-based outcomes (such as producing politeness strategies and consistently achieving appropriateness) showed slightly weaker—but still positive—perceived development.

Inferential Statistics

The researchers conducted a one-sample t-test to determine whether students' perceived sociolinguistic development significantly exceeded the neutral midpoint value of 3.0. The results indicated a statistically significant difference, $t(197) = 16.42$, $p < .001$. This finding suggests that the mean perception score (M = 3.83) was significantly higher than a neutral evaluation, confirming that students perceived a meaningful positive impact of the intercultural online exchange on their sociolinguistic competence.

The large t-value and highly significant p-value indicate that the observed difference was statistically meaningful rather than attributable to chance. From a pedagogical perspective, this suggests that even A2-level first-year students reported noticeable gains in their awareness and use of sociolinguistic features following the semester-long exchange.

In addition, the researchers conducted Pearson correlation analysis to examine relationships among the four dimensions of sociolinguistic competence. The results revealed

moderate positive correlations (r ranging from .48 to .65, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that the sub-components—pragmatic awareness, communicative appropriateness, politeness strategies, and cultural sensitivity were positively associated with one another.

The moderate strength of these correlations suggests that development in one dimension tended to coincide with improvement in others. For example, increased cultural sensitivity likely coincided with enhanced pragmatic awareness and more appropriate language choices. This interconnected pattern supports the theoretical assumption that sociolinguistic competence functions as an integrated construct rather than isolated skills.

Overall, the inferential analysis provides statistical evidence supporting the positive and coherent development of sociolinguistic competence through intercultural online exchange.

Qualitative results

To complement the quantitative findings, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected students from the total sample of 198 participants. The researchers selected these students to ensure variation in gender, participation level, and survey responses, including high, moderate, and lower levels of perceived improvement. Each interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes. The researchers reached data saturation after the 13th interview and conducted two additional interviews to confirm thematic consistency. Thematic analysis generated three major themes reflecting students' perceived sociolinguistic development.

Theme 1: Increased Awareness of Cultural Differences

Thirteen out of the fifteen interviewees explicitly reported heightened awareness of cultural differences in greetings, politeness conventions, and conversational norms. Students frequently mentioned becoming more conscious of how communication styles vary across cultures.

One participant explained:

"Before the exchange, I usually used simple greetings like 'Hi' or 'Hello'. After talking with my partner, I realized that greetings change depending on relationship and situation." (S5)

Another student reflected:

"I understood that being too direct can make others uncomfortable. I learned that culture influences how people express opinions." (S11)

These interview accounts suggest that intercultural exposure promoted sociocultural noticing, which aligns with the high mean score for Cultural Sensitivity (M = 3.94).

Theme 2: Improved Pragmatic Adjustment

Eleven participants described noticeable changes in how they adjusted language use during communication. They reported modifying tone, lexical choices, and sentence structures to achieve greater appropriateness.

For example:

"At first, I said 'Send me the file.' Later, I changed to 'Could you send me the file, please?' It sounds more polite and respectful." (S2)

Another participant noted:

"I tried to choose softer words when giving opinions because I did not want to sound rude." (S8)

These responses demonstrate emerging control over politeness strategies and pragmatic appropriateness, although several students admitted that limited vocabulary sometimes restricted their ability to express nuanced meanings fully.

Theme 3: Enhanced Confidence in Intercultural Interaction

Twelve participants reported increased confidence after repeated online interaction. In comparison, initial anxiety was common due to their A2 proficiency level; sustained communication reduced fear and improved self-assurance.

One student stated:

"In the beginning, I was nervous because my English was basic. But after practicing many times, I felt more comfortable speaking." (S14)

Another added:

"Even with simple grammar, I could communicate better and understand my partner's culture." (S9)

This theme indicates that intercultural online exchange not only enhanced sociolinguistic awareness but also strengthened communicative confidence.

Briefly, findings from the 15 interviews provide in-depth explanatory support for the quantitative results. The prominence of themes related to cultural sensitivity (13/15) and pragmatic adjustment (11/15) corresponds closely with the higher mean scores reported in the descriptive analysis. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence strengthens the validity of the conclusion that intercultural online exchange had a statistically significant and pedagogically meaningful impact on the sociolinguistic competence of first-year English majors.

Discussion

This study examined (1) the extent to which intercultural online exchange influenced the development of sociolinguistic competence among English-majored first-year students and (2) how students perceived its role in that development. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, the discussion situates the results within the theoretical frameworks and prior research presented in the literature review.

The quantitative results revealed a statistically significant increase in post-exchange perceived sociolinguistic competence, with an overall mean significantly above the neutral midpoint. This finding suggests that participation in the 12-week intercultural online exchange contributed meaningfully to students' development.

Notably, the highest mean score was observed in cultural sensitivity, followed by pragmatic awareness. This pattern is theoretically consistent with Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which positions intercultural attitudes and awareness as foundational dimensions of communicative growth. In digitally mediated intercultural settings, learners first encounter differences in greeting styles, politeness norms, and communicative expectations before fully mastering sociolinguistically appropriate language production. The present findings confirm that even A2-level learners can develop intercultural noticing when provided with structured exposure. This aligns with virtual exchange research, which suggests that reflective noticing often develops before advanced linguistic performance, especially among lower-proficiency learners when instructors provide structured tasks and sustained interaction (O'Dowd, 2018).

The significant gains in pragmatic awareness and communicative appropriateness also support Canale and Swain's (1980) conceptualization of sociolinguistic competence as the ability to select language forms appropriate to context. Students reported becoming more conscious of adjusting tone, level of directness, and forms of address depending on interlocutor and situation. This finding aligns with Taguchi's (2022) argument that repeated interaction and contextualized communication support pragmatic development more effectively than isolated grammar instruction. Importantly, the blend of synchronous and asynchronous modes may have supported this process by providing both real-time interactional demands and time for reflection and message revision.

However, the comparatively lower mean score for politeness strategies indicates that while awareness increased, full pragmatic production remained constrained. This finding echoes Kasper and Rose (2003), who distinguish between pragmatic comprehension and pragmatic production. Given the participants' A2 proficiency level, limited lexical and syntactic resources likely restricted their ability to perform nuanced politeness strategies consistently. Therefore, the findings suggest a developmental trajectory in which awareness precedes performance—an important insight for curriculum design. Pedagogically, this implies that early-stage learners may benefit from explicit language frames (e.g., mitigation devices, softeners, and modalized requests) alongside intercultural interaction, so that noticing can translate into more stable production.

The moderate positive correlations among the four dimensions reinforce the integrated nature of sociolinguistic competence. Cultural sensitivity, pragmatic awareness, and appropriateness seem to evolve interdependently rather than independently. This supports the theoretical assumption that sociolinguistic competence is a holistic construct within the wider communicative competence.

Qualitative findings provide deeper insight into how students interpreted their learning experiences. The majority of the 15 interviewed participants reported increased awareness of cultural differences and more deliberate adjustment of their language choices. These perceptions align closely with the quantitative trends, particularly the high ratings for cultural sensitivity.

Students' reflections on modifying direct requests into softer expressions (e.g., using modal verbs or polite markers) illustrate emerging sociopragmatic awareness. Such examples demonstrate not only noticing but also attempts at adaptive production, even within the constraints of A2 proficiency. This supports previous telecollaboration research (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2018), which emphasizes the role of intercultural online exchange in promoting reflective and adaptive communicative behavior. At the same time, students' reports of limited vocabulary suggest that interaction alone may be insufficient; targeted instructional support may be necessary to expand pragmalinguistic resources for politeness realization.

Additionally, the theme of enhanced confidence suggests affective benefits that extend beyond linguistic competence. Reduced anxiety and increased willingness to communicate may serve as mediating factors facilitating further sociolinguistic development. From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), sustained interaction within a supportive digital environment may function as a scaffold for expanding communicative capability. This affective pathway is particularly relevant for A2 learners, for whom anxiety reduction can increase participation intensity and opportunities for noticing and repair.

Importantly, students' perceptions confirm that the exchange activities, particularly thematic discussions and collaborative tasks, created meaningful opportunities for negotiating meaning and encountering sociocultural differences. This finding suggests that carefully

scaffolded telecollaborative tasks can help students develop pragmatic awareness and intercultural competence.

Conclusions

Findings

This study examined the impact of intercultural online exchange on the development of sociolinguistic competence among 198 English majored in their first-year, with qualitative insights from 15 interviewed students. The mixed-methods findings revealed statistically significant improvements in perceived sociolinguistic competence, particularly in cultural sensitivity and pragmatic awareness.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrates that even beginner-level learners can benefit from structured intercultural interaction. Although limited linguistic resources may constrain full pragmatic production, students' growing awareness and confidence provide an important foundation for further sociolinguistic development.

Overall, the study contributes empirical evidence from the Vietnamese EFL context and underscores the pedagogical value of intercultural telecollaboration as a meaningful pathway for fostering sociolinguistic competence in higher education.

Implications

The results of this study offer several important pedagogical implications for English language education, particularly in the context of EFL higher education.

First, the marked improvement in cultural sensitivity and pragmatic awareness suggests that intercultural online exchange should be systematically integrated into speaking courses, even at lower proficiency levels such as A2. Guided prompts, carefully scaffolded tasks, and language support can enable beginner learners to engage in meaningful intercultural communication without being linguistically overwhelmed.

Second, the findings suggest that awareness development precedes full pragmatic control. Therefore, it is recommended that instructors combine telecollaborative activities with explicit instruction on politeness strategies, speech acts, and register variation. Providing formulaic expressions and pragmatic models can help learners move from noticing to consistent production.

Third, the positive effect on students' confidence highlights the affective benefits of continuous online interaction. They can help to reduce anxiety and increase the willingness to communicate by creating a supportive and structured environment, especially among first-year students with little exposure to other cultures.

Finally, curriculum designers in Vietnamese higher education institutions may want to consider including intercultural online exchange as a regular component of communication-focused courses. Integrating intercultural online exchange into communication-focused courses reflects broader global trends toward digitalized and internationalized higher education.

Limitations

Despite the positive findings, the researchers acknowledge several limitations to avoid overgeneralization.

First, the study primarily relied notably on self-reported perceptions of development. While perceptions are useful (particularly in pragmatic growth early on where awareness is a valid outcome), self-report measures may not fully capture what is happening in interaction. Future

research should triangulate data on perceptions with performance-based measures (e.g., discourse completion tasks, role-plays, or analysis of recorded exchanges). Second, the participants were from one institution and course context, which may limit generalisability. Outcomes in other settings may be affected by differences in institutional support, partners availability, teacher expertise, and technological infrastructure. Third, the design did not seem to isolate which features of the exchange (e.g., synchronous meeting vs. asynchronous messaging; reflection vs. collaborative tasks) contributed most strongly to particular dimensions of sociolinguistic competence. Causal claims about particular components remain tentative absent a comparative or experimental component. Finally, the exchange lasted for one semester; although students reported meaningful gains, sociolinguistic competence develops over a longer period. The durability of the reported gains beyond the program is unknown.

Directions for Future Research

Building on these limitations, several directions merit attention. First, future studies could incorporate pre- and post-performance measures and discourse data (chat logs, audio/video recordings) to examine not only perceived change but also observable shifts in request strategies, mitigation devices, turn-taking, and repair sequences. Second, longitudinal designs could explore whether early awareness gains lead to later production gains as learners progress from A2 to higher levels of proficiency. The current results suggest a developmental trajectory that would be illuminated by following students over several semesters. Third, future comparative studies could examine different levels of scaffolding intensity, such as high versus low language support, or compare different task types, such as discussion-only tasks versus collaborative products. Such studies could help identify which designs most effectively support the development of politeness strategies among low-proficiency learners. Finally, research could examine contextual variables such as partner proficiency pairing, intercultural distance, and teacher mediation style. Understanding these moderators would help institutions implement telecollaboration more effectively and equitably.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Students' Questionnaire

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the development of sociolinguistic competence through intercultural online exchange with English-speaking people. The purpose of this questionnaire is to understand your learning experience and perceptions after participating in the exchange activities.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond honestly based on your personal experience. All responses will remain anonymous and confidential. The researchers will use the data for research purposes only and report the findings in aggregated form to ensure that no individual or institution can be identified.

Please read each statement carefully and choose **ONE** answer that best reflects your opinion.

Thank you very much for your time and valuable contribution to this research.

Note: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

Statement	Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
I. Pragmatic awareness					
PA1. I notice that the same sentence can sound different in different situations.					
PA2. I notice when my words may sound too direct.					
PA3. I pay attention to how my partner expresses opinions politely.					
PA4. I understand that meaning changes depending the relationship (friend/teacher/stranger).					
PA5. I notice when I need to use a softer expression (e.g., "Could you…?").					
PA6. I understand that culture affects communication style.					
II. Communicative appropriateness					
CA1. I can choose words that fit the situation.					
CA2. I can change my speaking style in formal and informal situations.5					
CA3. I can agree or disagree politely.					
CA4. I can keep the conversation going appropriately.					
CA5. I can adjust my tone when asking for help.					
CA6. I can clarify my message if my partner misunderstands me.					
III. Politeness strategies					
PS1. I use polite words like "please" when making requests.					
PS2. I can make my request sound more polite.					
PS3. I can refuse politely.					
PS4. I can give feedback politely.					
PS5. I can apologize appropriately.					
PS6. I try not to sound rude when expressing disagreement.					
IV. Cultural Sensitivity CS1. I respect different communication styles.					
CS2. I understand that greetings vary across cultures.					
CS3. I am more careful when talking about sensitive topics.					
CS4. I try to understand my partner's culture before judging.					
CS5. I can introduce Vietnamese culture respectfully.					
CS6. I feel more open-minded about cultural differences.					

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to understand better your experience in the intercultural online exchange with English-speaking people and how it may have influenced your sociolinguistic competence.

Please feel free to share your honest opinions and experiences. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

Part 1. General experience

1. How did you feel when you first joined the intercultural online exchange?
2. Can you briefly describe your overall experience in the exchange activities?

Part 2. Pragmatic awareness

3. Did you notice any differences in how your partner expressed requests, opinions, or disagreements?
4. Did you become more aware of when language may sound too direct or inappropriate? Can you give an example?

Part 3. Communicative Appropriateness & Politeness Strategies

5. During the exchange, did you change the way you made requests or gave feedback? How?
6. Can you give an example of how you tried to make your language more polite?
7. Did you ever feel your words might be misunderstood? What did you do in that situation?

Part 4. Cultural Sensitivity

8. What cultural differences did you notice during the exchange?
9. Did the exchange help you understand other communication styles better? How?

Part 5. Confidence & Development

10. Do you feel more confident communicating with people from other cultures after this exchange? Why or why not?
11. In your opinion, how did the online exchange influence your English communication skills?

Closing Question

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the intercultural online exchange?