

# DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING: A CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN INDONESIAN AND FILIPINO EFL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study presents an effective pedagogical model for cultivating intercultural competence (ICC) and digital citizenship among Indonesian and Filipino English Foreign Language (EFL) students through cross-cultural collaboration. Despite the recognized effectiveness of Project-Based Learning (PBL), a gap exists in the literature that explicitly examines how PBL and digital platforms can simultaneously foster ICC through collaborative digital content creation among the distinct Southeast Asian student population. Investigating the collaborative process behind the creation of the digital story *'One Sea, Two Cultures,'* the study reveals that digitally mediated PBL is a powerful method for achieving higher levels of ICC; the process facilitated a critical shift from basic cultural appreciation to a deeper understanding of shared maritime heritage, enhancing participant sensitivity, empathy, and openness. Furthermore, digital tools like *Canva* were instrumental in overcoming initial logistical and language barriers, while the project simultaneously provided an authentic context that effectively improved students' EFL skills. This study, thus, validates the digital-based PBL approach as a credible pedagogical model for fostering responsible digital citizenship and robust cross-cultural communication in EFL instruction.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Collaboration, Digital Storytelling, English Language Teaching, Global Citizenship, Intercultural Competence

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and increasing international mobility, language education is no longer limited to linguistic competence alone but increasingly emphasizes the development of intercultural competence and global citizenship. Cross-cultural collaboration has therefore emerged as a crucial pedagogical strategy in language education, as it provides learners with authentic opportunities to engage with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Through such direct engagement, students are able to practice language use in meaningful contexts while simultaneously developing essential soft skills, including empathy, adaptability, and intercultural awareness. Rather than remaining at the level of abstract knowledge, cross-cultural collaboration transforms theoretical

understanding of culture into lived experience, preparing students to become respectful and effective communicators in an interconnected world.

However, effective cross-cultural collaboration is not without challenges. Research indicates that successful collaboration across cultures requires awareness and understanding of cultural differences to minimize misunderstandings and foster mutual respect (Toprak & Genc-kumtepe, 2014). Empathy and effective communication among students from diverse cultural backgrounds are essential components of this process (Zhou et al., 2024), alongside cultural sensitivity, flexibility, and the ability to recognize and interpret cultural nuances (Nair & Adetayo, 2019). When these elements are successfully integrated, cross-cultural collaboration has been shown to enhance students' leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills, while also strengthening institutional capacity through intercultural exchange (Widayatsih et al., 2025). Despite these benefits, many educational contexts still struggle to translate these ideals into structured, practical classroom practices.

Previous studies have widely acknowledged the importance of intercultural competence for preparing students as global citizens (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Kuffuor et al., 2024). In addition, broader pedagogical models such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) have demonstrated the potential of technology-mediated international collaboration in higher education settings (Technol et al., 2023). Other research has focused on the general impact of cross-cultural collaboration on students' soft skills (Toprak & Genc-kumtepe, 2014; Widayatsih et al., 2025) or examined the use of digital storytelling to enhance collaborative skills within a single national or cultural context (Marisana et al., 2023). While these studies provide valuable theoretical and empirical foundations, they often remain broad in scope and offer limited insight into the actual collaborative processes experienced by students engaged in cross-cultural projects.

More specifically, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative research that examines how technology-supported, project-based activities facilitate cross-cultural collaboration in real classroom settings, particularly in underrepresented regional contexts. Existing studies rarely explore how students negotiate meaning, manage cultural differences, and develop mutual understanding throughout the collaborative process. Moreover, empirical evidence on cross-cultural collaboration involving Southeast Asian contexts—such as partnerships between Indonesian and Philippine students—remains limited. This gap highlights the need for context-sensitive studies that move beyond general claims and provide concrete examples of how intercultural competence can be cultivated through innovative pedagogical practices.

To address this gap, the present study investigates a technology-supported digital storytelling (DST) project as a model for cross-cultural collaboration in language education. Digital storytelling in this study refers to the process of creating narratives using digital media tools, including images, audio, narration, and animation, to convey messages and cultural experiences effectively. As an educational approach, DST integrates art, culture, and technology, and has been shown to foster creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and cultural awareness among students (Kurniawan et al., 2024; Nuroh & Liansari, 2024). When

embedded within a project-based learning framework, DST offers a promising medium for meaningful interaction and shared knowledge construction across cultural boundaries.

This study presents a qualitative case study of a cross-cultural digital storytelling project involving students from Indonesia and the Philippines, guided by principles of collaborative learning and intercultural engagement. It aims to examine how DST facilitates communication, reduces cultural barriers, and supports the development of intercultural competence through shared cultural themes. In addition, the study identifies key factors that contribute to successful collaboration, including clear role distribution, sustained communication, and shared commitment to the project goals. By providing a detailed account of students' collaborative experiences, this research contributes practical insights into how digital platforms and project-based pedagogies can be effectively used to promote intercultural competence and global citizenship in language education. Ultimately, the findings are expected to inform educators and institutions seeking concrete, contextually grounded strategies for implementing meaningful cross-cultural collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world.

## METHODS

### *The Study Design*

The methodological approach for this study was a qualitative, descriptive case study (Yin, 2018). This design was strategically selected to provide an in-depth understanding of a real-life phenomenon, the cross-cultural collaboration of a specific student team within its natural educational and digital context. The case study design allows for the exploration of complex social and educational processes, providing rich, detailed data that can reveal the nuanced dynamics of intercultural collaboration. The research employed multiple data sources, a process known as a triangulation, to confirm findings and ensure the trustworthiness of the results.

### *The Sample Population*

The overall cross-cultural collaboration project involved a total of 56 students, divided into eight groups. The participants for this in-depth investigation were the seven students who constituted the *Nusantara-Luzon Link* team, comprising four students from Indonesia and three from the Philippines. This team was selected as the specific case for investigation using purposive sampling. The primary justification for this selection was twofold: first, the team successfully completed and submitted the collaborative digital story titled '*One Sea, Two Cultures: Roket Tasek and Pistang Ng Dagat*,' providing a complete artifact of the collaborative process; and second, the team demonstrated consistently active participation and rich, documentable collaborative experiences, making them an information-rich case suitable for an in-depth qualitative study. While the team comprised seven members (ages 15-20) who consistently engaged, ensuring all data reflected firsthand, consistent experience. Informed consent and confidentiality were secured for all participants. .

### ***Data Collection Techniques and Instruments Development***

Data for this study were collected using a combination of process observation, semi-structured interviews and a review of project artifacts. The researcher served as one of the overall project's facilitators, employing non-participants observation during the team's weekly virtual meetings (*Zoom*) and asynchronous communication session (*WhatsApp*) over a four-week period.

To mitigate potential researcher bias arising from the facilitator role, the researcher maintained a strictly observational and non-interventional stance regarding the team's task execution and decision-making. Observation notes were systematically taken to record non-verbal cues, task division, conflict negotiation, and general interaction patterns. A series of individual, semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with each of the six active participants, lasting approximately 30-40 minutes, exploring their personal experiences, challenges, and reflections on their learning journeys. Project artifacts, including the final digital story and communication transcripts, provided concrete records supplementing the observation and interview data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, specific strategies were implemented. Credibility (internal validity) was achieved through triangulation across all three data sources and by employing member-checking, where preliminary themes were shared with participants for confirmation. Dependability (reliability) was ensured through the use of an audit trail, meticulously documenting the research process and coding decisions. Finally, confirm ability (objectivity) was maintained by documenting the researcher's observational protocols and bracketing potential biases, ensuring that the findings were grounded directly in the data.

### ***Data Analysis Techniques***

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This systematic method followed the standard six-phase model: (1) familiarizing with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and a review of project documents were used to become deeply familiar with the content; (2) generating initial codes to categorize data segments of key concepts, such as communication challenges, intercultural learning, and use of digital tools; (3) searching for themes by grouping similar codes to form potential themes related to the collaborative experience; (4) reviewing and refining the identified themes to ensure they accurately represented the core findings; (5) defining and naming the themes to clearly represent the essence of the data, such as overcoming time zone and scheduling challenges, the discovery of cultural similarities, and navigating technical and tool-related issues; and (6) producing the final report by connecting the themes to the research questions.

## **RESULTS**

The data collected from semi-structured interviews, process observations, and project artifacts were analyzed thematically, revealing three primary, interrelated trends that describe the participants' collaborative experience: communication challenges, intercultural

learning, and use of digital tools. These findings demonstrate a clear progression from initial logistical and social friction toward significant personal growth and successful collaborative outcomes.

### **Communication Challenges**

The analysis revealed that initial cross-cultural friction centered on a combination of logistical and social issues (See Table 1). The most cited difficulty was time zone friction, where even the one-hour difference, compounded by busy academic schedules, hindered synchronous communication. As participant LY (18) noted, the time schedule difference was the “barrier that hinders me from communicating.” This logistical hurdle immediately necessitated the adoption of an asynchronous communication strategy via *WhatsApp* for daily coordination, as evidenced by initial difficulty in scheduling Zoom meetings. Furthermore, the team encountered information gaps concerning specific cultural details, such as the *Pista ng Dagat* festival, which EFL (20) noted was unfamiliar to some partners. This required extra effort and time in the early project phase. Finally, social awkwardness acted as an initial barrier, confirmed by QN’s (15) reflection on the discomfort of asking questions at the start. Observation logs substantiated this, showing short, formal messages in the first week, demonstrating that overcoming this social friction was a necessary prerequisite for establishing the trust required for effective intercultural communication.

*Table 1. Finding on communication challenges*

Code	Representative Quotations (Interview Data)	Informant	Observation & Artifact Evidence
Time Zone Friction	“The time schedule is different....is the barrier that hinders me from communicating with my team from another country.”	LY (18)	Initial difficulty in scheduling synchronous Zoom meetings: team defaulted to the asynchronous WhatsApp platform for daily coordination.
Information Gaps	“One of the challenges is the busy schedule they have there. And also the lack of information they provide....some of them don’t even know about the festival.”	FL (20)	Project time line showed delays in the information-gathering stage, requiring multiple follow-up inquiries to confirm cultural details about the <i>Pista ng Dagat</i> festival.
Social Awkwardness	“At first it was awkward for us to ask questions and communicate, but as time went by we became more comfortable communicating.”	QN (15)	Communication logs (via observation) revealed short, formal, task-oriented messages in the first week, transitioning to more conversational and casual language later in the project.

## *Intercultural Learning*

The collaborative process served as a fertile ground for genuine intercultural learning, moving participants toward higher levels of Intercultural Competence (ICC) (See Table 2). The most significant finding was the discovery of similarity, which challenged the initial assumption of distinct differences. FL (20) expressed surprise that the Philippines' sea festival was "almost similar" to Indonesia's *Rokat Tasek*. This profound learning outcome is substantiated by the final project artifact's title 'One Sea, Two Cultures: *Rokat Tasek & Pista Ng Dagat*,' which explicitly frames the project around shared maritime heritage rather than contrasting differences. This process directly fostered ICC, as AF's (17) quote highlights the development of key skills like "openness" and the ability to find "creative solutions" through negotiation. The final project design, which showed a compromise in visual and narrative structure to accommodate both partners' ideas, serves as artifact evidence confirming the promotion of adaptability and mutual respect. Finally, the successful collaboration cultivated an atmosphere of mutual exchange and pride; students enjoy teaching and learning about their respective local customs, leading to a strong sense of cultural ownership and accomplishment in representing their traditions to foreign partners.

*Table 2. Finding on intercultural learning*

Code	Representative Quotations (Interview Data)	Informant	Observation and Artifact Evidence
Discovery of Similarity	"From this collaboration, I got information that the Philippines also has a festival about the sea and it is almost similar to the one in Indonesia."	FL (20)	The final digital story is titled: ' <i>One Sea, Two Cultures: Rokat Tasek &amp; Pista Ng Dagat</i> ,' explicitly framing the project around shared maritime heritage and cultural resemblance.
Intercultural Competence	"I learned to be more open, listen to different perspectives, and find creative solutions that I might not have thought of on my own."	AF (17)	The final project design showed a compromise in visual and narrative structure to accommodate both partners' ideas, demonstrating successful collaborative problem-solving.
Mutual Exchange & Pride	"Getting asked questions about the cultural local customs here in the Philippines. And learning about the cultural local customs of the other country."	LY (18)	The detailed and high-quality cultural descriptions in the digital story reflect a strong sense of cultural ownership and pride in successfully representing one's traditions to foreign partners

## *Use of Digital Tools*

Digital technology was identified as the primary enable and mediator of the collaboration, successfully bridging the initial logistical friction (see Table 3). The teams implemented a sophisticated strategic platform mix, utilizing tools based on specific utility: *Zoom* for formal settings, *WhatsApp* for fast, asynchronous communication, and *Canva* as the central cloud-based design hub. This strategic approach confirms that the digital platforms effectively stated as a “bridge” to overcome the communication challenges. Furthermore, students demonstrated digital innovation; ND’s (15) decision to incorporate self-created QR codes linked to audio narration highlighted a higher level of digital literacy in creating an interactive multimedia artifact. Conversely, the analysis uncovered two key barriers: resource and tool barriers and AI tools limitations. SN’s (17) experience of being restricted to only a ‘cellphone” limited her direct participation in design tasks, demonstrating that unequal access to personal devices can impede full collaborative engagement. Lastly, the frustration reported by FL (20) regarding the time-consuming process of generating that required further collaborative problem-solving and time investment.

Table 3. Findings on Use of Digital Tools

Code	Representative Quotations (Interview Data)	Informant	Observation and Artifact Evidence
Strategic Platform Mix	"We first communicated during the first meeting via <i>Zoom</i> , and then we continued via <i>WhatsApp</i> and the tool we use for editing is <i>Canva</i> ."	FL (20)	Successful project completion was achieved by utilizing <i>Zoom</i> (formal meetings), <i>WhatsApp</i> (fast communication), and <i>Canva</i> (central cloud-based editing platform).
Digital Innovation	"I chose to make a QR code because I thought making a QR code was very easy, but it turned out to be a bit difficult."	ND (15)	The final digital story artifact included functional, self-created QR codes on certain pages linked to recorded audio narration (voice-over), demonstrating advanced multimedia integration.
Resource and Tool Barriers	"I only assisted my groupmate, LY, because I didn't have a laptop to use, and it was hard to work using only a cellphone."	SA (17)	SN's stated contribution was limited to providing information, aligning with the observation that limited access to personal devices (lack of a laptop) restricted engagement in collaborative design tasks.
AI Tool Limitations	"The challenge is that it takes a long time to process the images we create using AI, it requires some time and also a lot of revisions."	FL (20)	The visual inspection of the final artifact confirmed the use of AI-generated images, and the project timeline showed delays in the visual design phase due to the iterative nature of prompt engineering.

The process observation and artifact evidence summarized above are visually substantiated in the following section. Figures 1 through 7 below present the raw data collected from the communication platforms (*WhatsApp and Zoom*) alongside key frames from the final collaborative artifact, "*One Sea, Two Cultures: Roket Tasek & Pista Ng Dagat.*"

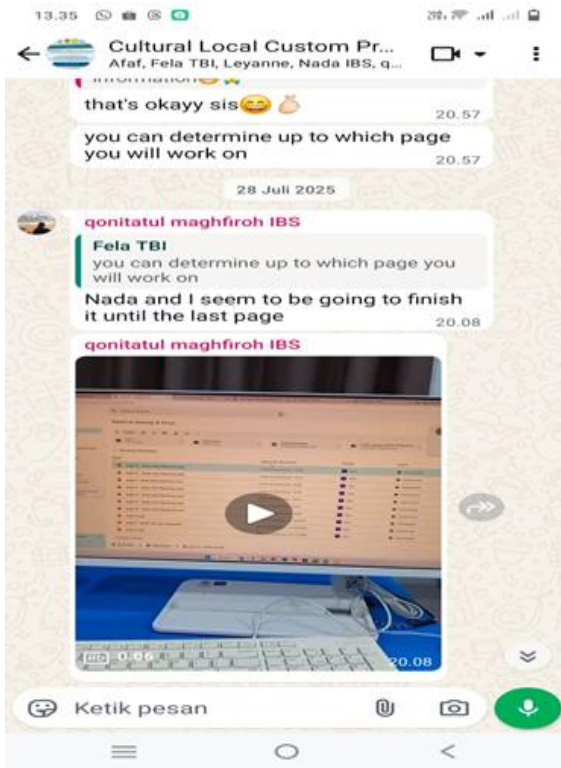


Figure 1

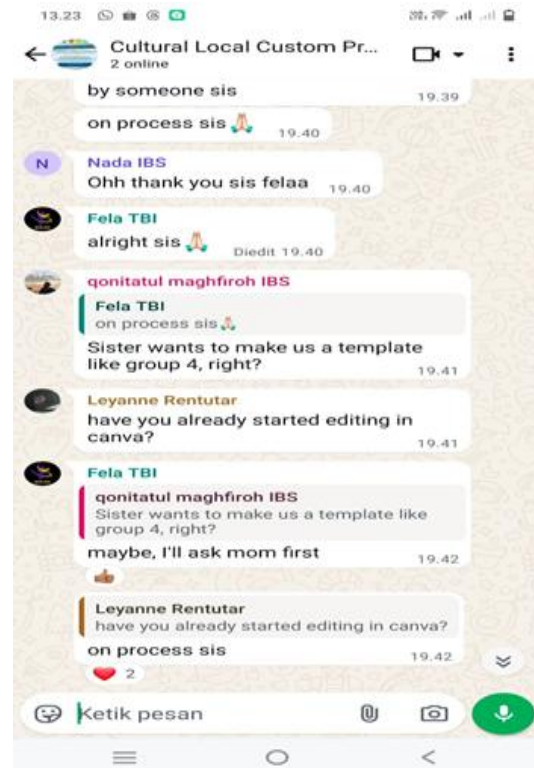


Figure 2



Figure 3

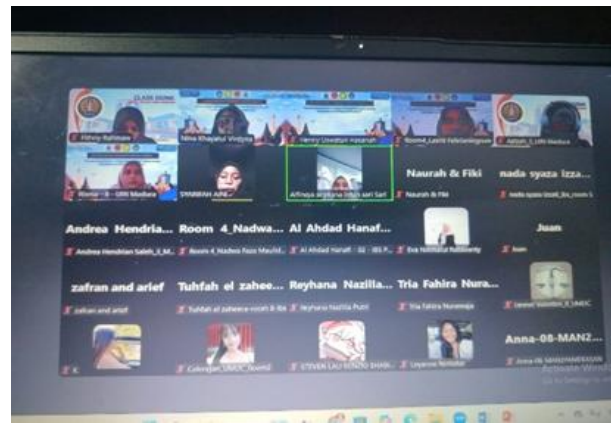


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

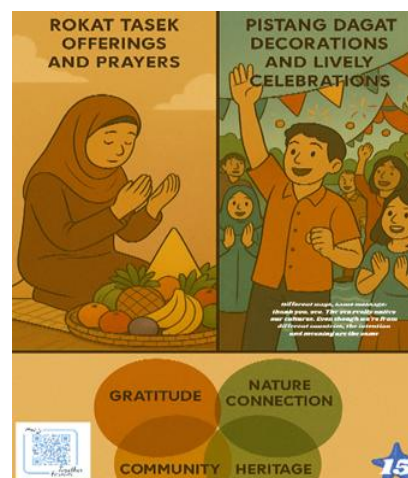


Figure 7

## DISCUSSION

The collaborative digital storytelling project, the *Nusantara-Luzon Link*, offers a compelling model for integrating cross-cultural collaboration and intercultural learning within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) e-learning environments. The project's success in building intercultural competence (ICC) is demonstrated through the critical interplay among communication, deep cultural exposure, and technological fluency. This study confirms the practical value of project-based learning (PBL) model in cultivating global citizens by interpreting the findings within established theoretical frameworks.

### **Communication, Negotiation, and Technological Mediation**

The initial communication challenges, specifically time zone friction and information gaps, are consistent with established logistical barriers found in international e-learning (Toprak & Genc-Kumtepe, 2014; Widayatsih et al., 2025). However, the resolution of these issues provides a clear interpretive link to the development of key ICC skills. The strategic shift to a multi-platform approach (*Zoom* for formal planning, *WhatsApp* for asynchronous coordination) was not merely a technical fix; it forced students to practice behavioral flexibility, an essential skill in ICC (Deardorff, 2006). This reliance on diverse digital media to coordinate tasks and exchange information directly supports the view that the effective deployment of diverse communication methods is paramount for successful transnational cooperation (Toprak & Genc-Kumtepe, 2014).

Furthermore, the reduction in initial social awkwardness over time suggests that continuous, goal-oriented collaboration, facilitated by an intentional implementation of ICC in the higher education setting (Kuffuor et al., 2024), successfully facilitated the development of intercultural relationship management skills, moving students from basic politeness toward genuine rapport. This underscores the finding that high intercultural

competence is a perceived predictor of successful cooperative learning among EFL students (Haregu et al., 2024).

### ***Intercultural Learning and Deep Empathy***

Crucially, the focus on comparing two distinct yet related maritime traditions, '*Rokat Tasek*' and '*Pista Ng Dagat*,' served as a powerful catalyst for profound intercultural learning. This approach of developing digital storytelling based on local wisdom is a recognized strategy for engaging students (Kisno et al., 2022). The finding that students discovered shared heritage and underlying similarities, rather than just documenting differences, signifies a shift along the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, moving the participants away from ethnocentric stages toward a more ethno relative understanding (Bennet, et al., 2017). This deep cultural engagement validates research arguing that learning about culture is equally as important as learning the language in EFL instruction, as it enhances student capacity to be effective mediators in international contexts (Obersterberghaus, 2024; Z.A, 2024; Marwa, 2018). This aligns with the necessity of improving cross-cultural communicative competence in undergraduate EFL instruction (Zhou et al., 2024). The project's requirement to reach a negotiated narrative, as evidenced by the compromises in the final artifact, demanded the consistent practice of empathy and openness, core internal outcomes of ICC (Deardorff, 2006). This experience reinforces the recognized role of project-based arts in promoting peace building, diversity, and intercultural understanding (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2017).

### ***Digital Fluency and Active Citizenship***

Finally, the project provided an authentic environment for improving digital literacy skills through collaborative content creation (Kurniawan & Fitriani, 2024). The finding supports the general effectiveness of using digital storytelling as a strategy for enhancing EFL students' skills (Castillo-cuesta et al., 2021). The necessity of utilizing advanced multimodal production tools, including navigating AI tool limitations and coping with resource and device barriers, for example, cell phone-only access, forced students into collaborative troubleshooting. The way students overcame these hurdles through self-directed learning and negotiation provides evidence of their developing digital resilience and skills fundamental to active digital citizenship (Putri et al., 2025; Frau-Meigs, et al, n.d.). Furthermore, the collaborative interaction required across various platforms (WhatsApp, Zoom, Canva) inherently demanded students practice save online communication and collaboration, highlighting the project's success in fostering core elements of digital citizenship (Ozturk, 2021).

In addition, the process of creating a multimodal narrative fosters meta semiotic awareness, which is the ability to strategically employ different meaning-making modes (text, image, audio) for communication, a crucial skill derived from digital storytelling projects in language education (Drajati et al., 2023; Deplancq., et al., 2021). Thus, this specific PBL model proves pedagogically effective because it strategically blends authentic language practice, required technological application, and deep cultural immersion, successfully building the complex components of intercultural competence.

## CONCLUSION

This research confirms the efficacy of implementing a digital storytelling-based collaborative project as a viable pedagogical model for building intercultural competence (ICC) among Indonesian and Filipino EFL students. By requiring students to work together across borders, the Nusantara-Luzon Link project successfully transformed theoretical learning objectives into practical, applied ICC skills in a real-world context.

The study's findings demonstrate a clear pathway to achieving the dual goals of cultural and digital fluency, yielding two primary contribution. Theoretically, the successful mediation of initial logistical issues (time zone friction and information gaps) through the flexible and purposeful use of digital tools highlights the development of behavioral flexibility and intercultural relationship management, essential component of ICC.

Furthermore, the deep engagement in comparing 'Rokat Tasek' and Pista ng Dagat' provided a rich context for genuine intercultural learning, moving participants beyond basic cultural awareness toward a realization of shared heritage. This shift is crucial, as it indicates movement towards ethno relative stages of intercultural sensitivity. Pedagogically, the project validates the digital storytelling-based Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach as a potent method for simultaneously cultivating linguistic skill, digital literacy, and meta semiotic awareness. Crucially. The necessity of navigating a multi-platform environment and managing collaborative tasks across boarders nurtured the necessary competences for active and responsible participant in digital society. This experiential learning directly addresses the need for students to establish safe online communication and collaboration, a core element of digital citizenship, preparing them for the complex communicative demand of the global workplace.

The implication is that EFL instruction aimed at developing global citizens must intentionally integrate projects that simultaneously target linguistic skill, digital creation, and deep cultural exposure. This model should be adopted by educational institutions, suggesting that curriculum planning must strategically incorporate tools that facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration to manage transnational logistics effectively.

However, this research, being a qualitative case study, is limited in its scope and does not measure the long-term retention of ICC or provide quantitative data on digital skill acquisition. Therefore, future research should utilize mixed-methods approaches, including pre- and post-tests, to quantitatively assess the growth in students' intercultural competence over an extended period. Further investigation is also warranted to compare the effectiveness of this model across different cultural pairings or with varying types of digital collaborative tasks, solidifying its generalizability as a powerful method for cultivating responsible digital citizenship and cross-cultural communication skills.

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