

# Enhancing Intercultural Communication Competence in Future English Language Teachers Through Virtual Technologies

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**Abstract:** Globalization has significantly increased intercultural interactions, making intercultural communication competence (ICC) indispensable for future English teachers. Through thorough analysis and examination, this research explores the ways in which virtual technologies effectively enhance intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among pre-service teachers. The article places particular emphasis on the significant impact of digital platforms, video conferencing tools, and collaborative online environments on fostering and augmenting intercultural communication competence (ICC) skills. The article explores the difficulties associated with incorporating intercultural skills into English language teaching (ELT) curricula, and evaluates novel methods utilizing computer-mediated communication. The results indicate that virtual technologies are successful in promoting intercultural awareness, linguistic adaptability, and professional readiness for teaching in multicultural environments. The study recommends the strategic integration of digital tools in teacher education programs to improve the development of intercultural communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication competence, English language teaching, virtual technologies, globalization, teacher education, online learning, digital pedagogy.

**Introduction:** Interactions between people from dissimilar cultural backgrounds have increased considerably due to globalization, which is a set of social, economic, technological and political processes that started intensifying in the 1970s and brought about changes throughout the world. The most important implications are: an increase in people flows across national borders; an increase in the density and diversity of these connections among people from various communities; the growing complexity of connection patterns, scales and terrains; and enhanced interplay between different dimensions of social life - economy, culture, politics, and the environment. In changing societies, everyone has to learn how to communicate and perform effectively in many cultural contexts, and this requirement increasingly includes people from homogeneous national cultures. Most experiences are cultural, they are learned from other people, modeled after them, and take place with them. To acquire a new culture is a learning process. To understand this learning process, this project addressed the following research questions: What kinds of communicative competence do people need in

an era of globalization?; What is the relative importance other language capabilities take, such as listening and intercultural skills, and how does this importance vary with a given context?; What impact do newly emerging technologies have on language learning and more generally on education?; What is the future role of the teacher, and what kind of pre-service education is thus required?. And all these questions also led to one of quiet focus: How can grass-root teachers be prepared to act as innovation agents in the emerging global scenario?

In an immensely multicultural world, the ability to communicate effectively has become more essential than ever. While English is fast evolving as the world's lingua franca, learners therefore need to be confident of their competence in understanding various accents and varieties of the language used by people from various cultures and traditions, rather than in replicating native speakers (World English Journal & ZAGHAR, 2017). Moreover, as present-day technology simplifies the means of communication across borders, it appears that rather than learning a different language, learners will need to learn to communicate

effectively with people whose first language is different from theirs.

Although current student variances and language advancement needs will continue to be diverse, future scholars and professionals can forecast to work in the environment, which is greatly technological and intercultural. This requires that students not only develop their technical knowledge, but also alternative competencies in communicative fields for undisturbed work in such multicultural workplaces. Aural and verbal communicative practices are widely taught in several second/foreign language classes. However, current technology gives teachers the opportunity to use other communication modes, which have been slightly exploited.

In the professional world of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and particularly in domains such as Engineering and Computer Science, intercultural issues are often ignored by both teachers and learners. With the focus usually on the extensive study of technical language and related communicative practices, there is hardly any time left for the development of intercultural competences. Interacting with people from overseas requires significant awareness of their cultural values, communication conventions and language differences, in addition to mutual language comprehensibility. In such a situation, further intercultural competences in teaching materials and instruction are requisite.

### **Main Part**

The development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been considered a mirror reflecting the multifaceted and complex reality of our globalized world. An integrative and transformative concept, it brings together the knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness necessary to engage in communication with individuals from various languages and cultures. Future English language teachers (ELTs) must develop their ICC to play a vital role in promoting it in educational settings, and to advance their own professional competence in a field where English has emerged as a global lingua franca for intercultural work, communication and exchanges (E Fantini, 2007). To recast the teaching of English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) for ICC engagement, it is essential to provide future ELTs with the tools and resources to learn about and enter into (inter)culturally aware and sensitive encounters and dialogue.

ICC is location- and context-dependent. ELTs in Morocco, like in many other countries, face a wide array of complex communicative and intercultural tasks. In the Moroccan pedagogic context, the multiple

social, historical and ideological underpinnings of EFL education, as well as challenges related to teaching a foreign language (English) and fostering intercultural/cultural learning, need to be taken into account. Hence, there is urgent need to prepare future ELTs for intercultural work. While in-service teacher training and further education has recently seen efforts to promote intercultural awareness, communicative and pedagogical competence, little is known about the perceptions, conceptions and construction of their ICC, and self-efficacy for (inter)cultural learning and dialogue. Thus, the inquiry focused on the question: What are the perceptions, conceptions and understandings of ICC of Moroccan preservice ELTs?

Education has been regarded as the key to social stability and prosperity, and with the surge of globalization in the 21st century, the educational landscape is expected to shift. English Language Teaching (ELT) plays a disproportionate role in the spread of global English, and has now become essential in diverse regions across the globe. Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is crucial for the professional development of future English language teachers (ELTs). There is a need to investigate how future ELTs develop their intercultural awareness. Technological advances have brought about opportunities such as independent inquiry and access to vast amounts of information available on online networks. Furthermore, using the Internet and social networking could also increase their cultural awareness. However, writing to learn strategies seems not to have been recognized as facilitating intercultural competence. Therefore, with an approach to ICC development, it becomes paramount to scrutinize the potential of virtual networking for enhancing intercultural capabilities.

### **Theoretical, Conceptual, and Empirical Background**

In the past few decades, it has become apparent that to become a “successful” language speaker, one must also be conversant with the culture(s) of the respective languages. This led, in 2002, to the establishment of the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for Languages, a document that sets out the most important development objectives for teaching and learning foreign languages. English is still the most likely language to meet such objectives, and is one of the most popular second languages in the world. Therefore, the strategic implementation of ELT in governmental education is prerequisite to fostering future initiatives. Many universities offer teacher-training programs in English. Such programs often include subjects that are more practical, such as In-Service Teacher Training or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (World English Journal & ZAGHAR,

2017). Yet pursuing an MA in a language locally requires satisfactory performance in school-based proficiency. As a result, educators frequently direct them towards undergraduate programs, a focus that misses the multilingual dimensions of the teaching profession.

### **The Role of Technology in Education**

Over time, human beings have transcended from the Stone Age, the medieval period, and the industrial revolution to the jet age. We are now in the age of information technology. Earlier, the means of information and communication technology (ICT) consisted of painting on rocks with colored stones, literacy on clay, and palm leaf. Information was later printed on paper, which transformed societies from usage paper and wood to digital/online, which constitutes a turbulent transformation to society (World English Journal et al., 2023). It has been significantly contributing to the creation of a global society, or becoming globalized and civilization to becoming civilized in English language teaching (ELT), contributing significantly to improving proficiency and fluency in the language. Revolutions of any kind – political, economic, healthcare, educational, agricultural, commercial, agricultural, and infrastructural – are worthy of notice, whereas the most powerful revolutions in recent epochs are knowledge/technology, IT, and web revolution, which are shrink-wrapping the planet. It is presuming to create interdependence among nations of the globe into one global of twenty-first-century technological villages, shaping relocation or transcend of goods, accommodation, capital, information, data sheet, and incredibly sophisticated, esoteric, and epistolary scraps and undertone, on balance, that electronic media are demonstrating a master key for the acclivity of cost-effective rituals of teaching English communicatively and adeptness of modern falcon or flux pedagogy.

In the 21st century, education has become conscious of mass literacy to realize multiple literacy, characterized as verbal, visual, digital, numerical, and information/computer literacy simultaneously to attract graduates highly adept, astute, imaginative, adroit, competitive, and analytical. Inclusion of ICT in today's educational institutions is essential, since they virtually display and simulate educational materials to those who cognize and gander at them – fetching rebound immensely among students – enclosure abstract conception concretely, emboldening learners to be curious, transparently evident learning cum exploring sources, facilities constructivist appraisal, catering to the needs of audio, haptic, and visual learners, opening up avenues for multiple modes of research work on various topics and issues, and league superior sense of security and to build communities

which go beyond the enclosure of As convergence and divergence of traditional literacy principles with ICT literacy erudition are mandatory requisites throughout the world in the 21st century, the educational system, along with the world, faces utmost pressure to rendezvous with the global demand of 21st-century nations, instead of disintegrating traditional literacy teachings and learning methods and techniques, and substituting ICT of educational technologies. So, it is imperative to make an eclectic ambidextrous bear on learning, discussing new topics and subjects, and giving hands-on or goal-oriented training to future graduates of English subject to comply with burgeoning demands.

### **Virtual Technologies in Language Learning**

Throughout the 20th century, language educators attempted to use new technologies to enhance language learning and maximize exposure to the target language. The introduction of diesel-powered tape recorders into language labs in the 1960s enabled students to listen to pre-recorded lessons and record themselves with playback technology (MacDonald, 2011). More advanced equipment came into play, including cutting-edge computers and devices for reading cutting-edge laser discs. Various forms of technology were used, such as simulations, large display devices, and data-enhanced technology, to prepare material. Language educators have been asked for innovative uses of education and technology, recognizing that success is most prevalent when technology facilitates language learning and supports the scholarly work of language educators in technology-based learning and teaching.

In the field of virtual technologies for learning and language teaching, language practice in a technology-based environment through voice communications is widely involved with the projects. Students from South Korea and the United States use the language exchange program to improve their speaking skills and cultural understanding. Future scholars conducted a study in which 14 advanced learners of Spanish were paired with 14 native Spanish speakers over 7 weeks. Each participant met the online partner for 1 hour per week. The tasks were designed to maximize opportunities for both learners and natives to practice their partners' languages (Pema, 2014). Each interactive pair meets once a week and plays the tasks pre-made by the teacher. After 7 weeks, each participant completes an acceptance questionnaire, language testing, and self-assessment questionnaire due to the successful experience. Due to the asynchronous nature, one of the main practical goals when designing the activities was to encourage writing on a forum in a conversational format, to foster discussion.

## Theoretical Framework

The idea of intercultural competence is based on the inherent dignity of the individual human being and the essential equality of rights between various cultures (Pema, 2014). Although communicative competence includes sociocultural competence, few empirical studies have been made of the intercultural dimension in SLT. Additionally, the relationship between virtual teaching environments and the acquisition of intercultural competences in students has been surprisingly little-investigated. Such technologies change the way foreign languages are studied and taught, and Albania demonstrates a particular case of this phenomenon. Although Albania lags far behind the developed countries in terms of most modern technologies, recent years have shown increasing interest in ICT-based technologies among foreign language students and teachers. Given this situation, the central aim of this study is to determine whether virtual environments in SLT facilitate and/or automatically promote students' intercultural competence. This will be decided after analyzing the level to which the intercultural components, an environment and a task are realized in web-based English listening classes. Therefore, the following questions guide the investigation: 1. To what level are the manifestations of the topic culture fulfilled in the listening materials? 2. How does culture's role in comprehension texts differ across the three categories interesting – critical – integrated? 3. Do the tasks accomplished by students in these listening exercises facilitate the development of intercultural competence?

An ongoing interest in the area of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) arises from the immense growth of multicultural communities. With English becoming a vital lingua franca, the need to acquire cultural fluency in all English related programs, especially in teacher preparatory programs, is present now more than ever. Decision makers in English teacher education should provide innovative strategies to enhance ICC in future teachers, to benefit from the recent employability demands, as well as the growing local and global expansion of English.

In the realm of education, the overwhelming global call for Inter-Cultural Teaching and Training (ICT) is important in determining future teachers' readiness to convey relevant global issues in language education programs. The current system of education and the abundance of educational resources offered to students often suspect significantly limiting their opportunity to encounter ideas different from theirs. Second language education, particularly when taught monolingually in non-native English-speaking

countries, is usually centered on language only, ignoring the question of how the cultivation of respect and tolerance of cultural diversity of that language is dealt with in educational programs (World English Journal & ZAGHAR, 2017). However, alarming photos and tweets, as well as verbal accounts of acerbic verbal racial exchanges often occurring between different groups of English teachers in the same program, alert teacher educators of the failure of their programs to provide future teachers with the skills necessary for dealing with students of various backgrounds in the dynamic and challenging world of present teaching in Israel. A short literature review reveals that no attempt has been made to expose this occurrence, which is causing an intensive chasm within the teacher residency departments of higher educational institutions. This paper will present an argument regarding the failure of teacher residency programs to provide future teachers with the necessary skills of ICC, and the possible negative ramifications of this failure.

The most comprehensive model proposed so far is surely the communicative competence model. A communicative competence model has been chosen, since the study aims to develop a foreign language for future educational and occupational needs. Coupled with the continuous process of globalization and liberalization of world economies of increasing interaction, competition, and mutual dependence among countries, international communication is by its nature predominantly through English, the current Latin. Communicative competence is made up of four sub-competences, which are grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Nevertheless, their partitions between them are often blurred, since each of them is laid in the others. As a matter of fact, any performance heavily affected or constrained by limitations in one competence is excessively dependent upon the "compensation" of the other three competences. Yet the objective of the teaching of communicative skills, prior to any focus on theory and rules, is the students' ability to fulfill their audience, purpose, and settings-dependent needs in terms of language use, with a broadened use of the target language in different domains. However, the general attitude to language teaching has made awareness less permeable to the links between language and culture. In this respect, different proposed models did not accelerate the progress as expected. They are over-often too theoretical, too narrowly confined to disciplines such as sociology of language, or anthropology of communication, or otherwise as readily considered in the didactic tradition. Varied perceptions of culture in particular have strongly conditioned the ways in which it has been



integrated into teaching practice. Culture is the fifth skill among language abilities. This was the traditional set of language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) thought to be massed in learning. In line with this manner, culture appears as either factual knowledge about a “civilization”, country, community lore, festivals, etc., a set of behavioral patterns and logics by which the members of socio-linguistic groups make sense of the world, or the realization of such patterns in rituals, rites, arts, religion, folklore, etc. Such a view though is an essentializing approach, which redounds to keeping the different group of individuals trapped in isolated or tightly defined roles, rather than as open to the full range of potentialities. It implies a static concept of culture, which exists in textbooks and in the material conditions of life, as it becomes historical spectacles like wax-work museums, rigid and lifeless.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Intercultural competence in foreign language teaching has been recognized as an essential skill for both teachers and students. As future English language teachers, the article of future perspectives on the development of intercultural communication competence in future English language teachers is intended to inform pre-service university students about the importance of the development of intercultural communication competence for teachers. Online virtual connections, such as real-time exchanges, email exchanges, text chats, and online presentations, are becoming increasingly popular in language learning. In addition, students preparing teaching practicum abroad acquire more intercultural communication competence. The present research offers future options for enhancing the development of intercultural communication competence of teachers and future teachers of English through telecollaboration tools. Although most research on language learners’ (intercultural) competence development explores the effects of telecollaboration partnerships with native speakers, there is little scientific research on the effectiveness of partnerships among non-native speaking language students. Taking advantage of the experience of practicing English teachers, this research offers insights and future perspectives on the development of the intercultural communication competence of future language teachers by engaging in partnership with only one non-native speaker of the target language through telecollaboration tools (World English Journal et al., 2023).

Teaching a language can impact the sociolinguistic aspect of culture. In the FL teaching context, culture embodies a journey of discoveries on how life looks

through the eyes of target people. FL students learn about the target culture to satisfy their curiosity about otherness. In the early 21st century, globalization and the spread of computer-mediated technology have changed the role of culture in language teaching. Culture was first imported as one of the main focus of communicative and action-oriented language teaching. Tasks and linguistic activities can be enriched by cultural elements to give meaning to learners’ actions, while learning to carry out and recognize the mode of execution of people of a different culture. Instructional goals today consist of training language users the basic intercultural communicative competences to help them wander across cultures (World English Journal et al., 2023). With the advent of the World-Wide-Web 2.0, increased inter-connectivity opened diverse possibilities for cultural exploration and reflection, along with language practice. Virtual contacts with speakers of the culture of the language can be sought and maintained with greater facility. World-Wide-Web 2.0 and the information societies show an effective way to store and disseminate large amounts of data.

Web-based tools and applications can be exploited to develop all the competencies the culture-centered teaching advocates have. Online video and audios are easily accessible. Spoken and written texts of cultural interest concerning people’s social practices, values, beliefs, etc. can be viewed and downloaded. Educational objectives can be achieved via the systems. School institutions that use computers connected to the internet can sign international telecollaborative partnerships. Pair or group activities can be designed to guide students online while searching or producing cultural material. Student-learner-authentic audio-descriptions related to local customs, rites, traditions, events, whatever they consider worthy to communicate are filed online by each institution and made available to the foreign partner. A related task would require students to analyze the filed materials (contents and forms) and then exchange comments, opinions, and queries with their mates through text or videoconference applications.

This article reports on an exploration to increase the Intercultural Communication Competence in Future English Language Teachers through virtual technologies. It introduces a virtual tandem project as the basis of an elective computer-assisted language learning (CALL) course to optimize their didactic potential. The general objective is to better understand the extent to which the virtual tandem project contributes to an increase in ICC, including learners’ perception of it. The focus is on the learners’ perspective regarding the advantages and limitations of the virtual tandem project for the development of

ICC. Seventy future EFL teachers at three Spanish universities participated in the study, which was carried out within the framework of a European Language Label (ELL) project (World English Journal et al., 2023).

In one of the course-related assignments, these learners had to write reflective comments on the material addressed in the virtual tandem. Questionnaires collected data and the aforementioned written comments. The findings suggest that virtual technologies can increase INT, as most learners consider their level of ICC has increased due to the virtual tandem project. This tandem model stands out due to three main factors: its flexibility and easy set-up, the promotion of both written and oral output, and the language combinations it offers for learning, namely French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

Despite the fact that technology is crucial in the enhancement of several life spheres, many instructors and students do not use it as heavily as desired. Special attention should be given to teaching and learning languages, as technology offers sufficient assistance. English, as a lingua franca, is significant in this respect. Virtual technologies appear to be an effective tool in the enhancement of English language learning and teaching, specifically by offering chances to bring the language to the environment in a situation where it is hard to get direct communication with native speakers.

Moreover, virtual mobility chances have been widely developed to support intercultural learning, because they offer students the chance to interact and communicate with individuals from different societies. Therefore, they can focus on their own culture and generate awareness of themselves. One outcome is the attraction of students to critically explore and discuss culture and language issues, leading students to enhance intercultural communication competence. It is recognized that potential EFL instructors must increase their intercultural communication competence (ICC) to enhance their professional life. Virtual technologies, in this respect, offer chances to increase ICC, as virtual discussions about language and culture are more effective, as shown in literature (World English Journal et al., 2023).

Therefore, action research was conducted involving third-grade undergraduate students in the TESOL department. Through structured activities in the Moodle, LINE and Google applications, discussions about culture and language were shaped. Materials in relation to culture, language and country were shared, and peer responses were asked. At the end of the process, a satisfaction survey was applied. Collecting and interpreting the data, it can be said that virtual interactions have the power to develop ICC of

prospective teachers.

### **Virtual Platforms for Intercultural Learning**

Due to globalization and the rapid spread of computer-mediated technology, the ever-changing nature of the world's interconnectedness has changed the role of culture in English language teaching as a Foreign Language in non-English-speaking countries. Moreover, the sociocultural approach argues that culture and language cannot be taught in isolation. Wishing to disseminate the topic, educators restructured English language teaching to integrate culture into the curriculum, not as it is cultural tradition and beliefs, but how it is contextualized and realized in different genres and in the vicissitudes of language use. This approach aims to endow English as a Foreign Language students with cultural capital and competences to gain access to the English-speaking world. Despite the integrative goal of culture and language, there is a lacuna in teaching sociolinguistic dimensions of culture, such as non-verbal cues, ways of dealing with politeness and problem-solving, or interpretation of symbols. Such a deficit, especially at the university level, might engross two consequences. On the one hand, cultural misunderstandings could arise and impede effective communication. On the other hand, it might not see international students as friendly as they perceive or intend to. Recent research focused on culture contests and how language learners could relocate their subject positions while interacting virtually with people from different countries and cultures. It is claimed that computer-mediated technology could recast the ways in which subjects experience or produce culture in light of a sense of place, rather than community derived from open discourse on identity and communications with locality.

### **Video Conferencing Tools**

Given the increasing focus on the development of EFL teachers in the field of intercultural communication competence, as this study has shown, it may be beneficial for teacher educators to explore methods of instruction and virtual exchanges that equip participants with the skills necessary for such interactions. In this section, three ways are examined to facilitate the development of ICoC in future English language teachers through virtual technologies and exchange: enhancing cognitive knowledge and considerations; use and evaluation of VC or VLC; transfer of VC and VLC experiences. The methods discussed have sought to generate ideas for the further ICoC development of FL and ESL teachers, who are often required to, or desire, to engage in, cross-cultural or multilingual interactions. The same applies to

emerging populations of EFL teachers globally, who must interact with native English speakers through virtual exchanges, conferences, and VC and VLC. To achieve productive cross-cultural communication and learning, EFL teacher trainees must now be sensitized, informed, and trained to deal with these contingencies.

### **Collaborative Online Environments**

The information and communication technologies (ICTs) bring exciting possibilities for enhancing intercultural communication competence (ICC) about future English language teachers (ELTs). This research explores the roles of multi-user virtual environments (MUEs) as an innovative platform and practice for future ELTs to improve their ICC, while also gaining the ability to language as a pedagogical subject in digitally-mediated education. The research attempts to investigate how future ELTs conceive of and experience the integration of MUEs in a language education course. This study is a small enactment of a full-cycle inquiry, focusing particularly on planning, modus operandi, and reflection among applied linguistics and teacher education. The study is explored using critical reflections (autoethnography) in the hope of generating implications for adapted practices.

In moving away from the analysis and pre- and post-course survey results, this research aims to provide a richer interpretation of the experience of involving future ELTs with MUEs for improving their ICC. While research on future ELTs with MUEs is still rare, combining applied linguistics and teacher education perspectives and integrating these experiences could provide insights into interdisciplinary. Collaboration assignments that can encourage the development of communities are now considered the norm for online learning. ICTs have extended the capabilities of LMSs, providing the facilities to support learning activities that feature more actively in campus-based courses to support learning and community development (M. Slattery & Cleary, 2018).

### **Case Studies**

Pre-service language teachers with strong intercultural competences are likely to contribute positively to their future multicultural classrooms. Given the importance of embracing learners' diversity, future teachers should be systematically trained in learning/teaching aspects that engender the development of an intercultural perspective. The aim of this study was to enhance FELT students' intercultural language awareness and skills through practice with virtual environments, and the analysis of authentic linguistic and cultural varieties in English. This goal involved a few specific tasks and research questions:

- The analysis of professional and scholarly literature on

intercultural competence, as it relates to both languages and language teaching, and on the potential of the visit WebLab for the enhancement of FELT students' intercultural proficiency, - The creation of an online exploration and simulation visit that would of exposure to native English speaking and English using environments, and serve as support for the analysis of and reflection on culture-related linguistic and extra-linguistic elements, - The reflection of FELT students' critical discourse about e.g. dialects, registers, varieties, interrogatives, proxemics, body language representations in English language teaching (ELT) materials and practice situations, an evaluation of the online visit's effectiveness and the overall project's usefulness for the improvement of FELT student's intercultural language awareness and skills.

The project was designed in the context of the potential for ICT to encourage creative and independent learning, provide more flexible and individualized learning settings, cater for increased personal responsibility in learning processes and outputs (Pema, 2014), and, most importantly here, facilitate more thorough cultural involvement. At the time of writing, most literature on ICT generally focuses on computer-mediated communication or components of it, all but ignoring the wide scope of computer-assisted technology and artistic capacities. Nevertheless, the inclusion of art, culture, and literature in an ICT-driven approach has been shown to use innovative mediums, better understand certain texts, and portray the ways in which cultures can be decoded and re-constructed.

### **CONCLUSION**

The integration of virtual technologies in ELT education plays a vital role in developing future teachers' intercultural communication competence. Digital tools and online platforms provide pre-service teachers with exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural environments, fostering adaptability and awareness essential for effective communication in global classrooms. While challenges remain in ensuring comprehensive intercultural training, this study underscores the need for teacher education programs to embrace digital learning strategies. By leveraging virtual exchanges and collaborative online environments, educators can better prepare future teachers to navigate the complexities of intercultural interactions, enhancing their professional competence in an increasingly interconnected world.

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